

Transcript of “Bernadette Woods Placky, Chief Meteorologist and Climate Matters Program Director at Climate Central in Princeton, New Jersey”

Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations about Careers in Meteorology and Beyond

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Kelly Savoie:

Welcome to the American Meteorological Society’s podcast series on careers in the atmospheric and related sciences. I’m Kelly Savoie, and I’m here with Rex Horner, and we will be your hosts. Our podcast series will give you the opportunity to step into the shoes of an expert working in weather, water, and climate sciences.

Rex Horner:

We are excited to introduce today’s guest, Bernadette Woods Placky, Chief Meteorologist and Climate Matters Program Director at Climate Central in Princeton, New Jersey. Welcome, Bernadette. Thank you so much for joining us.

Bernadette Woods Placky:

Well, thank you for having me today.

Kelly:

Bernadette, could you tell us a little bit about your educational background and what sparked your interest in meteorology?

Bernadette:

Of course. So, like most meteorologists I’ve always had a huge fascination for the weather. However, I did not look at it as a career. For me, my interest was completely focused on gymnastics, straight up into college. Then when I got to college, I did not compete and started to think about, “So, what is it I actually want to do with my life?” Now, I was at Penn State because I’m from Pennsylvania and it was in state. And I knew that I loved math. I knew I loved languages and sciences. And so when I started thinking about it, it became pretty obvious pretty quickly.

Bernadette:

And my brother kept saying, “You love weather. Why wouldn’t you not study weather? You’re at Penn State, it’s one of the best schools for weather.” So I started to put the pieces together and talked to the Department of Meteorology. And of course they said, “It’s not just looking at

clouds and storms like many people think.” And then I fortunately had taken a strong background in science and math and was able to transition into the major pretty well. And I’ve not regretted a moment of it ever since. Year after year, job after job, I continue to fall in love with the weather more and more.

Kelly:

So at Penn State, did they have certain specializations or concentrations in the degree?

Bernadette:

They do now. It’s a little bit different than it was structured when I was back in school in the ‘90s. While I was there, though, it was a general meteorology degree and you could take different focal points if you wanted, but they’ve advanced that to official focal points now. I took a minor in French because I also had a love of languages. So my path was a little bit different, but when I was going through the major, I realized I really liked forecasting. It was fun. I loved the storms. I loved following the storms, tracking the storms, forecasting the storms. And so as I rounded up my time at Penn State, it became obvious I was going to go in that direction.

Rex:

So what was your first job in the field? And then, after that, how did that job lead you along your career path to where you are now?

Bernadette:

My first job was at AccuWeather. I had earned an internship there while I was still a student at Penn State. And the internship structure at AccuWeather continued into the school year. So it was really concentrated during the summer, working full time. But then even when you started classes again, you had a shift a week. So you stayed connected with what was going on at AccuWeather and stayed forecasting. And when I graduated, I started a three year contract with AccuWeather and I always looked at it as a graduate school for forecasting, because there are some really good forecasters there who you can learn a whole lot from. And that’s how I launched into my forecasting career.

Rex:

And so what was next after AccuWeather?

Bernadette:

Well, then I made a transition into television. It may sound a little bit cheesy, but I think a lot of meteorologists would connect with this. I really felt this strong passion of trying to keep people safe. That was a huge drive of mine when it came to the weather. And as you saw what was going to happen with storms and you knew what that meant, working at AccuWeather was phenomenal, but I saw how we worked with television clients and I wanted to just directly talk to

the public when I knew those storms were coming. I didn't want to have to go through in-betweens. It was just, for some reason I had that drive in me. And I think, like I said, a lot of people do understand that.

Bernadette:

So I did make the transition over to television. My first market was in Fayetteville, Arkansas. And I said, "Hey, if you're going small market, go big weather." And then from there I worked a couple of years in Lexington, Kentucky, and then made my way to Baltimore, Maryland. Then I spent most of my television career in Baltimore.

Kelly:

So how did you end up at Climate Central? How did that opportunity open up for you?

Bernadette:

Well, it just keeps changing. Again, for all of you students out there or early career professionals, your track is going to take a few different paths along the way and turns. And I was fortunate enough to be able to make a few of these different transitions along the way. And while I was in Baltimore, my contract was coming up and I was just exploring what else was out there in the world of meteorology. I've always been very, very driven by the science, the fascination of the science, understanding and educating people about the science. And as I say, keeping them safe. And the more I learned about what's going on with our weather and how it's changing with climate change, that was always in the background. And I'd like to say that was the real driving force. But I came across Climate Central in an opening that they had.

Bernadette:

And as I got to know the organization and what they were focused on, I became very fascinated with the group and with the people who were there. I really was interested in what they were doing and how they were doing it. And for those who don't know Climate Central, we're a nonprofit, non-advocacy. We're really focused on the science and the communications of climate change. And one of the ways we do that is through our program that works with TV meteorologists and now journalists, and that's the program I came over to Climate Central to direct.

Kelly:

So you had mentioned that you did an internship. That's how you started at AccuWeather, right? You started with an internship for school?

Bernadette:

Correct.

Kelly:

So I'm assuming that while you're at AccuWeather, since you had lots of television stations who are clients and you were talking to a lot of meteorologists that probably helped you when you transitioned into television. Am I correct that you probably knew some people or you had some good networking going on while you're at AccuWeather?

Bernadette:

It is interesting, it did help. I mean, all that really helps and it all comes together eventually, but Penn State also helped with this. Penn State, I know many of the meteorologists in the AMS are Penn Staters, I'm very much one of those people. "Rah-rah, Penn State all the way." I'm still connected with our Alumni Association Board and with the Meteorology Department. And Penn State has an incredible network also. And that network had really helped a lot along the way. I mean, there are so many people who came before me who were willing to talk to me and help me along the way. I mean, there are so many names I'm going to forget, but a couple that really stood out in the beginning when I made the transition where Dr. Jon Nese, who is back at Penn State, but at the time was working in Philly at the museum, the Franklin Institute. And Glenn Schwartz, who is still at the NBC Station in Philly.

Bernadette:

And when my contract was up at AccuWeather, I said, "I'm going to try this TV thing." And Jon and Glenn were like, "Get in the studio. We're going to help you make tapes." So that definitely was one of the big steps along the way that helped get me into the television sector.

Kelly:

That must have been interesting because at Penn State, did you ever do any forecasting, like television forecasting? Did they have a studio or anything like that? Or was this just completely after you graduated?

Bernadette:

For me, personally, most of it was after. However, they do have a lot of that now. And even while I was there, I just hadn't been as focused on that at the time. So I didn't get to take advantage of some of those opportunities that were in place. There was a 400 level class that was sort of an elective type class in your Meteorology's that had a TV studio. Honestly, I took it because it was fun. And there was a lot of fun people taking it. And we all went out to celebrate at the end of the class. And that was a big part of taking that class. Because so many meteorology classes are so hard.

Kelly:

It's the party class.

Bernadette:

They're so hard. And that was one of the ways I started that process. But again, not thinking because that was going to be my career. I also had a professor while I was at Penn State, Dr. French, who kept telling me to go into television. And he was very good at helping people focus their strengths. And he kept saying just, "I really think it would be good for you and for our profession if you went into meteorology." And so when I finally made that transition, he was still at in-state college and I was, because I was wrapping up my time at AccuWeather, and he was like, "It is about time."

Bernadette:

So there were a few different things, people and things along the way that helped me out for sure. I mean, I can't allot this to just hard work, but the people who have come before me for sure.

Rex:

While you were at Penn State, Bernadette, you said you had a minor in French. And so I'm curious how did that maybe tie into your success in broadcasting? And if there were any other classes that were outside the math and science classes that are typically part of a meteorology curriculum that maybe augmented your skills as well.

Bernadette:

That's a really interesting question. And to all of you students out there listening, take things that are in your interest too, because like I say, you're going to take a lot of paths along the way and bends and curves on your path. And none of my French classes coincided with any of my math and science curriculum. It was a completely different path, with completely different people. I just loved languages. I still do. I wanted to study abroad. That was very important to me. So I went to school longer for it to happen, but I wanted to do that.

Bernadette:

Of course it does come back around, working in this position now at Climate Central, I've gotten to do a lot more international work. And our work is coincided with the World Meteorological Organization and some of the UN groups around the Paris Climate Change Agreement. And so, I've had the opportunity to tap into that branch, which has been very helpful. I have to admit, it's an area I can still grow in and add to in a lot of ways. But it's just a sign that need a strong base as you get out of college, because it is not a direct path for your career. There's a lot of things that help build your strengths and your character along the way. And if you have interests in other things, you should absolutely pursue them.

Kelly:

You mentioned a couple of mentors that you had. Did any of them help you decide to transition out of broadcast meteorology? Gave you advice on going the route of working for Climate Central?

Bernadette:

No, that one was really up to me.

Kelly:

That was your own decision. You said, “I’m going to do this.”

Bernadette:

But there are definitely people, once I’ve gotten into this position, because it was a new space, it was different, a huge learning curve. And while at Climate Central, two people really have stood out to me in particular, Heidi Cullen and Shari Bell, really helped me make that transition and start building that climate IQ that I needed to do. We also have Claudia Tebaldi who works with us, who’s a phenomenal scientist. She’s been really my moral compass in climate science along the way also.

Bernadette:

And so I rely on them heavily for a lot of different things. And so that’s after I made that jump. They were incredibly helpful along that way. So, I mean, again, it was not your normal path going from television to this, but there’s a lot to learn and to build upon along the way. The one thing that does stand out to me is through all these different stages I’ve taken, they’ve all been grounded in science and communication, and there’s always going to be a strong need for that going forward. And that’s where I’ve really focused my attention.

Rex:

So what’s it like a typical day on the job? Where are you? What are you doing? Do you travel? What are the hours like? Give us an idea.

Bernadette:

I can’t say any day is typical, but I’ll give you a typical week. Because we can break that down a little bit more.

Rex:

That’s fair.

Bernadette:

One of the things we do is, as I said, Climate Matters is a program that we're part of that we send out a weekly package of scientifically grounded content that relates to timely topics with climate change. And so, every week we are going through that production, it can be more intense some weeks than others. But what we do is, for example, in this summer, talking about heat. We find out different climate change related heat topics. We'll do the scientific research. We try to break down the data to each of 240 cities across the United States. We produce that into visuals. We package that all together with resources for TV meteorologists and journalists to help tell those climate stories.

Bernadette:

And as I said, some weeks can be more intense than others, because we range everything from impacts with climate change, to solutions, to things that we're just seeing in the world around us and how things are changing. And so we keep that production schedule going weekly. So that is one thing that happens that's fairly regular.

Bernadette:

The other thing is through the program, we do a lot of trainings and we do that from workshops down through webinars, down through basic outreach with our growing network of now over 800 TV meteorologists and over 400 journalists. As people dive more into this subject, they have questions and, "I'm working on a story, could you help me find a scientist that maybe we could interview? Or I got this question from my audience and I didn't really know how to answer it. Or could you take a look at this script because I want to make sure I get the science right."

Bernadette:

We also work with the Spanish speaking TV community and media. So sometimes making sure we can find a Spanish speaking expert for someone's story that they're working on. So, there's a lot of training and support within that too. And then on the bigger, more structured scales of training, the workshops that we do, we connect with a lot of media partners, like the AMS and the National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, RTDNA, Society of Environmental Journalists.

Bernadette:

And we try to do some sort of, whether it be a panel or all the way up to a full day workshop, at their annual events. And then we do our own standalone workshops, which could be more than one day. And it's a real range of how we're able to implement that, but really to help connect the climate science community with media, give them a chance to meet each other, to answer their questions, to get educated on topics. And give the media from the TV meteorologists down through the journalists, the tools they need to help tell these stories. Because unfortunately climate change has really affected so much of our lives and it comes up in so many stories that

we're already doing and we're trying to help them pull the science out and make that scientific connection.

Kelly:

Your organization is such a great resource. How many people work there?

Bernadette:

Our organization is about 30-ish people. And I've talked a lot about our Climate Matters Program in my work with meteorologists. We have a really robust sea level rise program. And for those who haven't seen them yet, they're worth going onto the website and exploring. If you go to sealevel.climatecentral.org. We have these maps that have the projections of sea level rise and they're overlayed with all sorts of data. They've got census data. They've got everything from populations at risk down through hospitals and schools that are going to be underwater by differing years and differing levels of projection of sea level rise. So you can play around with a lot of different tools there to see where that water is going.

Bernadette:

So that's another really robust part of our program. We, as I said, I've done a lot of work with journalists and the media. And then package that all together, we've got about 30-ish people.

Kelly:

So what do you like most about your job?

Bernadette:

Honestly, I love learning. I really do. And we get to learn all the time. And I'm so fortunate that I get to do that. I like the people, I like the energy of the organization, having come from television where things are contracting and changing in some different ways, at least at the station I was at, there was a lot of what you can't do. And I understand that. But at our organization now there's a lot of, "Well, what can we do? And how can we do that?" And it doesn't mean we can do everything, but it is fortunate to work in a space that is trying to make changes and trying to really move forward the discussion on climate change, that it is really one of our biggest threats to all of humanity.

Rex:

So what would be the most challenging part of the job?

Bernadette:

Communicating climate change.

Kelly:

In a way that everyone will believe it.

Bernadette:

Yeah. I mean, I don't have to go into the super details here, people know. The challenges with climate change has become political and that's unfortunate. So a subject that is scientific has become much more difficult to really move forward than it needs to be. And I think especially with everything going on in 2020 and the focus on the Coronavirus and COVID-19, and the value of science in guiding our decisionmaking and keeping people safe, hoping that we can translate and carry some of that over to the climate crisis.

Kelly:

Is it a challenge to get funding to keep the program going? Or is there already set funding in place where you have enough to continue to do the job?

Bernadette:

Funding is always a challenge, especially with what's going on in the world these days. It's a little unclear where some of the funding sources are going to go in the future. I mean, we've been fortunate. We have a great team that's worked really hard. We've had some wonderful funders along the way. We have a wonderful board that really supports us. We've had multiple National Science Foundation grants, which are really a gold standard in funding. So we've been very fortunate. And in that program, I do have to be clear. I don't get brought up yet, that our collective partnership with the National Science Foundation does include the American Meteorological Society and George Mason University, which has been our longtime partner on this and their Center for Climate Change Communication, and also Climate Communication with Sue Hassol.

Bernadette:

And so we've got a phenomenal crew. Also NASA and NOAA. So it's a bigger crew that really does try to advance this topic. And we've been very fortunate along the way.

Kelly:

So as far as your job goes, is it a Monday through Friday set hour job or is it shifts? How's the work-life balance?

Bernadette:

That's one thing that's changed big time since TV. Yes, it is primarily Monday through Friday, 9:00 to 5:00. I mean, you say that. But with our workshops and trainings, a lot do fall on weekends. And when you care about this subject and you work past those 9:00 to 5:00 hours, because fortunately there's been a growing interest in the subject and a lot of people reaching out with questions. A lot of our team, they're all just journalists. Like I was saying earlier, just a lot

of different questions about how best to do this? Or a story that they're working on. So it does push those hours for sure. But when you care and you do it.

Kelly:

How about travel? Does it require a lot of travel or not so much?

Bernadette:

That has been a mixed process here. I mean, obviously with some of the things going on with the coronavirus, that's coming to a screeching halt and we're trying to transition as much as we can to online. But there is something really rich and valuable about meeting people and being with them. And so, we limit the unnecessary travel because it does have a huge climate impact. And we think about that. But there are certain things that are really important. And so I have been traveling a lot more the past couple of years to these big workshops and conferences. And again, fortunately it's because people are becoming more interested. And so hopefully that will translate into more conversation around this subject matter.

Rex:

Is there anything you wish you had done differently in your career? Or I'll qualify this a little bit differently. Is there a hypothetical other career move you might've thought about making whether or not it actually fit into your personal path?

Bernadette:

That's a loaded question. There's definitely things I would have probably done differently. But it is what it is. And your experiences bring you to where you are. And that is just a life lesson. So I don't think I would change my path. I never would have said that this was my path when I first started, that's for sure. But it's been amazing and very rewarding to get to know so many different aspects of the meteorology community along the way. I mean, and I know a lot of other people feel like this too, when you get to go to an AMS conference and having touched on so many different aspects of meteorology along the way, it's really built out the full role of meteorology. And that has been awesome. Because I am lucky to be able to work in this world. I mean, it is something that brings me a ton of joy.

Kelly:

Bernadette, you mentioned that you love learning, what professional development opportunities do you pursue to keep current?

Bernadette:

That is not something I think formally that I do. I mean, some people continue to keep getting degrees. I am pretty packed with time with my current job and my two young kids and life. I don't really have that going on, but I constantly am trying to talk to people and see what else I

can read. And let me give an example here. Like I said, we take on different topics every week for Climate Matters. That alone presents itself where, in the summertime, sports and heat was a topic we took on last year. Just diving into that subject and learning everything you can.

Bernadette:

One of the beautiful things with this job is we've really been connected with the scientific community. And when I have questions, I can go to the experts and ask them. And they can help answer my questions or guide me in a direction of some literature to read, or some articles to read, or someone else to talk to, or a webinar can take, or a training that's online. Also, our office is located in Princeton, New Jersey. So we're connected with the university in some ways. And getting to go over to listen to lectures, not really in their normal classes, but when someone's visiting or when some of the current professors, there are monthly series and weekly series that they give. And getting a chance to go in and out of those has been really cool. And getting to know the people, really the people that are involved in all of this. And I feel like that's how I've built my learning.

Rex:

On a resume, what would be a must have if someone wanted to work as a meteorologist, especially as in climate change, maybe at Climate Central, if you were to hire them, what would you look for?

Bernadette:

Must have on a resume. We at Climate Central employ a range of different people. So I think if we're talking through the meteorology world here, since this is a must, one thing that's really critical to me, and I'm going to take your question moving in a different direction. I hope you're okay with that. It's not always what's on the resume. I mean, that is important too, but it's also what's not on the resume. It's how people work with other people, the kind of energy they bring to the job, their interest in growing and learning. That is really critical when looking to hire people. We're not looking for people who are really self-focused in building their own resume. It's really about how you support the team and the subject. And that has been one of the things I've really looked for when hiring.

Kelly:

Do you have any tips for broadcast meteorologists who are looking to transition out of television?

Bernadette:

I speak to many of them.

Kelly:

I bet.

Bernadette:

It is a wonderful job, but it is a challenging job for those who aren't in broadcasting, who don't know. There are so many opportunities when you work in television, but then there's also the fact that you are always, and this happens with a lot in meteorology, I guess, in general, because anyone who forecast, weather never stops, you're going to work Christmas and you're going to miss family events and those kinds of things weigh heavier on people, some people than others.

Bernadette:

So I think some people that aren't even going to leave television have asked me this question. So I think the thing that I always talk to people about is, it's funny, when you talk to TV people, they say, "Oh, you left the profession." But when you're a meteorologist, you're not necessarily leaving the profession, because at least for me, I'm still focused on weather and climate. I've just moved it into a different avenue.

Bernadette:

So journalists maybe leaving TV, it's a little different. But for a meteorologist, if you're taking some sort of an approach or a new job that's still somewhat weather or climate focused, it's just expanding your horizon into a new aspect of weather and climate.

Rex:

One last fun question for you, Bernadette, totally on a different topic. What is your all-time favorite book?

Bernadette:

This is an easy one for me, *The Lorax*. And I guess it would make sense that I'm doing what I'm doing now. You know *The Lorax*. It's been fun to my boys. I have twins. They're currently in third grade. And it's been fun going back and revisiting kids' books, because I think what maybe 10 years ago, if you'd asked me my favorite book, I would not have thought of a kids' book, but there are so many wonderful aspects of life that are so simplified in kids' books. And *The Lorax* is enduring and it's phenomenal. And so that is my favorite book.

Rex:

For those of us that maybe don't know it, just in case, give us your brief rundown of how you would elevator pitch the book to someone if they haven't read it.

Bernadette:

Sure. Well, if you haven't read Dr. Seuss in a while, I highly suggest doing it. He was so ahead of his time. *The Lorax* itself is about looking out for the Earth, because the Earth takes care of

you. And there's a line at the end that says, "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing's going to get better. No, it's not." And that's just such a Dr. Seuss moment right there. And it's a great book. It won't take you long to read it.

Kelly:

Well, thanks so much for joining us, Bernadette, and sharing your work experiences with us.

Bernadette:

Well, thank you so much for having me.

Kelly:

Well, that's our show for today. Please join us next time, rain or shine.