

AT WORK: Climatologist spends life close to weather, God

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Ask elementary students what they want to be when they "grow-up," and the top choices always seem to be "a fireman," "a policeman," or "a weatherman." Kids, like the rest of us, just want to be where the action is.



Barry Shanley
At Work

Of course we don't all grow up to become a fireman or a policeman, but all of us in this part of the country are interested in the weather. Every day. The proof is how prominently placed the weather segment is in your local television newscast. The weather is the one topic of universal interest because it is the one daily occurrence that affects us all. In fact, when I anchored the news on Channel 13 in Grand Rapids our boss laid down the law that no matter what, at 11 p.m. in this early-to-bed market, the weather would be first in the newscast. We used to make jokes in the newsroom with mock news teases. "The Russians have launched missiles toward America, but first let's check the weather for tomorrow...." Laugh as we did, that policy was the main reason we soon became No. 1 in news at 11 p.m.

Western Michigan University Climatologist Robert Ruhf, at age 5, then living in the Grand Rapids suburb of Wyoming, was given science books by his observant and supportive parents and remembers how he "became fixated on snow and wintertime weather. I always was somewhat of a 'weather nut.' I loved snow, storms, cold weather, rain, clouds, wind and every other imaginable form of weather."

Following a suggestion made by his father, Ruhf soon wrote to the National Weather Service office in Grand Rapids. "They responded by sending me several actual weather maps from the previous week."

His interest became as intense as the weather often is in West Michigan.

"Once I even climbed-up a ladder so that I could try to see a tornado that was sighted a mile from my neighborhood. I didn't see it, however, as I could only see the dark storm clouds that were associated with it." Close enough, thank you. "Even the smallest thunderstorm or snowstorm could send me into an emotional state of extreme excitement."

The budding scientist also was always close to God. By the end of high school Ruhf thought his true calling might be as a missionary, an inspiration that led him briefly to Grand Rapids Baptist College, (now Cornerstone University). As he searched for exactly how he would combine science and Christ in his life, his dad suggested he return to meteorology because he knew he loved it. To help once again, his dad would actually take him "lake-effect snow chasing" -- adventures together that included driving through white-outs.

Ruhf eventually entered Central Michigan University to study meteorology, held internships with National Weather Service offices in Houghton and Grand Rapids, all of which convinced him he was more interested in the long term, than the short term, in climatology rather than in predicting the weather through meteorology.

"This interest led to the writing of my master's thesis, for which I analyzed precipitation patterns over a 20-year period at a station in Oshtemo Township.

And, what did he learn from the 20-year period? From 1981 to 1999 "there was no statistically significant change in precipitation over that period, but I found that the highest average precipitation totals during the winter occurred during the early morning hours before sunrise. This was a significant finding. The most-likely reason is because this is the time when the greatest contrast is found between the air temperature and the temperature of the surface of the Great Lakes, so lake-effect snow is being enhanced."

Is it true we had, (until this winter, Heaven knows), more snow when we were kids than we get now? "In the 1970s there was less annual snow on average than what we are seeing in this decade," he begins. I get a quizzical look on my face. "But," he explains, "the snow tended to stay on the ground longer in the 1970s. Thus the actual amount of snow on the ground was usually higher during the winters of the 1970s than it is today, even though there is more snow today."

This of course leads to me asking about global warming. "The research has taught me to be more skeptical about the reactionary extremes of people on both sides. Credible scientists disagree," he says, preferring to follow a leading expert in the field who believes the science of global climate change is still in its infancy, with many papers published every year.

"No scientist knows for sure what is happening and why," he says. There is one thing Ruhf says he is certain about. "I am angered at the way that both liberals and conservatives in the media and in the political arena twist science to promote their own agendas. It makes me sick."

Following his meteorology degree at Central Michigan University came a master's degree at Western Michigan University, where he was convinced to continue with a doctorate in Science Education through WMU's prestigious Mallinson Institute.

Today, he works as a field researcher and program evaluator for Science and Mathematics Program Improvement, a critical position as the state and nation re-emphasize those disciplines.

Ruhf finds no conflict, but rather fulfillment in the combination of his love of science and love of God. "I have a natural God-given inclination toward science. I have the sort of mind that is always analyzing things and organizing things into patterns that helps me make sense of what is going on around me."

When it comes to science or spirituality, he prefers to look at the long term.

Ruhf's experiences confirms my long-held belief that the lucky ones in the world are those who find out early where their inclinations lie, are lucky enough to have teachers who ask as early elementary school, and parents who are observant, supportive, and involved because they wouldn't miss it for the world.

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