

Kelly:

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 Jason Emmanuel, 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.

Jason:

We're excited to introduce today's guest, Ronelle Williams, a broadcast meteorologist at KSNW TV in Wichita, Kansas. Welcome, Ronelle. Thanks so much for joining us.

Ronelle:

Yeah, thanks. Glad to be here. This is the first podcast I've ever done.

Jason:

Nice.

Kelly:

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

Ronelle:

Well, yeah. As far as the interest sparked, because that, of course, that happened before a lot of the education. So it was... How old was I? I think I was about four or five years old, and maybe six. But one of my members at the church that I was going to in Rochester, New York, I remember he gave me some VHS tapes, like the old storm chasing tapes. And I still have them. And it just went from there. Seeing tornadoes at that age, it was like I knew that that was what I wanted to do, was either chase them or have something to do with tornadoes at that point in my life. And before that, I was big into Star Wars. So before I got into meteorology, it was astronomy and constellations and the planets. And every single day, even after school, I was in the library. I was just reading. My mom can vouch for me. But, yeah. Just reading as much as I could, learning as much as I could.

Ronelle:

And once I really started getting into meteorology and getting away from all the astronomy stuff, that's when I was in high school where I decided, "You know what? I really want to major in this." Now, unfortunately, my math and my science... I did get my Regents diploma, which is where, I'm pretty sure... This was a long time ago, so I'm trying to remember. But basically, I had to take some extra math classes to get my Regents high school diploma versus my just high school diploma.

Ronelle:

But my math and my science skills, they still weren't up there. So I went to a two year college. They had four year programs, but they didn't have any meteorology or atmospheric science program. But I used that two years to build up my math and science. And then I got into a SUNY program in New York State. I graduated from SUNY Oswego with a Bachelor's in meteorology. And it took me a little while after that to find my first job. I know we'll get to that in a moment, but I'll just leave it there as far as my education and the interest that was sparked. And if I could say one more thing regarding that, I feel like all of us in

the field of meteorology and atmospheric sciences, we've all had that interest within us. It's just a matter of time before it comes out.

Jason:

Yeah. Definitely. So you mentioned your first job. Could you tell us a little bit about it? And how you ended up where you are now?

Ronelle:

Yeah. First, it started with Walmart. And I give Walmart a lot of credit, because that's where I got my paycheck from, and just my experience with the real world before I actually, officially, professionally got into the meteorology field. And I was trying to get into the private sector. A lot of doors just weren't opening. And I spent probably about six years at Walmart applying for jobs all the time. And this was after I graduated.

Ronelle:

So just before I got my first job, my older brother, he's been in radio and television since I can remember. And around that time, he was working at a TV station in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. And when I was visiting him one time, he took me to the station that he was at. He's not talent, by the way. He directs and produces. But he introduced me to the morning meteorologist and maybe seconds after meeting the guy, he stopped me and he said, "Hey, man." I keep backtracking. I'm sorry. But originally, I didn't want to get into the TV side of things. But he stopped me and he said, "Hey, man. I know you say you don't want to do TV. But you have a great voice. You have a great presence. You're not ugly."

Kelly:

That helps.

Ronelle:

Yeah. And, "This is what you need to be doing." And he gave me a list of things to do. Right after talking to him, I signed up to do some volunteer forecasting with an organization called Foot's Forecast. And I just contacted every and anyone I could to help me get some kind of reel put together. And while I was working at Walmart, one of my coworkers, he's big into photography. And to this day I still don't know how we did it. I still have the video. But I did a quick forecast using a white blanket sheet. Somehow he got graphics behind me. And that was enough to get the attention of one of the local TV stations in Rochester, New York.

Kelly:

That's cool that you were able to pull that off.

Ronelle:

Yeah. Yeah. It's been a long journey. A long, humbling journey. So once I did all that and got his attention, they helped me make a reel. And that's what helped me get to St. Joseph, Missouri. And that was back in April of 2014. I spent a little bit over two years there, and then I went to Kansas city, Missouri. And a lot of people still, to this day, they always tell me, "Oh, that was such a huge market jump." But I still don't look at it that way because during that time I didn't really see my potential. You

know? You don't really see or recognize what everybody else is telling you about yourself. You're just doing your job and trying to do the best you can. And that's all I was doing.

Ronelle:

So I spent two years in Kansas city. I went there in June... Yeah. It was June of 2016. And then I left KC in June of 2018, so last year. And now I'm in Wichita, Kansas. And one of the reasons why I'm here is because one of my old coworkers who I worked with in Kansas City, one of the meteorologists, she is now the chief here at my current station. So she played a big part in getting me over here.

Jason:

That's awesome.

Kelly:

So you said that you didn't initially want to be a broadcast meteorologist. So what did you envision yourself doing? When you graduated, what was your goal? What did you see yourself doing?

Ronelle:

I knew I just wanted to do something sitting behind a computer and forecasting. I didn't want to be in front of any kind of camera or microphone. But I know even nowadays, the NWS meteorologists, they... Now that we have Twitter and Facebook and stuff, I had a few of them tell me they have to be a little bit more social than back in the day.

Jason:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Kelly:

And you mentioned that... What was it that you said you signed up for to help with... To get a reel together?

Ronelle:

Well, it wasn't so much to get a reel together. It was to get like the forecasting experience. I'm sorry. I didn't mention that. But it's an organization called Foot's Forecast. And they have forecasters all around the country. I'm not sure if they have any forecasters outside of the country. But I'm pretty sure it's all nonprofit. I wasn't paid or anything. But they're a legit organization. And that helped me basically have something to put on my resume to say, "Hey, I forecasted for this organization for so long," even though I wasn't getting paid for it.

Ronelle:

And my responsibility with them was because I was the only one in Western New York. I had my own Facebook page, and I had to update that page every single day. And being in the Northeast, I'm sure y'all know, with Lake-effect snow, especially in upstate New York, I was updating that thing constantly. And then I was still working at Walmart at the same time. So that was a busy time for me. I think I started doing that in August of 2013. And then I did that all the way up until I got my first job in April of 2014.

Jason:

Man, yeah. It just feels like a lot of hard work to get to where you are now.

Ronelle:

Yeah. Yeah. That's what I said it was just a humbling experience. And now that I think of it, I think I didn't want to get into the broadcast side of things because, unfortunately, when I was in college, when I was at SUNY Oswego, there was a broadcast class that I wanted to take just to at least get my feet wet, since I didn't have any experience with it other than watching local mets on TV.

Ronelle:

But the gentleman who was heading up the class, and I think he's still in Syracuse. But he was a Syracuse meteorologist. And pretty much it was up to him whether or not he wanted to do the class or not, because it was usually during the winter time. And with the snow, if he was only going to be teaching five or six of us, he had the chance to decline where he wasn't going to be driving back and forth. And that's what happened that one time during my college career where I was able to take it but couldn't, because he didn't want to teach it because he didn't have enough students and he felt that it wasn't worth it.

Jason:

Right. Yeah. So, otherwise, as you were trying to pave your own career path, did you have any other mentors that provided you with guidance?

Ronelle:

Yeah. My college counselor, who was also one of the meteorology professors... I'm sure it's like that in most of the programs. His name is Dr Steven Skubis. And he's just an all around nice guy, very down to earth. His office door is always open. Whether it's synoptic or dynamics that you have questions about, he just was enthusiastic about that stuff. So it was like you weren't going to get some kind of boring explanation. You were going to get, "Okay. Well, look at this equation. This goes here. And what does that do?" You know? He was just very enthusiastic. And with him always having an ear and always having his door open, that really helped me get through things. But it was nice to have that relationship with someone at his level.

Ronelle:

And the meteorology, atmospheric science programs, I feel like they're pretty small compared to other programs, anyway. So we, as mets, I feel like we automatically have that relationship with our professors, whether it's one of them, two of them, three of them, all of them. You're going to forge a relationship with someone once you get to that third and fourth year of college.

Jason:

Right.

Kelly:

So now that you have a career as a broadcast meteorologist, looking back, what other courses and skills beyond the required math and science do you think would be most helpful to individuals wanting to get into that field?

Ronelle:

Do you mind if I take a little detour?

Kelly:

No. No.

Ronelle:

Like, little fork in the road? Because of course, college, you can't put a price on that. Or you can. I mean, my student loans. I was about to say, believe it or not, those six years that I was at Walmart taught me a lot because you've got to have thick skin. At the end of the day, you're in front of a camera. You have a voice. You're a public figure. And not everybody's going to like you. And Walmart helped me realize that over the years I was there because, I took a lot of stuff while I was there. You know? Somebody tries to return a TV that's obviously two years old and you've got to tell them, "No," they're going to have some things to say to you because they want a new TV.

Ronelle:

So just just taking that and then bringing it here. Even when I was in Kansas City, that really helped me keep my composure and keep my stature and not really... Whenever something happened, it didn't really knock me off my feet that much.

Jason:

Right. Yeah, generally, I think everyone should have to work retail at some point.

Kelly:

Yeah. I think we probably all have, at one point. And it is tough.

Ronelle:

Oh, I just remembered something. Do you mind if we backtrack, just for a quick moment?

Jason:

No. Go for it.

Kelly:

No.

Ronelle:

Okay. Yeah. I just wanted to give a shout out because word spreads. And one of my other mentors who I still keep in touch with, his name is Mike Bracciano. And he's the chief meteorologist in St. Joseph, Missouri, so at my very first job. And I still keep in touch with him. And I can call him, text him about anything regarding moves to make, stuff like that. Just situations at work that I've never like been through. Like, "Hey, how should I go about doing this?" He's always been there, too. And I'm sure even once he gets out of the business, I'm sure he'll continue to be there for me.

Jason:

Yeah. It's great to have a resource like that, I feel like.

Ronelle:

Yeah.

Jason:

So over the course of your career, what's the most exciting thing that's happened so far?

Ronelle:

It's got to be being out in the field. I'm doing mornings right now, weekday mornings in Wichita, so I don't get to go out as much as my last job when I was in Kansas City. But that's definitely something that just stands out. And I say that because all those years when I was working at Walmart, when I really started to get into Facebook and get into Twitter and following the Weather Channel and CNN Weather and different meteorologists... During severe weather season, I would always look at these different pictures and photos of shelf clouds and mesocyclones and tornadoes and mammatus clouds.

Ronelle:

And now, with me sticking around in this part of the country, not really moving all that much outside of the Midwest/Plains, it's cool, because now I'm able to take those pictures myself and share them. And I feel like there's somebody out there who I'm impacting. Maybe not somebody in college, maybe even somebody younger that might be looking at the pictures that I share, even from some of our viewers. And maybe they're thinking to themselves, "Man, I want to get into that. And I want to go out there and just be where the action is." So I always thought that was kind of cool.

Kelly:

Could you walk our listeners through a typical day on the job? And let us know what it's like to work as a broadcast meteorologist?

Ronelle:

Yeah. Well, it's hard to get into the normal 9 to 5. So I wake up at midnight, that's when my day starts, mainly because I do the weekday mornings. Now, if I was mid shift then you'd work maybe a 9 to 6, but if there's severe weather you might stay a little bit later. And then, of course, chief, that's more the 2 to 11 range. But with me starting my day at midnight and then sometimes I have to do our noon show, that does make for a long day. So you got to be ready for those extra hours, especially during that active weather, if there's showers, storms, around, snow, if you're expecting severe weather.

Ronelle:

And also because our DMA is so large, so there's a lot of people that we serve. We cover almost the entire state of Kansas, nearly. The only parts of Kansas that we don't cover, Eastern and Northeastern Kansas. Other than that, everything else is us. And we also cover some Nebraska and Oklahoma counties.

Ronelle:

So starting at midnight and then, as soon as I wake up, get on the computer, start forecasting a little bit, eat something, maybe a little bowl of cereal, cold cereal, bowl of oatmeal. And then I leave, get ready to

go. I'm usually at work by about 1:30 in the morning, and we start at 4:30. So everything that I do, my list of duties... Where we have to do radio, I do more forecasting. All of that takes up that three hours. And also because we have four zones that we cover because we have such a large DMA and therefore we have four seven day forecasts.

Ronelle:

So that's why the forecasting takes a big chunk of at least my time. I know other markets, they usually have one seven day forecast. Maybe two, maybe three. And then I do know some, including us, have four. So...

Kelly:

And do you do social media, as well? Is that required? I'm assuming.

Ronelle:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. That just gets thrown under that umbrella. Social media, updating our website. And when it comes to social media, it's not just posting all the time. You got to show that personal side, and therefore you have to watch what you post. I feel like I've got a healthy equation for Facebook. Honestly, I just signed up for Instagram and I'm still figuring that out. And then Twitter, I feel like I have a healthy kind of regiment for that, too. But after those three hours where I'm getting graphics together, too, fixing our graphics and doing all that, our show goes from 4:30 to 7. And then literally, right after that, I have to do a live radio interview. And right after that, we start our Today Show cut ins. We're an NBC affiliate.

Jason:

Wow. Okay.

Ronelle:

Yeah. So, Al Roker usually tosses to me. Whenever he gets in his little jokes, I try to follow up with something. But kind of tough. It's tough. But those last two hours... So, I do that from 7 to 9. And between 9 and 9:30, that's usually my chance to grab a quick bite to eat, because right at 9:30, we have our morning editorial meeting where I have to give a weather update for the day. And for some of the reporters that... They might be live. I have to let them know if the winds are going to be very strong, if we're expecting storms because of lightning and they're going to be outside trying to do these live shots. So that's important. That's required, every single day.

Ronelle:

And right now, I might have another bite to eat between about 9:45 and by the time our noon show starts. But I have to do more radio. And we also do forecasts for Wichita State University. We were doing forecasts for our hockey team here, the baseball team. So there's different things throughout the year that throw extra things on our plate in our normal routine. And then our noon show, that's about a half an hour. But, again, if there's weather, our chief... They don't come in at 12:30 in the afternoon. They probably won't come in until 1:45, 2 o'clock. So you might be here a little bit longer. So that's why I said between midnight and then sometimes you're staying past 12:30 in the afternoon. Those can make for some long days.

Kelly:

Yeah. That is a long day. And do you do school visits?

Ronelle:

Yeah.

Kelly:

So how does that fit in? Like, you get time off during your normal work hours to do that? And do the meteorologists switch off?

Ronelle:

Well, you just have to try to fit it into your schedule as best you can. And unfortunately... And a lot of people around here know this, and they're really cool when it comes to us saying no. Because especially during severe weather season, if there's a likelihood of tornadoes and baseball size hail, they understand if you're like, "Hey, I'll be off work during that time, but I still need to be available. I can't come." So this time of year where things are a little bit more on the quiet side, we're just looking forward to getting the first snowflakes of the season. This is when we do start to get that increase in school visits because they know that come February, March, it's going to be tough to get to get a meteorologist into the classroom.

Ronelle:

And it's not just school visits. It's MC'ing different events, doing things like what I'm doing right now with this podcast. I'm sure this won't be my last one, even though it's the first. But it's just a matter of time management, just trying to fit things in. Because you want to be there for your community.

Jason:

Yeah. Definitely.

Ronelle:

Even though it's a lot. It's one more thing that stacks up on your plate. Even though some of those days are long, like what we were just talking about, at the end of the day, it's that passion that I was talking about that gets us through those long days. And that's why I always tell people, "If you do want to get into this, broadcast meteorology in particular, just be ready." Because, unfortunately, we've heard some things where these kids getting right out of school, they get overwhelmed. And then something that ends up happening, something bad happens, and they might not know how to take it. So just be ready for all of that, is what I'm trying to say.

Jason:

Yeah. Definitely. So what do you like most about your job? Is it the variety? Or getting to do something you're passionate about every day?

Ronelle:

Yeah. Definitely, the passion has a lot to do with it just because at the end of the day it's something that I've wanted to do since I was a kid. Now, I don't know how long I'm going to be waking up at midnight for... I don't have any kids yet. I'm not married. So I'm going to do this as long as I can. I'm talking about the weekday morning shift. But either way, we'll see what happens. And I say that because I didn't think

I'd be doing this, or at least be this far into broadcast meteorology in the first place. So we'll see what happens.

Ronelle:

But going back to one of your previous questions, what you asked, what's my favorite part? It's got to be going out into the field and just seeing everything that you've learned about in textbooks just with the naked eye, upfront, personal, and also being able to diagnose things every now and again. A lot of us, we've gotten those emails or those Facebook messages, "What kind of cloud is this?" "Why is this happening?" And it just feels good being able to be there for people and provide answers to their questions. So going out into the field and just being that person that's looked to in that standpoint when it comes to people wondering what's going on out there.

Jason:

Yeah. You had mentioned at the very beginning that you had gotten those tapes of tornadoes and storm chasers. Have you ever seen any storms or tornadoes up close?

Ronelle:

No. No tornadoes, at least not over land. I have seen a few water spouts when I was younger, on Lake Ontario.

Jason:

Oh, cool.

Ronelle:

I think I was about 13, maybe 14 years old. But, yeah. Other than that, no tornadoes. But I've seen some pretty crazy shelf clouds, mammatus clouds. What else? Hail. I actually saw... Had to have been ping pong ball sized hail.

Jason:

Oh, man.

Ronelle:

Yeah. I saw hail that big for the first time. That was a couple of months ago, maybe two, three months ago. And that was pretty crazy, because they sent me out in our new weather vehicle because... That was actually my first time. And it was a pretty crazy day, because I had the complete opposite schedule. But outside of our chief, I am the only one who had been in a vehicle like that before. So they wanted me to be the first... They wanted me to be the guinea pig, basically.

Ronelle:

Everything was great and I know not to punch hail cores. But it just so happened that one of the cells that we were following, we did get just a little bit too deep into it. And where we were, it literally just flared up and intensified. And that's where we got that ping pong ball sized hail. And I was getting a little nervous. It was making some noise. I don't think we had a whole lot of dents on the vehicle. And I'm trying to talk a little bit lower, because our general manager is in the building and sometimes he walks past. But we were okay.

Jason:

Yeah. Yeah. This might be an elementary question, but is hail more common in the Midwest? Because I feel like I haven't really experienced it over here.

Ronelle:

I feel like it is. Outside of the meteorological standpoint, just from the viewers that I've interacted with, where a lot of people around here, they've lived here for a long time to the point where they ignore tornado warnings. If there's a severe thunderstorm warning, a warning for baseball, softball sized hail, they usually make sure they have their cars inside if they can get them inside somewhere, well beforehand. So they're just used to it around here. But so many warnings almost every day for hail during severe weather season, between March and June.

Ronelle:

And even outside of that, when we get those clockwork summertime convective storms, once some of those get going, it's the 60 mile per hour gusts, quarter-sized hail, that's almost automatic. And versus where I'm originally from, Rochester, New York, I saw hail for the first time when I was in my middle 20s. And it was only pea size. And I was just ecstatic. So it took me that long to see hail up there. So, yeah. There's definitely a contrast.

Kelly:

So is the most challenging thing about your job the waking up at midnight? Or is there something else that you find the most challenging?

Ronelle:

Me personally, I get into a routine. So when I go to bed at 5 o'clock, because I do it every day... 5 PM, my body just knows like, "Okay. It's time to go to sleep now." Going to bed at that hour, of course you're not going to sleep the whole way through, because that's just not natural to go to bed at that time. But at the same time, I always make sure I get enough sleep. But it is rough sometimes. I had a two week vacation that I got back from last week before I went on another brief trip. And that day, oh, man. I don't think I slept at all the night before. I just couldn't, because I had been gone for so long. And then to put your body back into that shock. I was exhausted. I was a walking zombie. But, hey. That's just part of the job. You know?

Kelly:

Yeah. I was thinking the work life balance would be pretty tough. For your social life, you're like, "Oh sorry, guys." I've got to go to bed. It's 5 o'clock." You know? But I'm sure you just...

Ronelle:

Yeah.

Kelly:

It's your job and you do what you have to do.

Ronelle:

Yeah. And there's a way to make it work. And now that I'm doing weekday mornings, I have weekends off, now. So that helps.

Kelly:

Oh, that's nice.

Jason:

Oh, nice. Yeah.

Ronelle:

Yeah. So come Friday, I'm off earlier than everybody else. Even though I have to go to bed early on Sundays. It's still... It's a trade off. You know? So just have to work with what you've got. And even in my past jobs while I was in Kansas City, St. Joseph, Missouri, and when I was working at Walmart, I had those weird days off. I had Monday, Tuesday off, or Wednesday, Thursday. And even that wasn't all that bad, because I was able to get stuff like grocery shopping done. Because it seems like everybody grocery shops on the weekends.

Kelly:

Oh, I know.

Jason:

Like, Sunday.

Ronelle:

Yeah. Exactly. So I was able to get all that stuff done with a breeze. And then if I had to do laundry... My first couple of apartments, I lived in places that didn't have that kind of utility inside the apartment. So I would have to go to the little community washroom or whatever and put quarters in the machine. I had to do all that. So it was really nice to be able to do all that stuff, to run errands and do what I needed to do while everybody else is at work. And there's no traffic. It was still nice. So that's why I said you just have to work with what you've got. And I was still able to have a social life, too, during that time. So it wasn't all that bad.

Kelly:

Looking back, is there anything you wish you had done differently in your career?

Ronelle:

Hmm. Outside of that broadcast meteorologist class, there isn't really a whole lot. And I can't even really bring up that one class, just because that wasn't really my choice. Where the professor, he didn't want to teach it because he only offered it... I think it was only like every year and a half or something crazy like that.

Kelly:

Oh, that's too bad for students who are interested in that. That was their only opportunity to learn about broadcast meteorology.

Ronelle:

Yeah. And it kind of sucked for everybody else. Because some of my classmates, they really wanted to take that class, and they never could. But outside of that, there isn't really a whole lot that I wish I would've done, other than studying a little bit more, get better grades. And I say that because being a public figure and being in the public eye, when I got my first job, I was in my late 20s. I was close to my late 20s. I think I was about 27. So a lot of my coworkers, they were just out of school. You know? They were 21, 22 years old. And even though I only had five years on them, that's still five years where I was able to make stupid mistakes without being that person or being in the public eye.

Ronelle:

Not that I was a problem child or I was always looking for trouble. It wasn't like that. That's just the way life goes. You make mistakes. So I was glad and relieved that some of my mistakes, I was able to make them... Not in private, like, "Nobody saw me do this." But you know what I mean?

Jason:

Yeah. Yeah.

Ronelle:

Just without a lot of fingers being pointed at me. So there is a piece of me that says, "Man, I wish I would have done this a little bit earlier." But then it's like, "You know what? At the end of the day I probably wasn't ready. I'm glad I'm doing it now. And everything worked out. So it's all right."

Jason:

So I know you're a Certified Broadcast Meteorologist, or CBM. Are there any other professional development opportunities that you think are beneficial or that you've pursued?

Ronelle:

The... Which is it? Through the COMET program. The MetEd modules.

Jason:

Oh, yeah.

Ronelle:

Yeah. Outside... Because of course, we all use those to study for the CBM exam. But even outside of that, that is what helped keep me somewhat sharp those six years that I was working at Walmart. And a lot of my coworkers, they can vouch for me. I was going into work every day with a textbook. I mean, my mesoscale meteorology textbook, that thick black one? I was on break on my lunch, always reading that. Always. So between reading and those MetEd modules, those helped keep me going. Those played a big part

Kelly:

Ronelle, we always ask our guests one last fun question at the end of each podcast. Who is your favorite musical artist?

Ronelle:

I was trying to go back and forth a little bit. But I'll go with J. Cole. And mainly because... And for anybody that's listening, if they don't know who that is... I know a lot of people know who he is, but he's a rapper. But I watched him.... He's one of those rappers who I felt like I was growing up with. And I say that because I think I was in my late teens, early 20s, when he first started coming out with some mix tapes. And then he started coming out with albums. But you listen to those artists where as they progress, you can hear them... You can hear the maturity. You can hear them growing up. And I think we're around the same age. I think he's like 33, 34, something like that. So that's why I said, listening to him and listening to the stuff that he's saying, it's like I was going through a lot of the same things. So I thought that was cool. And that's why he's one of my favorites.

Jason:

Nice. Yeah. I feel like that could be really valuable, to find an artist that's expressing things that you're also going through.

Ronelle:

Yeah.

Jason:

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

Ronelle:

Yeah. Thanks for having me. Thank you very much.

Jason:

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