NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
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IN PARTNERSHIP WITH NOAA HERITAGE AND THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN OGREN
FOR THE
NOAA 50TH ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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Molly Graham: This is an interview with John Ogren for the NOAA 50th Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on January 14, 2020, in Boston, Massachusetts, and the interviewer is Molly Graham. We'll start at the beginning. Could you say when and where you were born?

John Ogren: Sure. I was born on April 13, 1966, born in St. Francis Hospital in Blue Island, Illinois, which is a south suburb of Chicago.

MG: What brought your family to that area? Tell me a little bit about your family history.

JO: Sure. Well, as much as I know. At least on my dad's side, [we're] of Swedish descent. We do carry on some small Swedish holidays and those types of things, different cookies, and dishes. By and large, settled in Minnesota and Wisconsin. My grandparents moved to Chicago for work. So, I grew up in a factory-working family. In fact, my dad worked in the same factory as his father worked in, and then I actually worked there for a brief time before coming over to meteorology myself.

MG: What kind of factory was it?

JO: It was a forging plant. So it's hot steel. The way you do that is you load bars of steel into a god-awful hot furnace, and then there are these guys with Popeye arms at the other end that grab the steel with tongs. It's a drop-forge, so it just hammers away into a die until you have a part. So we made connecting arms for outboard motors. We made brake pads for aircraft. We made craftsmen tools. It was cool. It was an interesting thing, but it wasn't what I wanted to do for a career. But that's where the family background was. It was very blue-collar, and a great time to grow up. That's what we knew; we knew manufacturing.

MG: You worked there for some time.

JO: I worked there for about a year and a half after college. When I graduated, there was a hiring freeze in the National Weather Service. I did some really bad interviews with some private sector companies and didn't get those jobs. Right out of school, you need to have some money. It was natural to go do what the rest of the family did. So it was an interesting time, but it definitely wasn't what I wanted to do with my career.

MG: Can you tell me about the town where you grew up?

JO: Yes, in Blue Island. I was actually in Blue Island just until about third grade, so I don't remember a whole lot about that. Then we moved a little bit further into the Southwest suburbs in Tinley Park. To me, I think it was a traditional suburbia life. We had everything we needed. We were fairly close to the city. I used to go to a lot of baseball games with my grandparents, and things like that. We'd take a hooky day off of school and go downtown, go see all the Christmas lights in downtown Chicago, and things like that growing up. It was very much – we lived in Suburbia, but we're certainly close enough to the city to enjoy all of those things.

MG: Were you close with your grandparents?

JO: Yes, everybody lived close. So my parents, my dad's sister, my aunt and uncle, both sets of grandparents. We were probably all within ten minutes of one another. So growing up was really cool. We were always together on all the holidays and things like that.

MG: Any family stories or memories stand out to you?

JO: Oh, boy. [laughter] It was a lot of fun. We just got together because we were so close. It wasn't like every holiday was this great event. It was the holidays, and of course, we're going to get together. Really, it was around getting together, a lot of the foods that we ate. We would make Swedish potato sausage, which is meat and potatoes stuffed into a tube. How can that be bad? [laughter] It was delicious. We played a lot of cards. We played a lot of games around the dining room table at my grandparents' place – a lot of good memories around there. Actually, when my grandparents passed away, I inherited that table. So we continue that tradition in my family.

MG: That's really nice. Do you have siblings?

JO: Yes, I've got one sister. She's about five years younger than me. She still lives in the Chicago area. My only knock against her is that we all group up on the South Side of Chicago, and we were all White Sox fans. And she married a Cubs fan and is now a Cubs fan. I don't know where that came from. But she's still family; I like her. [laughter]

MG: [laughter] Well, tell me a little bit about the schools you attended growing up.

JO: As far as schools growing up, I don't know that there was anything special. I went to grade school. I don't remember a whole lot about that. High school was in Tinley Park. I played football. I played football for three years anyway out there. I don't think there was anything particularly special. I was a quiet, introverted person. I certainly had friends. But I wasn't really out there. It wasn't until I went to college that I came out of my shell and found the real me. So I got involved with on-campus activities, some student government type things. I joined a fraternity. I've got lifelong friends from there. We were just a bunch of knucklehead guys, but we still get together and talk. Social media has been great for that. For me, college was a coming out. I felt like I could be me and figure out what it is I want to do with the rest of my life.

MG: In high school, were you interested in earth science?

JO: Oh, yes. I'd been a science person forever. Really going back to formative years – what got me interested in meteorology and weather was a sheer fear of the weather. I think it was in 1967. I don't know the date. Oak Lawn, which is a south suburb of Chicago, had a deadly tornado. It hit a high school, and there were a number of fatalities. It hit a roller rink. Technology at that time was not such that we could warn ahead of time. My grandfather – this was my mother's dad – was quite a bit older than my grandmother. He had been a mason but retired. He was doing things on the side, and he was a school bus driver for that high school. His bus had been rolled. Again, I was too young to know this, but just through family lore, hearing how awful that was – so always hearing about tornadoes and storms and things like that. So when the thunder

roared, I was the first one in mom and dad's bed. [laughter] They just scared me terribly. As I got into high school, I really started getting interested in science and was taking an earth science class. We did about a six-week unit on weather, and I was hooked because I wanted to take this fear and then [figure out] what makes weather tick. Why is this stuff the way it is? It just took off from there. So went off to school at Western Illinois University. I got my degree, actually, in geography. I was going to go to a different university, but they put the program on hold. I looked at the University of Wisconsin. I looked at Purdue. I looked at out-of-state tuition, and I thought, "Well, there's no way I can afford that." So I found out about this program at Western. The degree was in geography, but they offered all the courses in order to be a certified meteorologist. So I thought, "Hey, I'll go there for a few years. See what happens. I can always transfer out." It just fit, and I stayed and graduated from there and moved on.

MG: What was the year you graduated?

JO: I graduated from college in 1988.

MG: Tell me more about the curriculum and the classes you were taking.

JO: Yes. Well, it was a lot of math and science. Certainly, because of the degree in geography, we took a lot of social and physical geography type classes, but the emphasis was really in weather, in meteorology. Then my minor was also in broadcasting and communications. So always trying to tie those types of things together. So a lot of math and physics. So we were in class with the engineering students. We had a few professors who said, "Well, you weather guys. You don't belong here. This is an engineering school. Why are you in my physics class?" kind of thing. So he rode us pretty hard. That gave us a few extra credit kind of things, just to prove our worth. But we all survived. So, a lot of math, a lot of physics, a lot of meteorology. It was a very small department. I think there were only six in my graduating class. So we all got pretty close working on problems together and doing our homework.

MG: What did you hope to do with your degree?

JO: I really wanted to work for the National Weather Service. That was my dream to work with the National Weather Service. I was aware of broadcasting. I've got some really bad demo tapes out there, somewhere. I'm sure they'll surface at some point, probably at retirement. The private sector was there, it was an option, but I've always been service-oriented, not profit-driven. So I didn't understand this whole making money thing. We certainly need to make money, and we're in a capitalist society for sure. What I learned through the fraternity, what I learned through growing up, was giving back to others and doing for others. So government service, public service, was just a really good fit for me. Just the ability to do science, to forecast weather, and to warn other people about the impending hazards was important to me. I thought, "How cool could that be." It took a year and a half to get in, but it was well worth the wait.

MG: Tell me more about your life in college, your fraternity, and things you did outside of the classroom.

JO: [laughter] Actually, in meteorology, we hung out a lot together as far as doing our coursework, but my social life was all about the fraternity. Again, we were just a bunch of knucklehead, late teens, early twenties guys, but it was a real bond. Again, I keep up with those guys even today way more so than the high school crowd. It taught you about philanthropy as well. I talk about giving back to the community, and things like that. So, while we partied hard and were probably stereotypical college students, we did do a lot of philanthropy in the group. Oddly enough, our biggest philanthropy was an event called "Big Wheels." It was founded by a couple of guys wandering back from the bars, well before my time, and they found a couple of kids Big Wheels in someone's front yard, and they thought [it] would be fun to race them down Murray Street, which was the main drag going into campus and ended up down by the football stadium. So from there, I don't know how it was dreamt up, but they thought, "Wow, we ought to do this. We should have a campus-wide competition where we would race big wheels down this hill, and make money and donate it." [laughter] So here we go. It's still ongoing today. So we would fence off the yard, and we'd roll in a beer truck, and we would sell tickets to come in. We would sell tickets to teams. There would be four-person teams. There would be somebody at the top to push, somebody to ride, and two idiots at the bottom to catch you. [laughter] But we were able to raise money for senior citizens of Macomb, Illinois every year. So we had a lot of fun, but we also felt good that we were also giving back to the community.

MG: That's great. Tell me a little bit more about the year after you graduated and what that was like. You were applying for jobs.

JO: Yes, it was frustrating. You graduate; we all want jobs, right? My dad had transferred out of Chicago, had gone downstate Illinois to a different plant, and so I was actually living with my grandparents, my dad's parents. In the end, that turned out to be pretty special.

MG: It sounds like you were close with them. Do you want to take a break?

JO: No, I'm okay. I'm alright. Both grandparents were diagnosed with cancer while I lived with them. My grandfather passed away in only a couple of months. I'm glad I was able to be there for my grandmother. In the time I was with her, we spent a lot of evenings watching baseball. She died after I had moved out and started my career.

MG: What did you know about the National Weather Service at that time?

JO: Well, I knew I wanted to work for the National Weather Service. I didn't really care where. So when I applied and I look back at that application today, and it's like, "Wow." It was bad. I think we've all been there. But there was a checkmark. It said, "Where would you like [to go]? Do you want to work in the Northeast? Do you want to work in the Midwest?" I said, "I'll work anywhere." It was just a matter of time and waiting it out. I worked. I still had my summer college job. So I did that for the first summer. Then they kept me on for a few more months. After a while, they were like, "Look, we just can't sustain it." That's when I went to the factory. It was a great learning experience about manufacturing. It continued to drive home that blue-collar work ethic that I was raised with anyways. You're up at the crack of dawn. It's hot. It's dirty. It's nasty. It's hard work. It's heavy work. But after a while, I talked to the plant manager, and he knew who I was because of the family lineage having worked there. I said,

"You know, I've got a college degree. I can do more than drive a forklift, or load steel into a furnace." That turned into a rotational assignment. I worked in the metallurgy department, which was science-y, which was fun – taking samples of the products and slicing and dicing and testing them for hardness and things like that. I ended up in the storeroom, and they hired me to be a purchasing agent. So I was buying pieces and parts and steel and things like that for the company. That was the biggest mistake they made because they gave me a desk and a phone. [laughter] Finally, the job interview came, and it's so different then from what it is now in that the interview was, "Hi, my name is (Gil Russell?). I'm in Jackson, Kentucky. Do you know where that's at?" I said, "No, but I can sure find it on a map." He's like, "Well, we're looking for somebody to come in. It's an entry-level position. It's in Jackson. We're this small town of twenty-five-hundred in Appalachia. So if we were to hire you, would you come? I said, "Well, yes." He said, "Well, let me tell you a little bit more about the town first." I said, "Fine, but it really doesn't matter. I want to work for the National Weather Service." He went on to say, "It's Appalachia. It's kind of a depressed area." Really, it was coal-mining and tobacco farming, and neither one was doing particularly well back then. "But we're a county seat, so we've got a Wal-Mart, and we've got a Winn-Dixie, and we've got a True Value Hardware store and those things." I said, "Sir, it really doesn't matter. I want to get my foot in the door." So away we go. I get the call. I get the invitation. We drive down. We check-in. I'm down there with my parents and my fiancé at the time. We're looking around for a place to live. The first thing we do is we pick up a newspaper, right? So we're going to look and see what kind of apartments are available and things like that. This is probably a Friday or a Saturday on the weekend. My mom looks at the paper. She says, "Well, this paper is old. It's from Tuesday." We're from the city. [laughter] It didn't dawn on us that it was a weekly newspaper. So we looked around. Finally, we just weren't finding anywhere to live. So we drove up to the forecast office, introduced myself, and talked to some of the people working there. They said, "No, no. You're doing it all wrong. Don't look in the newspaper to find a place to live. You need to go down to Main Street. There's a drugstore there. Go in there drugstore, buy yourself a Coke, and go sit on the park bench out front." I was like, "You're kidding me." He said, "No. Sooner or later, somebody's going to walk by and say, 'Hey, you're new around here. What's going on?' Just tell them you're new. Tell them you work for the National Weather Service, and that you're looking for a place to live." I was like, "You got to be kidding me." Sure enough, we did that. The four of us walked down, got us a Coke, sat down. It took maybe five minutes before somebody stopped by to say, "Hi. Where are you from?" We told them, and they said, "Oh, you need to go talk to Ronnie Hubbard. Ronnie teaches at the city school. They cut out at three o'clock. Just go on down there. Go to the desk and ask for Ronnie, and Ronnie will take care of you." And that's exactly how I found my first place to live. He had a couple of places. We drove around. We picked half a house that we rented out, and it was dirt cheap. I wasn't making a lot of money, either. It was like fourteen-thousand dollars a year, or something like that. He's like, "Oh, well, you work for the Weather Service, so I don't need a security deposit. I don't need a lease. We'll just go month-to-month. This place is a little rough, so if you ever want to do any upgrades to the house, just let me know. I'll buy the supplies. If you want to do the work, I'll knock some off your rent." So we lived there for three years. It was a great start. [laughter] It was a really great start.

MG: What was your title?

JO: I was called a meteorologist intern, which is really a misnomer because I think most people think of interns and think you're still in college, and you're just trying something out, and it's temporary. It was really an entry-level meteorology job.

MG: What were your first impressions of Jackson?

JO: It was like, "Wow." [laughter] This was 1989, so we didn't have internet. You made me really feel old. But we weren't able to really do a whole lot of homework on there. So, yes, driving in the town – I mean, I was used to small towns. My mother had extended family in Minnesota. We're from farm towns and small towns. My wife's family grew up in farm communities in Iowa. That wasn't a big deal. But Appalachia is different. It was a little bit of an adjustment. What was so cool about Jackson was they were really proud of the National Weather Service. There had been a political battle to open an office between Jackson and Hazard. Jackson won, and they were proud of that fact. In fact, when you stop at the rest area on the Bert T. Combs Mountain Parkway, at least back then, there was a brochure in the rest area that said, "Breathitt County: Home of Lees College, the Honey Festival, and the National Weather Service." So they were really, really proud to have us. Now, you weren't from there, and that was a given. But because you worked for the Weather Service, you were alright.

MG: It's great to have that relationship with the community.

JO: Yes, and that's where – I took that with me. Because as you work in National Weather Service forecast offices, you are a part of the community in doing community preparedness. You're working with emergency services. You're working with emergency management. You're working with state and local governments and things like that. You end up working with other groups like the Kiwanis, Rotaries, American Red Cross, Salvation Army, and things like that. So you really do – especially in the smaller communities, but even in the bigger cities you really do become a part of that community. That's been something very rewarding to me.

MG: It seems important to have that trust.

JO: It really is. Exchanging business cards at the disaster is not the time to be introducing yourself. So much work goes into building those relationships from the get-go. At Wichita, Kansas, I was there for seven years. I really didn't know I was doing my job particularly well until about the time I was leaving. We had an un-warned tornado that hit an elementary school about the time the kids were arriving. It was a sunrise weather event, particularly hard to warn for. That's what I had been preaching for a long time, that you need to pay attention to severe thunderstorm warnings as much as tornado warnings because they can do as much damage. I had been working with the news media and things like that. We're great friends with all of those folks as well. So I thought, "Okay, here it is. We missed an event. Let's see how bad this is going to be." The support from the community, the support from the media, was amazing because we were all saying the same things that, "Oh my god, this was bad. This is horrible." Fortunately, there were no injuries or anything. We were fortunate from that point of view. But it was an opportunity to educate others that even some of these weaker events are still potentially dangerous and you need to pay attention to them.

MG: This is jumping ahead a little bit, but can you walk me through that event? What happened?

JO: It happened first thing in the morning, so I was rolling out of bed. I had looked and seen the radar. I had seen this line of storms approaching the Wichita area. I lived on the east side of town. The office was on the west side of town. I'm thinking to myself, "Can I make it?" So quick shower, hop in the car, and I drove right into the teeth of this thing. The storm cut loose as I got into the parking lot. We're a 24/7/365 operation. So the forecasters were there doing their job, issuing warnings and severe thunderstorm warnings out, but we had a small spin-up tornado with it. Sure enough, after the storm had passed, we had heard of a tornado hitting a school. So I immediately had to turn right back around, go back to the East Side because I was doing a damage assessment in my own neighborhood. So I went out there, met with the school officials. I met with emergency management. Fortunately, everything was okay. But then come the news media interviews and – "This is horrible. What happened? Can you explain?" It really helped that we had those relationships ahead of time. I knew all of the TV weather people, but I also knew a lot of the reporters that were out in the field because we were doing – it's Wichita, Kansas. We have a lot of storms. You got to meet, and you built somewhat of a relationship, even with the reporters out there. So you felt like you were getting a fair shake and really had an opportunity to share your part of the story at least.

MG: How do you develop those community relationships?

JO: Yes, it is. We would do station visits. This was when I was a warning coordination meteorologist. It was really my job to build those relationships in the community with emergency management with the news media with the not-for-profits. So, yes, we would actually go to the TV stations and meet with the meteorologists, we would make appointments with the news director, try to build as much of a relationship as you could with the reporters. The newsroom was a little harder to crack. But, again, when you're doing field interviews after storms and things like that, you just get to recognize one another. It was a pretty good working relationship, back and forth.

MG: Getting back to Jackson, can you describe the forecast office where you worked?

JO: Sure. It was tiny. You're making me old again because we were a WSO, Weather Service Office. There were only five of us. Our job was to take hourly weather observations. We did have a radar, so it was not the Doppler radars that we're using today. So we needed to take radar observations. We did voice recordings on NOAA [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration] Weather Radio of the forecasts and climatology data, warnings when we were issues warnings, and things like that. By and large, we were working alone. It was 24/7/365, only five of us. So on the dayshift, you might have two people around. But on the evenings and mids, you were on your own. You became very self-sufficient, in that you were responsible for everything that went on there. I knew it was a foot-in-the-door job. It was an office that was supposed to close during the National Weather Service modernization. There had been somewhere on the order of 365 offices around the country, and we were reducing down to around 122. So Jackson was supposed to close. Even our regional headquarters were coming to say, "Hey, just be prepared. In the future, we're going to close this office. We'll consolidate

into Charleston, West Virginia, and Louisville, Kentucky, and so on. Four of the guys, they loved it there. They definitely didn't want to move. Some did. One retired. But I was young and early in my career. It was a great place to start, but it's not where I wanted to stay forever. So I was like, "Hey, no problem. I'm ready to move on." It created self-sufficiency. You had to pretty much do everything. Even when we had active weather, you were lucky to bring in one extra person. So it was a lot of work, but it was a lot of fun. Some of those midnight shifts were pretty darn boring if there was no weather. So you try to do a little bit of training as much as you can on the midnight shift, just anything really to stay awake. Interesting times.

MG: Did the office ultimately close?

JO: No, they stayed open. The politics of the day said, "No, we still need an office in this place." So they stayed open. In fact, they expanded. So they're a full-blown forecast office to this day. In fact, I went back there just this past fall. The meteorologist-in-charge was retiring. While I hadn't worked for him, a good friend of mine, who works for me now, did. I hadn't been back to Jackson in twenty years. I thought, "You know what? A road trip is in order. Let's go back and see how it's changed." You know, it really hasn't. [laughter] The only thing different is it was a dry county, and now you can actually buy a beer in Jackson. That was the major thing. And some of the roads are a little bit different; I got a little bit lost. But it's still that small town of Appalachia. The biggest thing I remember was the people I worked with. Being early career without a lot of money, there was a lot of great hiking around there. Natural bridges were there. There was a great state park, Red River Gorge. So when you had time off, it was real easy just to hop in a car and go a very short distance and really have some outstanding hiking trails and beautiful scenery to see.

MG: You mentioned you came to visit with your fiancé. Did she move down with you?

JO: Yes, eventually. I was down there just by myself for about six months. We got married that next July. It was tough. She had a degree in education, wanted to teach, but she wasn't from there. So ended up taking care of our next-door neighbors, who we still keep in touch with this to this day, and helped as a nanny while they worked because they were both working. Jim was a teacher at one of the schools. Martha worked with the county extension there. So we got to grow up with their girls a little bit, too.

MG: How did you meet your wife?

JO: In college. We were college sweethearts. Kind of see each other from across campus, I think even freshman year, but both had other relationships going on, and it just so happened we broke it up with our other boyfriends/girlfriends. It turned out that we were in a film class together. How convenient is that? [laughter] So, through watching Hitchcock films and things like that, we got to know each other. We also had a lot of mutual friends through the fraternity and sorority system, and things like that. It was sophomore year in college. It just clicked. Thirty-five-odd years later, we're still together and doing great.

MG: I'm sorry I keep jumping around. I meant to ask more about your duties in your first position with the Weather Service.

JO: Sure. Again, you were responsible for everything that went on in that building. The duties were much smaller than what they are in a forecast office today. We had surface observations. It was very important that we make sure that we know the temperature and humidity and wind speed direction and barometric pressure. So that was an hourly thing unless conditions changed. We were at a small airport. We had a good relationship with the few flights that came in and out of there. It was nothing commercial, but it was local. We did NOAA Weather Radio, so broadcasting hourly conditions on the weather radio, our forecasts. Our parent forecast office was in Louisville, Kentucky. So while they did the statewide forecast, we would localize it to our neck of the woods because it was mountainous, so things were a little bit different, a little bit tougher to forecast. Then we had seventeen counties that we worried about for weather warnings. So with the old radar, we would issue severe thunderstorm warnings, tornado warnings. Flash flooding was really the main concern there. Again, with the terrain and the mountains. It didn't take a lot to get some of these small creeks going into really roaring torrents. So most of the weather fatalities that we had when I was working there were from floods and nothing else. That was our biggest risk in that part of the country.

MG: Any significant weather events stand out to you from that time?

JO: Yes. That's a part of weather. If you're going to be a warning forecaster, at some point in your career, there's going to be fatalities on your shift. We had a particularly heavy rain event. Kentucky had this network of remote rain gauges, which was really important. They would report about every fifteen minutes. So very heavy rain, slow-moving storms, and we're watching – I was working with another gentleman that night. We were watching this one particular rain gauge. The amount of rain in a super short period of time was incredible. We issued a flash flood warning. We contacted the country sheriff's office. The media was broadcasting it out of Hazard and Lexington, Kentucky. There was even enough time to where law enforcement went into this holler and had literally gone door to door [to] say, "Hey, we got a flood coming. Everybody out." Everyone left but one family. I didn't know this at the time. The storms petered out. The evening shift went home. I was working by myself on the midnight shift and got a call from the county sheriff's office. They said, "Well, we found one in the trees." I said, "Found one what?" They said, "Well, we found a body." Then as the night wore on, they found the family of four. So in hindsight, what had happened was a lot of heavy rain, but there was a lot of brush and trees and debris that created a natural dam. So when all that water piled up behind the dam, when that dam broke, this wall of water came through and just scoured out the holler. Those that left survived. Those that didn't didn't. The first one is the worst one. They don't ever get easier, but the first one is the worst one. Again, it's all learning. I feel like I did everything I could absolutely do. How often do you actually have time to go door to door? That just doesn't happen. Even with today's technology, that doesn't happen. It still sticks with me, and it hurts every time. Any time you work a big weather event and there are fatalities, it's a part of the job. It's a part of the stress. It's something I continue to work on today. Critical incident stress is a hot topic within the National Weather Service, and we're trying to at least – we're not first responders, but we're collateral damage from the first response. So what type of counseling is available to us to help out with that? Certainly, nothing that existed back then. That doesn't exist yet today, but we're working on fixing that because it does take a human toll on the individual forecasters that have to work these big weather events.

MG: I hadn't thought of that before, but I can understand that need. You also referred to the MAR [Modernization and Associated Restructuring]. Did that begin around this time you were in Kentucky?

JO: Yes. I am a child of the modernization. Really, I've done a lot in the organization. I rose through the ranks rather quickly. I like to think it was some hard work, but honestly, a lot of it was just timing. There were a lot of opportunities. I walked through a lot of those doors. I was willing to say, "Yeah, that looks interesting. Maybe I'll try that for a while." So when we first came in, I was in Jackson, Kentucky. We were supposed to close, but they were spinning up these new forecast offices. I'd applied for twelve other positions and had been declined. I was starting to wonder, "Man, am I ever going to get out of here? What's wrong with my resume?" – all the self-doubt that creeps in. Sure enough, I got a call from Wichita, Kansas. They said, "Yeah, we've got five positions we're hiring for. You're one of them. Come on out." It was a really cool time because we had the sixth Doppler radar in the country. So we got to play with some of the news toys before a lot of the other kids did. We were really encouraged to try things – trial and error. This is new. We know what the radar proved in research, but we actually get to see how these things worked in real life. There's a lot of growing pains that go along with that. But, to me, it was really exciting times. We had new equipment, new technology. All of us forecasters were all pretty darn young and really close. It was family. We did everything together off-shift. So we worked hard, and we played hard. We had bowling leagues. We had softball leagues. We just did an awful lot together. That was a part of that growing time. We learned so much with the new science and technology that was there and had that freedom to try something. If it didn't work, you say, "Okay, we learned something. Let's try something different." It was a lot of fun.

MG: When did you come to Wichita?

JO: I went to Wichita in 1992. As I said, I was one of the original forecasters there, but my real goal in my career was to be a warning coordination meteorologist in a place that had thunder, and a lot of thunder. Again, going back to childhood, it's those high impact tornado severe thunderstorm events that really intrigued me. First, it scared me and then intrigued me. I was already in Wichita. We already had a warning coordination meteorologist, but he had moved on, and then they hired another one. Then he moved on about eighteen months later. My boss was very much of the opinion – he wanted to hire managers from the outside office station. So I thought, "There's no way I'm going to get this, but I'm going to throw my name in the hat anyway and see what the heck happens." What do you know? I got it. So by thirty years old, I had met my career goal. "Wow, I'm a warning coordination meteorologist in a place that had thunder, and a lot of it." It's like, "Wow, this is really, really cool." So it was really, really good times back there. I was there from 1992 to 1999.

MG: Doing warning coordination the whole time?

JO: I was a forecaster for about three years, and then the warning coordination meteorologist for four.

MG: Go ahead.

JO: I'm just doing the math. [laughter]

MG: Can you say more about the development of the Doppler radar and its significance?

JO: Yes, it was absolutely cutting-edge. When I worked on the old radars, you were in a dark room. Phosphorous ray tube with a green strobe – think about old black and white movies, this green strobe that's just slowly going around. They paint echoes on the screen. As those echoes were there, you were there with your grease pencil, and you just outlined where they were, and then you'd change some other settings for intensity and draw another concentric circle around that. You have to get your tracing paper and put it on there with your Sharpie and draw where those are. That's where you knew where the storms were. It was very manual, labor-intensive, slow. To issue a warning, we thought we were doing really good from the time we said, "Hmm, we should issue a warning," and it would take about five minutes to go out into the other area, get on a computer, type it up, get it out – just very labor-intensive. So with the Doppler radars coming in, they were digital. We had maps. We could see so much more stuff, so you could know spatially where the storms were. You could loop them. You could see exactly where they were going. The situational awareness was incredible. Then, the Doppler effect – being able to see what's going on in the storms. What are the winds doing within the storms? Are we seeing rotation that might indicate a tornadic storm? Are we seeing a lot of rain and hail being held aloft by the updraft of the storm, and you know it's going to collapse at some point and produce a big wind or a lot of hail? There were just so many new things that we could see that we had learned from research. Again, we were right in the heart of severe weather country and had the tools to do it. We certainly made some mistakes along the way, but we sure learned an awful lot along the way. We thought back then any storm that rotated probably was going to produce a tornado. And boy, did we find out we were wrong about that. There's a lot of storms that rotate. Maybe they produce high winds, maybe they produce hail, but they don't necessarily produce tornados. There's still ongoing research to this day trying to really hone in on which storms are going to produce tornados versus which ones aren't.

MG: How close are you to figuring out that there might be a signature?

JO: Every experiment we do in NOAA Research [or Oceanic and Atmospheric Research] gets us that much closer. What we know today versus what I knew in 1999 is night and day. That's where we need to work in partnership with the other NOAA lines. NOAA Research, in particular in that case, is to have them funded and continuing to work on research and how we can be more predictive in what we do with these things. So we keep in close contact with them. Even as a trainer today, I continue to work along well with them because it's that new research that we need to train our forecasters so they can continue to learn and improve on their performance as well.

MG: Someone was telling me recently about a Weather Service Boot Camp. Is that something you're involved in?

JO: Yes, if you're talking about the Decision Support boot camp. That's been a real shift in the National Weather Service over the past – I don't know – five, six, seven years, is the idea of decision support services [DSS] I'm one of those people – I think we've been doing that since the beginning of time. We've been trying to communicate information so people can make smart decisions with that information. Over the years, it's been more ad hoc. So we're putting a lot more organization around that. So what the decision support boot camp does is that we're teaching meteorologists to be better communicators. We're not saying, "Don't dumb down the science," But we are saying, "Communicate in your partners' language, so they understand. As meteorologists, we have our own language. We can talk to each other all day long; you wouldn't have a clue what we're talking about probably because it's a completely different language. So my feelings are that we need to be a translator. We need to take our scientific jargon and put it into emergency management's language. So then they can make smarter decisions. That's what the boot camp is about, is changing how we communicate with them. But we also put them into scenarios. When they come into class, they get put into an emergency operation center, and they get put to work. We have incident commanders, and we have plans chiefs and operations chiefs, and things like that. So if you're going to be deployed to an incident command center or an emergency operation center, we want to run you through that scenario multiple times before you have to do it in real life. That's really what the boot camps are about is preparing to be deployed. It's not really providing that information from the home office; that's a different sort of training. The boot camps are really about being deployed to the incident and getting that on-site support.

MG: When you were in Kansas, what was the area you were in charge of?

JO: In Kansas, I was a forecaster. So I was working 24/7 – well, I wasn't working twenty-four hours a day, but we were on rotating shifts. The office was open – so the day to day work of providing weather forecasts. Then, certainly, we had our share of active weather, with severe weather. Also, winter weather was a nemesis of mine because it was always trying to decide: is it going to be rain? Is it going to be freezing rain? Is it going to be snow? It always just seemed to be a fine line of what that would be in that part of the country. Again, as the warning coordination meteorologist, most of my work was working with external partners in building those relationships and preparedness plans. We did a lot of training of weather spotters, spent a lot of time in Spring just traveling around to the twenty-seven different counties that I was responsible for, trying to make sure that we were getting the real-time storm reports. We can see things on radar, but we still can't guarantee exactly what's happening on the ground. So we still use volunteer networks to share with us what information is happening. How big is the hail? Okay, it looked like it got really windy there. Was there any damage? Did trees come down? Was there any roof damage? You need that ground truth. You need that real-time information. Today, we crowdsource it. We've got apps for that. But back in the day, it was a phone tree or amateur radio. So we worked very closely with the counties to build up these volunteer networks of people that would give us a clue what was really going on as these storms went through.

MG: Again, any significant events stand out to you from his time period, working in Wichita?

JO: Yes. Well, by far the biggest was May 3rd of 1999. That was my almost going away storm. I worked a lot of different events, so many different events. Floods of '93 were significant. A

lot of tornadoes. A lot of big wind storms. May 3rd of '99 was a massive outbreak in the United States. Oklahoma got hit much harder than we did in Kansas, but we still had an EF4 [Enhanced Fujita] tornado that killed six. It was not far from where we worked. So it hit home as well. So we knew the storm event was coming. Part of the community work was working with a group of teachers through the American Meteorological Society. It's a program called Project Atmosphere. So we're teaching teachers to teach weather in the classroom. By and large, it's middle schoolers and a little bit of high school. So myself and my boss and one other person, we had a meeting that late afternoon and into the evening. Ironically, we were meeting at a TV station. One of the TV stations said, "Sure, we'll sponsor you. Come on out. We'll host the meeting here. We'll show you around." So, as this event started to unfold, we were actually at the TV station. It was really cool because usually I'm at work, and I don't see what happens behind the scenes. I was able to watch the on-air talent do their thing, and the chaotic dance that they do of people ripping and reading and getting products to the on-air meteorologist, and doing their thing. I'm like, "Wow, this is really cool." It's great to see how the news media uses our stuff in real-time. Then, we start hearing the hail hit the roof in the studio. We're like, "Okay, it's close. Here it is." We saw it on the radar. Then, about that time, the chief meteorologist came over and said, "Hey, I haven't had a radar update from you guys in a while. Everything okay? Is the radar okay back home?" So we call back to the office. They said, "Yeah, the radar went down about thirty minutes ago." We're like, "Oh, boy. Okay. We got to go." [laughter] So we had a car. We had plenty of people there, but now all of a sudden, we started having equipment problems. So we raced from the TV station down to the office to do that. Somewhere along the way – I make bad decisions with my family in storms. Somewhere along the way, I called my wife on the drive back to the office and said, "Hey, this is looking particularly bad." She's like, "Yeah, I know. The sirens are going off for the sixth time. What should I do?" I said, "Well, one, if you feel in danger, go to the basement. Two, it looks like this storm is going south of the house. If it does anything, it's going to make a righthand turn, and it should be fine." No. [laughter] The storm weakened, took a left, and ended up very near my house. Everybody was fine. It was minimal damage, but part of the story is we had six fatalities. We had warnings out well ahead of time. Again, that's hard. It's hard to deal with. It felt like we did everything we possibly could in that particular event, dealing with that. Doing the damage assessment the next day, that was a part of the job of the warning coordination meteorologist. Just walking through these neighborhoods where everything is leveled. Meeting with families that have lost everything, including loved ones, takes a toll. But it's important work to understand how it went. We're looking at building construction integrity. Of course, you can't, in some cases, say – they were like, "Wow, this was amazing. This tornado hit this house, and it didn't hit this house. How could that be?" The fact was one house was built better than the other. Again, that human toll of being in the community, being a part of that community, and trying to assess. Everybody, even though they'd lost everything, they were somehow okay. Everyone was happy to be alive. We were happy to have what we have. We can replace stuff. We can't replace each other. That was big. Later on, on that day, I flew in a helicopter with the Wichita Police Department. We wanted to get the overall track of this tornado. Again, it was in the '90s. We didn't have computer technology like we do today. So I've got a paper map and a pencil, and I'm saying, "Okay, well, here are the railroads, here's the water tower. Here looks like Central Avenue." By the time we get to the end of the storm, I look down, and we're hovering over my backyard. It was at that point, twenty-four hours later, I realized I had this huge limb on the roof of my house. I got some insurance money, but my

house was for sale. Actually, my house was under contract. I already knew I was taking my next job in Washington, D.C. I thought, "Oh, boy. Now I got to get a roof replaced before I go." So it was certainly bad for the community. It was a big event. It was a historic event in the United States. But that's something other people don't necessarily think about is that all disasters are local and sometimes they affect your own family. This was one that did. It was easily rectified. We live in these communities, so we get impacted by the storms, too.

MG: Did your family end up taking cover in the basement?

JO: Yes, they did. They did. It would be a great question for my wife. [laughter] She reminds me occasionally that, "Sometimes you're wrong."

MG: That's a wife's job.

JO: [laughter]

MG: So you had started your family by this point.

JO: Yes. We had our first son in Wichita. Kristofer was born there. Just a Kansas kid. I think he was about three years old when we moved to Washington, D.C. So he doesn't remember a whole lot about Wichita. That's where we did start the family.

MG: What was the position in Washington, D.C.?

JO: Well, in D.C., I was the national program manager for the warning coordination meteorologists. So, interestingly, it was an emergency manager in Wichita that convinced me to apply for that job. So I was at an emergency management meeting. We decided to say, "Hey, let's go grab lunch." "Okay, fine." He said, "Hey, So-and-so is retiring. You're going to apply for that job, right?" I was like, "Are you kidding me? No, absolutely not. I don't want to work for Weather Service headquarters. I don't want to live in D.C., and there's no way in heck I'm going to convince my wife to move to D.C. It's just not going to happen." He said, "Let me tell you about it a little bit." I was like, "Fine. Go ahead. Tell me about it." At the time, he was the president of the International Association for Emergency Managers. So it's an association of all local emergency managers across the country. He's talking possibilities. He's like, "I'm doing this. You could be working with FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] at the national level, Red Cross, partnering with emergency managers across the country. I think you really need to do this." I think he was trying to run me out of town. We averaged a federally-declared disaster area every other year the years I've worked in Wichita. But anyway, we were great friends, still are. But he intrigued me enough. So my wife grew up in Olympia, Washington. This job was in Washington, D.C. So, being me, I come home, and I said, "Hey, there's a job open in Washington. What do you think?" She's like, "Really?" I said, "Well, the other Washington." She said, "No, really." I was like, "What? You're kidding me. How long have we been married now?" She's like, "No, I always thought it would be cool to live out there." "Really?" She said, "What's the job?" I explained the job for it. She's like, "Well, if you're interested, go for it. We could do it. Maybe not forever, but we could do anything for a little while." I was like, "You got to be kidding me. Okay." But I'm thinking to myself, "I'm

just this guy from Wichita, Kansas. They're not going to hire me in D.C." The old saying, "Be careful what you ask for" – [laughter] that was a learning thing too because I loved my job where I was. I couldn't lose. If I didn't get the job, okay, cool. I'm happy. I'm having a ball doing what I'm doing. It was my dream job. So when I went into the job interview, I was just brutally honest. "Here's who I am. Here's what I think is wrong with the program today. Here's what I would do to fix it." I left that interview thinking, "They're going to love me, or they're going to hate me." They hired me anyway.

MG: How long were you in that position?

JO: I was in that job for three years.

MG: Say more about the work you were doing there. Do you want to take a break first?

JO: Yes. If I could get some water.

MG: Sure, of course.

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MG: You were talking about your work in D.C.

JO: Sure. The job in D.C. was eye-opening. I had never worked in a headquarters. I had always been a field person before. So I came in there. Really, I was overseeing the warning coordination program for the nation. So I used to joke that I was the disaster dude for the U.S. So we have 122 forecast offices. We've got warning coordinating meteorologists at some of our national centers, like Storm Prediction Center, National Hurricane Center, and things like that. Overall, policy and direction for that herd of cats out there. So I had no supervisory responsibility for those. They all reported to the local management teams, but really trying to work on policies and direction. We had an annual conference during that time. Internally, it was really working with those in the regions and the local forecast offices to give them some resources to do good community outreach and those sorts of things. Externally, I worked a lot with other federal agencies. So working with FEMA, working with Red Cross, working with the Corps of Engineers, I got involved with hurricanes quite a bit and evacuation planning. So when we had a landfalling hurricane, which zones would need to be, what are the clearance times. So if our best forecast – a lot better today than they were then – but if our best forecast was that we could give you maybe twenty-four-hours notice to do an evacuation, but the community actually took seventy-two hours to evacuate, we had a problem. So we were working with different researchers and different agencies to work on that evacuation puzzle, which I found really interesting because having been a severe thunderstorm flood person for most of my career, I got to delve into a different type of hazard. So that was interesting work. That's when I really got engaged with the other emergency management organizations, international associations, local emergency managers, and then there's NEMA, National Emergency Management Association, and the state directors. So it was a lot of the same work I was doing in the field just on a much larger scale and a much larger stage.

MG: Is this when becoming a Weather-Ready Nation [WRN] was being talked about?

JO: Not yet. That came a little bit later in the career. The catchphrase that we created during that time was "Working Together to Save Lives," so very much in concert with Weather-Ready Nation today. The whole idea was that we are working together with other agencies – local, federal, state, not-for-profits – to save lives. That was really our goal. That's what we had coined. So we worked a lot with that. During that time, we did the first-ever lightning safety awareness campaign, which was a neat project to work on. It was certainly something that was needed. We talked about lightning safety, but we really hadn't focused on it in particular. So working with our communications office, we actually went out, and we made a cold call to the Professional Golf Association. We called the PGA cold and said, "Hey, we want to do this thing." Golfers are certainly at risk. Sailors are at risk. We've got all kinds of people at risk. We just made a cold call to the PGA and said, "Hey, we want to do this lightning safety campaign. Would you like to be a sponsor? Would you like to offer up one of the players to do some public service announcements?" I'll be doggoned, they said, "Yes." [laughter] We worked with a couple of the players. We had some posters made up. We actually did a press conference at one of the golf tournaments. So we were able to go up there and hang out at the golf course, watch a round of golf, and then do public service announcements and a real media campaign to help with the lightning safety campaign. So that's continuing on, again, today. The other major project was a project called StormReady. StormReady is a recognition program. It was actually dreamt up by two guys in Tulsa, Oklahoma – Steve Piltz and Lans Rothfusz. I was aware of it when I was in Wichita because they were a neighbor. They had an unwarned tornado in an area where they had closed an office during the modernization. So their problem was – what do we do about this? What do we do about building a better relationship? They're thinking, "Well, you drive into towns, and you see "Tree City, USA," and you see these types of recognitions for different communities. What if we reward it? What if we recognized those communities that were really working in partnership with the National Weather Service to make sure their communities are prepared for whatever it is, whatever hazard it is there. I forget what they originally called it. Then there were some trademark issues, but they came up with StormReady. They started it down there. They had an application process. They had a review process – did you have communications with your weather office? Did you do training in the community? Did you have NOAA Weather radios in the schools? All of these different criteria. So when I showed up in Silver Spring, my boss said, "Hey, John. You've heard of StormReady?" I said, "Yeah, I've heard of Storm Ready." I said, "Great. We need you to make it a national program." "Wow. Alright. Here we go." [laughter] So almost in week one that was assigned to me. So working with my partners in crime, we built it. We took what started in Tulsa and turned it into a national program. Last I saw, we've got over twenty-five-hundred StormReady communities across the country. I have to say I smile a little bit every time I see one of those road signs because I knew I had a big part. I didn't dream it, but I helped expand it across the nation. So it was a lot of fun. A lot of headaches and heartaches any time you try to spin up a major project. It's one of the things I'm most proud of. It's something that's been going on for over twenty years now.

MG: Who were your "partners in crime" for that work?

JO: Well, it started off – a gentleman by the name of Herb White. Herb was with me for maybe six months. He took another job. Then Amy Holman, who now works up in Alaska with NOAA still to this day. So Amy was doing the Presidential Management Fellows program. She was doing rotational assignments. Jamie Hawkins, who was in NOAA – he works for a private company now, but he was there, and he said, "John, you need to hire somebody, right?" I said, "Sure." He's like, "Well, I need you to meet Amy." I was like, "Okay. So let's go to lunch." I meet Amy. We hit it off. She had done rotations with FEMA, and she had done rotations with other agencies. So I came back, and I went to my boss. I said, "Hey, we don't need to advertise this job. Let's just bring Amy into the agency. We can just do a direct hire." He said, "Okay, great. Tell me about Amy." Amy's not a meteorologist. Amy had a degree in public administration and international affairs. He's like, "Wait a minute. You can't. She's not a meteorologist. She can't possibly do this. I said, "Look, I've been in this job for nine months. I haven't practiced meteorology a day since I got here. I need somebody who can help me manage projects and programs and get stuff done, and she knows how to do that. Let's just hire Amy." And we did. So she came on board. She was with me for only a year because she was incredible and she got swept up to the eighteenth floor to work for the director of the Weather Service after about a year. About that time, using that same philosophy that I don't necessarily need a meteorologist, there was Donna Franklin. Donna came on board, and we worked together for a little bit, over a year, to help it. Really, she was the powerhouse. Amy and I got it off the ground. Donna maintained this thing for years and years and years. She's still in the National Weather Service, not doing that work anymore. Without Donna, we would not be where we are today.

MG: Did this work require going to all of these locations and having someone on the ground there?

JO: We worked through that network of warning coordination meteorologists. So we managed the program nationally and found the money to buy these road signs, which was a harder buy than you can imagine. Yes, we worked through all the local offices, going out, building the partnerships, going through, reviewing, making sure that the communities actually met these criteria, doing these presentations in community meetings, and things like that. So it really was a national effort to do this, to have as many StormReady communities as we have around there. During that time, we were also hearing from the tsunami community. They were saying, "Yes, we're a hazard, but we're not storms. We need something different up here in Alaska. We need something different all across the West Coast of the United States." My attitude was, "Well, let's give it a go. The worst it can do is not work, and we just won't do that again, or we'll do something different." So probably a year or two into Storm Ready, we launched TsunamiReady. So that's still very active throughout the West Coast, in particular, a little bit in Hawaii. The whole idea is to do community preparedness for tsunami threats. One of my favorite events, by far, was the first-ever joint StormReady and TsunamiReady community. It was in Ocean Shores, Washington. So we all went out there, just a small beach community right on the Pacific Ocean a couple of hours outside of Seattle. The public affairs person, Marilu Trainor – back in the day, her real skill was borrowing a crowd. So she had arranged that we would do this recognition for the mayor. Because it was the first TsunamiReady one we had, the deputy undersecretary for NOAA there, Scott Gudes. So we had some senior people that wouldn't normally be at these types of things. So Marilu worked it out to where there was a community festival going on that

weekend, which included a sandcastle sculpting contest. So it was a big community event. The artwork on these sandcastles was just phenomenal. It's just wonderful. So we set up a table. We set up a booth. We were handing out outreach materials on how to protect yourself. Just before they announced the winners of the sand sculpting contest, we presented the mayor with the road signs for both StormReady and TsunamiReady. It was one of my big memories. It was so unique and so cool.

MG: Sounds like it. Also, when we took a break, you mentioned the September 11th attacks. I was curious about the impact it had.

JO: Yes, 9/11. We hadn't planned on that. I mean, obviously, nobody planned on that in the world. At that time, we were working with emergency management, and we were talking more and more about manmade disasters. We had done a lot of work certainly over the years and felt like we were in good shape with natural hazards, but we were talking more and more about manmade hazards and weapons of mass destruction. So it was the same week as the NEMA conference, the National Emergency Management conference. So every state emergency manager was at this meeting in Bozeman, Montana. Senior FEMA officials were there. I was there along with General Jack Kelly – he was the director of the National Weather Service back at the time – and the warning coordination meteorologists. Five were there from Montana. So we were there to be a part of this important meeting. It was an annual meeting. It was just a standard meeting. We were going through it. What was interesting and eerie was that the talk that Jack Kelly gave was about preparing for all disasters, weather or not. The real focus was what type of weather support could the National Weather Service provide in the event of a dirty bomb, some sort of weapon of mass destruction because a lot of the emergency management community really wasn't thinking that way. But we've got wind forecasts. We've got dispersion forecasts, where we can help if we need to evacuations and things like that. So Jack's talk that I wrote was about preparing for disasters, weather or not. The FEMA administrator at the time was Joe Allbaugh. He spoke immediately after Jack. He talked about preparing for the biggest disaster we never anticipated and the importance of first responders. Think about that. That next morning, we woke up to the horrors of 9/11. The foreshadowing was just eerie to this day. But that was the beauty of the partnership. That was the beauty of the relationship and the beauty of the – even though these state-level officials, federal-level officials, when we went downstairs and we knew what was going on, they broke the conference ballroom into an emergency operation center. They were doing an immediate federal response to 9/11 from Bozeman, Montana, in a ballroom at a hotel. So we got down there, me and the warning coordination meteorologist, and said, "Hey, what can we do?" They said, "Oh, well, you're ESF-whatever [emergency support function]. We need weather support. Go." One of the warning coordination meteorologists had a small satellite dish. Internet was there, but not real, real fast. We had a way to pull down weather information via satellite. So Dan Noah went and set up a satellite, and we were bringing in weather data, and we were providing weather support for the immediate aftermath of 9/11 from Bozeman, Montana. Not only did we have what happened in New York, Pennsylvania, and the Pentagon, there was a hurricane spinning off of Long Island, Hurricane Emily. So the concern was we've got emergency responders in the Twin Towers, and we're trying to rescue as many people as we possibly can. But there was a real concern about high winds. If Hurricane Emily got to close to shore, then we would have more buildings collapse, and we might lose more people than we already had. We had another

hurricane that was developing in the Atlantic and heading for the Southeast Coast. So working with the state emergency managers in Florida, in South Carolina, in Georgia, they literally went to town, bought a car on a credit card, and drove from Montana all the way back to the East Coast to deal with the hurricane that was going on there while everyone's attention, of course, was on the terrorist attack. Locally, I think there were four or five of us there. We just drew straws. We're going to work twelve hours shifts – "You got the day shift. You got the midnight shift. Go get some rest." Like anybody could rest. After about twelve hours of that, we stood down, and then we had to find our own way home, which was an adventure all in itself. Sometimes you get put into scenarios where you can't plan for them, but you rely on your knowledge, you rely on your partnerships, you rely on your experiences and just do the right thing when you have to.

MG: Did that spur on more conversations about planning for these manmade disasters?

JO: Absolutely. Yes. Without a doubt. It really leads to where we are in decision support services today. We were providing onsite support for an event we never dreamt would ever happen. That's exactly the type of work we're doing today.

MG: Good. What made you stay for just three years in Washington?

JO: I knew at that point that that wasn't the end for me. I'll be honest. D.C. stressed me out. [laughter] It was a great job. I loved it. I got to work on all these wonderful projects. I even got to travel internationally and do some work in Africa and developing countries. It's amazing how much got packed into that three year period. But by that point, I was getting stressed. The big epiphany – family story. It was myself, my wife Kathleen, and Kristofer. He was probably three years old. We're in D.C. No family around. So we're having Christmas morning. My wife may tell this story differently, but this is how I remember it. So we're opening gifts. I open up this gift. It's a coffee mug, a Disney coffee mug that has Grumpy on it. So we have a laugh, and it's cute. But later on in the day, my wife comes to me and says, "Well, you know what he calls you, right?" I was like, "Hopefully 'daddy.'" [laughter] She said, "He calls you GG." "GG? What's GG?" "Grumpy guy." So in my current job, we talk about leadership development, and leadership can come from anywhere – leadership lessons from a three-year-old. Twenty years later, I still carry that mug every day to remind me not to be grumpy. It doesn't always work. [laughter] But twenty years later, I carry that mug every day – lessons from a three-year-old.

MG: Those are important lessons.

JO: No doubt.

MG: In an email, you explained how you travel about fifty percent of the time for work. Is it hard to be away from home?

JO: It's easy. My wife's a rock. [laughter] Kathleen's a rock. I'm blessed. I'm very fortunate. We both have an attitude – we've got work to do. If that's what it takes, that's what it takes. So we just do it. It's never been an issue, at least not that she's told me. She's usually pretty blunt when she disagrees with me. So yes, it's just work. I traveled a fair amount when I worked in

Weather Service headquarters. I traveled a fair amount currently in my role as the chief learning officer. We just make it work. It's that easy. I know that wouldn't work in many families, but we do it, and we try to maximize the time we have when we are together.

MG: You mentioned international travel as part of this position. What are some of the places you have been to, and for what purpose?

JO: My first trip ever was to Mombasa, Kenya. I thought, "Wow, this is a tough way to break into international travel. My boss just came bopping around the way he did, and he says, "Hey, we got this opportunity to go work with the World Meteorological Organization. There's this meeting in Kenya. Do you want to go?" I was like, "Well, okay." It was a little scary, though, because it had only been about eighteen months after the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi had been bombed. So I didn't feel all that safe as a US citizen going into there. But I thought, "Well, okay. It's weather people. It can be okay." It was a phenomenal meeting. It was an adventure getting there. I got into Nairobi. Again, I wasn't seasoned in international travel whatsoever. So when you got to Nairobi, to get my connecting flight to Mombasa, you literally had to get your bags in the international terminal across the street and go to the domestic terminal. I didn't know that. So I got off the plane, and I said, "Well, my bags are checked all the way through Mombasa, everything's fine." I go in there. I get checked in. I go through security. Everything is fine. I'm sitting in this small, tiny, little terminal, and sitting with a couple from Scotland. We're just striking up a conversation. Somebody with a cart comes by. They said, "Oh, good. Our bags made it." I said, "I don't see mine there. What's up?" They said, "Well, you got your bags at baggage claim, right?" I said, "No, I didn't know that." [laughter] So I run back across, I get that, I'm coming back across, and then somebody on the street is trying to help me. He said, "Oh, let me carry your bags for you," trying to get the tips. Then, out of the blue, comes this guard with an M-16 and scares this guy away. He says, "You almost got mugged, you know that? What are you doing here? Get in there." He runs me off into the thing. Anyway, we finally get to Mombasa. It's midnight. Somebody from the conference is supposed to pick me up. There were only six of us on this flight, so it clears out very quickly. There's nobody there to pick me up. I'm looking around. I'm the only American there. I just start asking questions. Nobody knows anything about this weather conference; it's an airport. But one of the people there says, "Well, we have a weather office. Do you want me to call them?" I said, "Please." [laughter] So they called up. Whoever was working the midnight shift came over and got me, brought me back to the forecast office, and we just struck up a conversation until someone finally did come and pick me up and take me to the conference hotel. I got to see what their weather forecast operations were like, and it wasn't a lot. It's an old 1950s vintage phone and a wet fax and a very small computer. But they were writing aviation forecasts just like are written in the United States and all over the world. The crux of the meeting itself – I learned more from them than they ever learned from me. My expertise was in short-fused warnings and tornados and flash floods. Their focus was so different. It was all about water quality. It was all about food security. It was all about predicting droughts, predicting floods. While we have weather models in the United States for weather, they have models in Kenya to predict the spread of waterborne diseases after a flood. They have models that predict malaria after floods and things like that. It was amazing. It was really eye-opening, but cool work. We were working with USAID [United States Agency for International Development]. Part of the project was to put in small radio stations just like our NOAA weather radio stations in the United States. We put in

small radio stations because one of their communications dilemmas was that the official language is Swahili and English. But there are also fifty-some-odd tribal languages that need to be translated. They said, "Well, rather than translate it, we'll just get the information to them, and they can manage their own radio stations." So we were working on trying to get those deployed out there. It turned out to be a really good community service as well because not only could the weather service in Kenya share the weather information for them, give them some heads up that a rainy season's coming or a drought or whatever, but then the local communities could use that radio station for themselves. They did a lot of AIDS education, for example. They did a lot of – if the tribal leaders wanted to address the community they could. They had their own talk shows, whatever the case may be. So it was one of those unique opportunities that had I not gone and worked with Weather Service headquarters I never would have known.

MG: You also mentioned experiencing stress working in D.C. and maybe wanting another opportunity.

JO: Yes.

MG: How did that next opportunity present itself?

JO: Just like any job, you've got to apply for it and hope somebody picks you. At that point, I thought I wanted to run my own office. I thought, "Okay, I already worked my dream job once. Everything beyond that is gravy. At that point, I thought it would be interesting to be a meteorologist-in-charge. What was fortunate about that particular position is it was very visible. I worked a lot with the regional offices, and the regional directors were the hiring officials, so I knew most of them. It took a few swings, but I got hired to go to Indianapolis in 2002. My title was meteorologist-in-charge. I oversaw all weather operations for twenty-four staff – meteorologists, hydrologists, electronics technicians. Soup to nuts, you're the one who's responsible, basically the general manager for that particular office. We were responsible for forecasting warnings for a large chunk of central Indiana, one of the 122 offices that we had across the country. I spent five years there. Again, another great experience, great people. I still keep in contact with several. In fact, I've got – gosh, three staff that I worked with there that are meteorologists in charge today.

MG: Had the MAR concluded by this point?

JO: Yes, by then, the MAR had pretty well concluded. All the radars had been deployed by then. All the training for the radars had been deployed. We were continuing to evolve for sure. Yes, we were cruising right along. I was back into that mode – I still can't get that warning coordination meteorologist thing out of your blood. I think once it's in there, it stays with you. So I worked very closely with our own warning coordination meteorologists, with community outreach and partnerships. But it was also a big shift in that you had to worry about everything. You had to worry about buying things. You had to worry about the plumbing not working. You had to worry about the electronics, making sure radars were up to speed, and the surface observations were running and still working with the electronic staff, working with the hydrologist and flooding that was fairly prevalent in Indiana. It was a bigger job, and, all of a

sudden, you're a supervisor. So that was my first supervisory role. You've got a lot to learn about being a boss.

MG: How did you fare in that position?

JO: [laughter] Ask them. Well, one of the adjustments in Indy – my predecessor had been there for twenty-seven years. Six people outlasted him; they were there longer. It was a pretty stable staff. Great people, but had been there a good while. Then, of course, there were a lot of retirements, which allowed me to hire some new people. But the major difference was that the previous supervisor just spent a lot of time in his office and doing those things. I'm very much about managing by wandering around. I'll be in my office, and I'll be doing my day to day work, I like to get to know people. So I would get out and have a morning weather briefing, and then I'd get bored with myself, and go back out and wander around. I know – at least, I heard through backchannels anyway, at first, they were like, "He's spying on us. He's keeping an eye on us." I was like, "No, no. That's not it at all." [laughter] I like people. I am an extrovert. I like to be around people. I get energy from being around people. So I think it worked out pretty well. We had a great team. Certainly had our big weather events, and we had our squabbles. You realize in that – it's still a fairly small office of twenty-four people. So you're like a family. It's 24/7/365. All families have squabbles now and again. All families have triumphs together, too. So it was fun. It was a lot of good times over a five-year period.

MG: What else stands out to you from that time and that position?

JO: Again, building those relationships really paid off. Our biggest weather event was Memorial Day weekend of 2004. If you know anything about Indianapolis and Memorial Day weekend, there's a race – the Indianapolis 500. If you're not a race fan in Indianapolis, you'll become one because you can't avoid it. It's ingrained in the community. It's there. It's a big family event. The entire month of May is dedicated to the Indy 500. There are marathons; there are festivals – you name it. Kids even get Friday off before the race for Carburetion Day – Carb Day. [laughter] It's that big of a thing in the Indianapolis community. In '04, we knew we had a big weather event coming. Again, this is before DSS was DSS, but they actually had a hotline in the office, VFR [visual flight rules] direct to the pagoda at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway to their safety folks. So if there were any weather events or if they were concerned about the weather, all they had to do was literally pick up the phone and they could talk to a forecaster in the office. That was unique to me. So we're leading up to this event. We knew it was going to be a really bad day. It was a holiday weekend. A lot of people had taken time off because it's a holiday weekend. So leading up to it, we had said, "Look, this looks like a major outbreak day. I know you're on vacation. If you're out of town, let me know. But if you're in town, let me know if you're available if we need to call you back in." So we had really well prepared for this. And wow, what a day. So we wake up. We had all the lead-up, and we're briefing ahead of time. Even the motor speedway folks that we were talking to – and we were talking to the public safety people. We weren't talking to the Indy racing league. It was government to government type conversations. They said, "Well, what would you do?" I said, "I would move the race to Monday." They said, "Well, we can't do that." I said, "Well, I'm just saying Sunday is going to be really bad. The storms are going to be bad. There's going to be potential for tornados. There's lightning. We have four-hundred-thousand people at this race in metal bleachers. This

is just not a good thing. "We can't do that. We've got VIPs coming in. You've got Secret Service there. It's a major event. TV rights and things like that. There's just no way around it. This race will happen Sunday." I said, "Okay." So we're all prepared. Here comes Sunday. I wake up that morning, roll out of bed. The first thing I do is look on our website, and I see the radar is down. "Okay, this isn't good." So I call into the office and talk to the forecaster. He said, "Yeah, it just went down. But don't worry about it. One of our electronics technicians is coming in. They'll check it out. It's like, "Okay, call me back." They called me back an hour later and said, "Yeah, no problem, boss. They found the problem. They got a spare part. Everything's fine." I said, "Cool. What time is this going to get started?" They said, "Well, pretty early. Probably around ten. So you might want to think about coming in pretty soon." So I showered and tried to get ready. The phone rings again. They said, "Well, we got a problem. The spare part is bad. But it's okay, boss. It's alright. We've got another part coming in, being flown in from the warehouse on the next flight out of Kansas City. It'll be fine." Well, by then, the storms had started. The flight was canceled. We never got that part. So we had over half of the office call back in to work that weather event on a holiday weekend, many of which were either scheduled to work or were on vacation days who said, "You know what? I'm going to give up my family event. I need to come in and work this event. It's that important." So when we got in, the lead forecaster was Chad Omitt, and Chad scared me. I put a lot of value on our lead forecasters to run the show. Yes, I'm the boss, but I'm here to help. I'm here to eliminate distractions as much as I can so you can focus on your job. Chad's briefing to the forecasters, the warning forecasters that day was, "Look, this is a tornado event. I don't even want you to mess with severe thunderstorm warnings. If it starts to rotate, we need to do tornados." Boy, was he right. We did it with back up radars, so out of Chicago and Northern Indiana and Central Illinois and Louisville, Kentucky, and Ohio. We used TV radars. We used anything we could. The two electronics technicians stayed there for sixteen hours. One of them actually left the Indianapolis 500 to come and work. That's the dedication of our workforce. They did as best they could with our radar. We'd get a little bit of data before it would start to flake-out. They would bring it down gently, bring it back up, just so we could have anything. In the end, it was the second-largest tornado outbreak in Indiana history on Memorial Day weekend during the Indianapolis 500. There was an Indianapolis Pacers basketball game. Families are out at the state parks, at the lakes. The impact of that weekend is incredible. We had a tornado seven miles from the track during the race. [laughter]

MG: What happened? Did folks evacuate?

JO: That was the problem. Where do you put four-hundred-thousand people? The message was, "Well, it's raining on turn two. The race is over. Here's the winner. Everybody out." So it was in the aftermath that Indianapolis Motor Speedway contacted us and said, "Look, we have an emergency operation center at the track. We have other federal agencies – we've got state police, we've got Secret Service, we've got FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] because they're moving the blimp around. We've got all these other federal agencies in our emergency operation center. You need to be there." At the time, the policy was that we didn't do that kind of work, even though we had the bat phone direct to the thing. But there was a lot of pressure, at the time, in the private sector – that tug and pull between the public sector, government sector meteorology, and private sector meteorology. We were pretty much told that you don't do those sorts of things. That's when I first got to meet Ed Johnson. [laughter] I originally said, "No, you

need to get a private meteorologist to do this." He said, "Whoa, whoa, whoa. Wait a minute. I've got other federal agencies here. Why can't I have you?" I said, "Well, you know what? You're right. Let me contact some other folks and see what we can do. In the end, the answer from headquarters was, "Yes, do that, but don't tell anybody." [laughter] Because it was still politically sensitive with the private sector. Again, it was DSS before DSS was really organized. So we really never got any recognition for that because it was done a little bit under the radar.

MG: Can you say again what DSS is?

JO: Decision support services. Again, it's where we're deployed on-site, giving that face-to-face weather support to major events or after major tornado events or weather events.

MG: So if you had been more involved initially, like the other agencies you mentioned, how would this changed things?

JO: At that time, I don't think it would have made a difference at all. What happened with us being at the table, we were able to better prepare and work with them to come up with an evacuation strategy. It's still not pretty, right? It's an awful lot of people. But anticipate more than react to the weather events. So in the years that followed that tornado outbreak, we were meeting with them for months ahead of time. Oftentimes, the conversation was, "Well, it looks like it's going to be particularly hot, so they would ensure that there were more cooling stations or more first aid stations available if people were getting overheated and dehydrated and things like that." So we're fortunate. In the rest of the years I was there, it was blue sky days. You would think, "Well, if the skies are blue, why did you even need to be involved?" But again, it was overall planning, and it was for months in advance. It was for heat. It was for lightning. It was for other situations that they could help plan for utilizing weather information.

MG: What was your conversation with Ed Johnson?

JO: Ed was in charge of the policy of the public-private partnership. I said, "Ed, I know policy-wise we're not supposed to be doing these things, but when I originally said, 'No,' the gentleman looked me straight in the eye and said, 'Look, we can do this the easy way, or we can do this the hard way. You can either say yes right now, and we're going to do it, or I can talk to Senator [Evan] Bayh, and we'll do it a different way." [laughter] Then you have that ultimate realization – wow, you really do work for the federal government, and you are accountable to Congress. So working with him and a few others at Weather Service headquarters, we agreed that yeah, we can do this. So we supported three races a year, the Indianapolis 500, NASCAR [National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing] had the Brickyard [400], and Formula 1 still had – the U.S. Grand Prix was in Indianapolis. So we were there. Again, we weren't working with F1. We weren't working with NASCAR or the Indy Racing League. We were working within the confines of an emergency operation center to provide that weather support to protect the public that were in the stands.

MG: A lot of what Ed talked about in his oral history interview was the Fair Weather Act. Did that shift the nature of your work?

JO: Yes, it did. That's where the sensitivities of where do you draw that line, which is – what is the public responsibility? What's the government's responsibility versus what the private sector's responsibility was? Sitting on the ninth floor of the pagoda at the Indianapolis Motor Speedway was questionable at the time. Should we actually be there? On one side, yes, we have a vibrant private sector meteorology group, and we support the weather enterprise. On the other hand, I see the speedway's point of view – "Well, I've got other federal agencies here. Why can't you be here?" Who am I? I was just a local manager. I needed help. That's where I was able to work with Ed Johnson and others to work through that sticky wicket.

MG: Were you satisfied with the outcome?

JO: In the end, absolutely. Yes, absolutely. We still have staff that go there today. I look, and I see other local offices across the weather service today, and they're proud – "Yeah, we provided decision support services to this event or that event." I smile because we did it very early on, and very few people know about it.

MG: That's very impressive.

JO: [laughter]

MG: What was your next position?

JO: The next position was the hardest job I ever had in the National Weather Service. So I was encouraged to apply to be the deputy regional director of the Weather Service Central Region. So we got thirty-eight forecast offices, two river forecast centers, five center weather service units which are collocated with FAA air traffic control centers. So about a thousand people in forty-five offices in fourteen states. I would be the deputy director. The deputy director of anything is you do the duties that the director doesn't want to do. So most of my work was dealing with labor-management relationships and dealing with poor performers or people behaving badly. So I very much became the vice-principal, if you will, of about a thousand people. This is not meteorology anymore. It was a steep, steep learning curve. I was glad to be asked to see if I was interested. I still question why I said yes. Like I said, it was definitely the toughest job I ever had. But I also learned the most of any other job possible. It was truly the stretch job and did that for three years. I'm glad I did it. In the end, super glad I did it. I just knew I didn't want to do it forever.

MG: Who was the director at the time?

JO: The director at the time was Lynn Maximuk. Lynn had been a longtime Weather Service employee as well. Most recently, he had run the local forecast office in Kansas City and moved up to the regional headquarters. I guess he saw something in me that I didn't see in me because I try to think I'm a nice guy. I mean, sure, my kid calls me grumpy. In general, I'm a pretty easy going guy. I don't know that I'm Mr. Bad Guy. I was like, "What the heck? Let's see what happens." I knew the Kansas City area from going there for training and other meetings and things like that, felt like it was a great community, a place that me and the family would be happy to live in. Again, I applied and got it. Like I said, I learned a lot. The lessons learned

from there, I teach today as the chief learning officer, and that's helping managers deal with difficult problems because that's part of your job.

MG: How long were you in the deputy director position?

JO: Three years. I have a real trend here; every three to five years, I change jobs. I like to joke that I can't keep a job. [laughter] But I'm curious. I like to try new things. My Achilles heel is routine. I enjoy new challenges. I enjoy trying new things, and when things get routine, I get uncomfortable. So that's where that opportunity – I'd been in Indianapolis for five years. Things were running really, really well. I didn't need to leave, but the opportunity knocked, and I walked through that door. But it was wild. You're seeing some of the ugly underbelly of an organization. We've got wonderful people that have worked for NOAA and the National Weather Service. My mantra, what kept me sane – I always seemed to have six cases on my desk – somebody doing something silly and inappropriate in the workplace or attendance problems or addiction or whatever the case may be. What kept me sane was the fact that there's only six out of a thousand. That's pretty doggone good, right? At the time, I was also able to spin-up a leadership development program. So that was positive. That gave me something positive to work on. The idea was if we can create more leaders – when I talk about leadership, I don't talk about a position; it's a behavior. If we have more leaders throughout the organization and we can make it that much better, maybe I'll have less than six of those packets on my desk. [laughter] The fact is we are a slice of society. We're a very educated slice of society, but we still have problems with people that have issues or do things they shouldn't do in the workplace. What kept me also sane in that job was that I didn't feel like I was ruining someone's life by terminating them; I was making the agency stronger. I saw that many times where maybe I did have to remove someone from their job, but then I saw how much better the workplace was as a result. That's a tough thing to grasp for a lot of people. We want to have a great healthy workplace as best we can. That's something we struggle with because I think most people like to think they're nice people, and they don't want to do what someone considered the ultimate mean thing to do. But in order to keep the agency successful, sometimes you've got to do some sort of discipline. Like I said, it was a crazy three years. I learned so much about law. I learned so much about human resources, and I learned a lot about human beings. [laughter]

MG: It sounds like it was good on-the-job training for what you currently do as chief learning officer.

JO: Yes. It was a natural progression, I think. I knew I didn't want to do that for the rest of my career. I was having a particularly stressful day. There were three jobs that I was looking at. I was so busy I didn't apply for any of them. My boss came in, and he said, "Hey, man, we're trying to hire somebody over in training. Man, we're just not finding the right fit." I looked right at him, and I said, "Hire me." [laughter] He said, "What?" I said, "I'm serious. I've had it. I'm done." [laughter] I don't know what was going on. He's like, "Are you kidding me?" But I was already the same grade. I was already the same series. I was already fully qualified for the job. He was like, "Wow. Huh. Well, maybe you want to throw your name in the hat." So we re-advertised and went through it, and ended up moving over to training. It's just been a great fit. I moved thinking, just like everything else, "I'll do it for three or five years." Nine years

later, I'm still having a ball. I never thought that would happen in the career, but the job fits. I've got a great staff. We've got a great mission. We have fun all the time.

MG: Talk more about that. Tell me about the staff and mission.

JO: Sure. The staff – originally, I started off, I was in charge of the National Weather Service Training Center in Kansas City. So we're about thirty people. We train electronics. So new electronics technicians come in. They already know electronics. They're already journeymen at that level. So they've learned it through the Navy or the Air Force or somewhere else, but we specifically train them on how to maintain the radars, the surface observation systems, the upper air systems, weather radios, all the equipment. We do all IT [information technology] training for AWIPS [Advanced Weather Interactive Processing System], which is the computer system we utilize for data visualization of weather and issuing forecasts and warnings. We have a group that does decision support. How do we better communicate our message to our partners so they can make smart decisions? And we've got a leadership academy, which is training new hires, anywhere from the very beginning of your Weather Service career, whether you're young or not. You're new to the organization; lay down a foundation in who we are, what we do, and why it's important. We start laying down some leadership development right away because leadership is a behavior; it's not a position. Anyone can lead at any given time. 9/11, you didn't know you were going to be a leader, but all of a sudden, you were; it just happens. So we were doing that. During the National Weather Service reorganization of headquarters, I was asked to be part of a team in the headquarters reorganization. I was in charge of the National Weather Service Training Center in Kansas City, Missouri, but there are two other components of training in the National Weather Service. So there was the Warning Decision Training branch down in Norman, Oklahoma, and the Forecast Decision Training branch out in Boulder, Colorado. So, really, we were three different training organizations within the Weather Service. We did report to a gentleman by the name of Leroy Spayd in Silver Spring in our headquarters. But we, by and large, operated independently, focused on our own areas of expertise. So, during the reorganization, they had asked if I'd be part of a team to help do that. They were going to take training and move it into the Science and Technology Integration group. I argued against that. They were like, "Wait a minute. No, no. It's training. It's science and technology integration. It makes total sense." I said, "No, it doesn't. I've been going to different learning groups. I've been hanging out with other chief learning officers. I've been watching the private sector. I've been watching other federal agencies. Training needs to be a corporate function of who we are and what we do. We can't be a part of just one part of the organization. We need to train everyone in the National Weather Service, not just the meteorologists, not just the electronics technicians. We need to train the admin staff. We need to train the project managers. We need to train the budget staff. We need to train everyone in the organization, not just the electronics technicians and the meteorologists." They said, "Well, what do you propose?" I said, "We need a chief learning officer." Dr. [Louis] Uccellini looked me square in the eye and said, "No, we don't. We need a chief training officer." I said, "Well, I'll define for you the difference between training and leadership," but that was the beginning of this new position. I'm the first. I'm the one-and-only for Weather Service. To Louis's credit, he went back. He's a voracious reader and came back a couple of months later. He said, "You know what? You're right. We need a chief learning officer, and we need to move that office up to the senior leadership level." So where training had, in the past, been in the old office of climate/weather/water services, and we were

getting a little bit of money here and there – we were doing okay; it wasn't bad until the sequester year, but that's a different story. But we moved up in the organizational chart. So now I report to the deputy director of the National Weather Service. So training is now a corporate function of who we are and what we do, and we're considered a cross-cut. So when we work with the other parts of the Weather Service, we get our funding and we get our requirements from the five different offices, the five different headquarters offices across there. So, the Office of Observations – if they know they're doing a major upgrade to the radars, they know they need to carve out a certain percentage of their budget to help pay for the training for the electronics technicians, to help pay for the training for the meteorologists on how to use that new science and technology. We're doing that all across the organization. The result was the training budget in the National Weather Service has more than doubled because all of these offices have skin in the game; they know it's important. Even as we go through budget drills and budget cuts, training is not the first thing to be cut in the organization anymore. So that's been a huge cultural change in the organization.

MG: Does every new hire come through this program?

JO: Every new hire comes to a new hire orientation. We don't bring them out immediately. It's usually within their first year. But we bring in every position. So we've got admin support with weather people with electronics with facilities – you name it. It's new to the organization. So you might have a twenty-year career with NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] or some other group, but you're new to the organization. That's a misnomer. People are like, "Well, I'm not early career. Why am I going to this thing?" Well, the idea is we're bringing everybody together, and it's amazing to watch how quickly everyone realizes that everyone has a role in meeting the mission. It's easy for the weather people to say, "Oh, well, yeah, we meet the mission because we issue the weather watches and warning and forecasts." "I'm just an admin support staff. How do I support the mission?" Really? If you're not making the procurements to make sure we have the supplies to our job, we can't meet the mission. If you can't cut the travel orders to get us to training, we can't meet the mission. In many cases, the admin support officers in our local offices, they're the real leaders of the office. They're the glue that holds it together. It's amazing to watch. The two field offices I was in, that was absolutely true. So it's just cool to watch the group gel together and realize that, yes, if the roof is leaking and the water is coming down on the file servers, it's a bad day and we can't meet our mission without the facilities people or the budget people or the admin staff or the (ETs?). My mantra is that – oftentimes, people like to say, "Well, we need to stay relevant." I don't like relevant. I don't want to be irrelevant, but I think there are better words than relevant. The word I like to use is indispensable. I want to be indispensable to our partners, but I feel it's important that everyone within NOAA are indispensable to one another, that we can't do our jobs without one another. We're only as strong as our weakest link. So if we're all pulling our own weight, we're all doing our thing, we can meet the mission, and we can create the weather-ready nation.

MG: Well, that sounds so wonderful and valuable.

JO: [laughter] Yes, in la-la land, right?

MG: [laughter] Well, it's an exciting thing to be part of. You just mentioned the sequester year. What were you referring to?

JO: Yes. In the government sequestration, we went through the economic downturn. It was very bad for the economy, but it was also a real stress on federal budgets as well. So in my first year in training, we had a training budget of roughly five million dollars. So when the budget cuts came, again, training and travel were some of the first to get cut. Our budget went from five million dollars to 825,000. Devastating. Devastating. We certainly shifted a lot to distance learning versus residence, which we had already been following that trend anyway. But it really forced us to do that because when you take that steep of a cut, there's just not that much you can do. It took several years to dig out of that hole. It was also going on about that same time as the National Weather Service Headquarters reorganization. We pulled training out from the middle part of the organization and brought it up towards the top, and then we got more support. In recent years, budgets have certainly been getting better, but we certainly have our trials and tribulations in trying to meet the mission. There's always more requirements than you'll ever have money to do. That's always going to be. But as we go through budget exercises today, folks aren't quite as quick to cut training budgets. That's been a major, major shift over the past five years.

MG: Good. Is there anything I have forgotten to ask you about in terms of your career? I'm sure there is.

JO; I'm sure we could talk all day. [laughter] I can talk as much as Ed. Let me think about that. Just to say – so as I was the training center director, and I was a part of that team, and then had the opportunity to become the first chief learning officer for the Weather Service. So the responsibility grew. I now do oversee Weather Service Training Center folks in Kansas City and also the group down in Norman, Oklahoma, the Warning Decision Training Division and the Forecast Decision Training Division in Boulder, Colorado. We also have a great partnership with the COMET [Cooperative Program for Operational Meteorology, Education and Training] Program, which is part of UCAR, which is University Corporation for Atmospheric Research. So we're continuing that theme of partnerships and working with others to get the job done. So we're always going to have more training requirements than we've got money to do, but we really are able to focus in on the most important things and continuing to help meet that weather-ready nation. We're doing decision support training as we do more numerical modeling, as we bring on new science and technology. We're on the front edge of that, and we're integrated with those programs. So when they do roll out the new piece of technology, we're able to roll out the training concurrently with that. So I'm really proud of what we've developed and built. We could always have better, always more to do, but it's been a cool ride. I think about the entire career path; I just wanted to be a weather person. I just wanted to forecast weather. That shifted to I want to be a warning coordination meteorologist in a place that had thunder, and I hit that pretty early career. Then everything else is just gravy. I've had a lot of great mentors in my life that have helped coach and guide and make suggestions and correct. [laughter] Dick Elder, I would say, is my best boss ever. He was in Wichita. He was one of those that – he wasn't perfect either, but he was one of those [people] that you knew exactly where you stood at all times. If you needed a boot in the butt, you got it. If you needed a hug, you got it. If you needed a pat on the back, you got it. So you just always knew. I take a lot of my leadership style

from him and others. You learn from good bosses. You learn from the not-so-good bosses. But, like I said, I've been really fortunate to work with some incredible people that I learned a lot from. It's been a wild ride. It's been a fun ride. Like Joe Walsh says, "Life's been good to me so far."

MG: I also wanted to ask what it is about your current position that got you through that three to five-year job itch? What has made you want to stay on?

JO: I never got a three to five-year itch. That's just it. It hasn't become routine. Everything's been changing. When I first came in, it was just the training center, right? Then I had the opportunity to evolve it and create this new position and to expand the role of training within the National Weather Service. For every other job, I did have that three to five-year itch. It hasn't hit yet. It hasn't become routine. I'm having fun. I'm surrounded by great people, and we're doing really, really good things. Will it hit one day? I don't know. I don't know how to act. I've never had this happen to me before. This is a first. [laughter] But I'm having a ball. For the first time in my career, I'm not looking for what's next.

MG: That is a good feeling.

JO: It is a good feeling.

MG: Can you tell me about your life outside of work?

JO: Well, it's all about family. Outside of work, I've got two sons, currently twenty-three and sixteen. So there was a big gap in between. It's been a lot of their activities, and they're unique in their own right. My wife was a teacher to start off. Her degree is in education. When Kristofer was born in Wichita, she came to me – another surprising conversation – and said, "You know what? I'd like to stay home, at least until Kristofer's ready to go to school." I said, "Okay. We can adjust and make it all work." But then we were moving around a lot. So when we were in the D.C. area, it was time for him to go to school. He was ready physically and intellectually. He wasn't ready emotionally to go. The school said, "Well, maybe we just hold them back a year." My wife says, "Well, at this point, I'm holding teacher certificates in three states. How about if I just homeschooled him for kindergarten?" They said, "Yeah, that's a good idea. Why don't we do that." And we just fell into it. So we've homeschooled both kids for their entire academic careers. It clicked. It worked. It's no dislike of public schools or any other schools or anything like that. We're not doing it for religious reasons. We just fell into it, and it was working. It really paid dividends in that my older son Kristofer really took – he fell in love with figure skating. There weren't any rinks near us in D.C., but when we moved to Indianapolis, we found a park district rink and a learn to skate program. He was so shy; he wouldn't go out there by himself. So I took skating lessons with him in the beginning. He was maybe seven years old, and he just took off. I was like, "Look, guy, you got it. You go." The coaches back then were like, "You're pretty good at this. What do you think you want to do?" Do you want to play hockey? Do you want to speed skate? Do you want to figure skate?" Typical seven-year-old answer – "Well, spinning and jumping look like fun." [laughter] So we got him his first pair of figure skates. He got that foundation in Indianapolis. When we moved to Kansas City, we found a rink right away and got him back into lessons, and got him hooked

up with a private coach. It was the same thing. It's like, "Okay, you're wild as heck, but you're actually talented. So let's go with this." So he had been working as a single skater and working his way up through the ranks. Mom and dad – we're like, "Okay, sure. You coaches say this to all the parents, right?" They're like, "No, no. He's really good." We're like, "Okay, sure. Fine." So a gentleman by the name of John Coughlin – John was from Kansas City, and John was a national level pairs figure skater, two-time U.S. champion. He trained in Colorado, but he was from Kansas City. So he would come to Kansas City to see family and things like that. There's not a lot of guys in this sport. So he latched onto Kristofer. John was maybe eighteen to twenty at that point. He would tell Kristofer, "You really need to come to Colorado and train with me." "Yuk, yuk, yuk." We'll laugh about it. Kristofer is like, "Yeah, no big deal. This is fun. This is a cool guy. I'm hanging out with somebody who might go to the Olympics one day." Mom and dad are like, "Yeah, sure. Sure, sure." Over the years, he kept saying, "No, really. I think you need to come to Colorado and train with me." We finally said, "Are you serious?" He said, "I want to introduce you to my coach." So we all hop in the car. We drive to Colorado. We meet Dalilah Sappenfield, and she's one of the top pairs coaches in the world. Kristofer tries out with them, and she says, "Yeah, I want you on my team." So he's been, for the past five years, training in Colorado Springs at the Olympic training site out there, training in pairs. He's been in U.S. Nationals at some of the junior ranks over the past several years, and still working his way up through the ranks. His ultimate goal – he wants a team U.S.A. jacket.

MG: That's so neat. I'll have to keep my eye out for him.

JO: [laughter]

MG: What's your other son's name?

JO: My other son is Collin. He's sixteen. I think he picked up figure skating because he was a little kid who was bored sitting in the stands and didn't want to do his homework. [laughter] He's also a very accomplished skater. He's incredible. He started in gymnastics, so he's got that background. What he's got against his bigger brother is he can actually do a backflip on ice.

MG: Wow.

JO: [laughter] But he has no desire to compete. He just wants to go off and learn new tricks. That's his friends, that's his community, and that's where he hangs. But he's our computer guy. The advantages of homeschooling – you can teach according to their aptitude and what they're good at. He's doing java programming. He's written an app. He's doing 3D graphics. It's like – wow, really? He's really amazing. That's how he spends his days and with his friends. That's where he thinks he wants to go in his career, is into computers in some way. Back to Kristofer, he's a science guy at heart, as well. It's just that he wants to get through this competitive phase, do that, maybe do some shows for a few years, and then put himself through college and go get a job somewhere in science. Science technology just seems to be ingrained in our family.

MG: You must be so proud.

JO: It's amazing. It's amazing. It's easy to sit back and say, "Oh, this is just routine. This is just us." But how many people get some of these opportunities? You have to look at opportunities. You've got to look at open doors and take a risk and go through them. You only live once.

MG: Right. Well, is there anything else I have left out or forgotten to ask you about?

JO: I don't think so. I think we've covered an awful lot. I'm sure there will be stories that will pop into my head later in the day, but I think you've covered an awful lot of ground.

MG: And you can always add more to the record or transcript at a later date. I'm also happy to get together again. This was really a treat, and I have loved talking with you.

JO: [laughter]

MG: Thank you for all your time.

JO: Absolutely. I enjoyed every bit of it.

MG: Good.

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MG: Well, I just turned this back on. We wanted to capture some more about how your story relates to NOAA's 50th anniversary.

JO: Sure. Yes. Really, in the early part of my career, probably for the first twenty years, I didn't know NOAA other than it's the National Weather Service parent agency. But then I was asked to be part of a team, NOAA Regional Collaboration. It was formed a little over ten years ago. The idea was that all of the NOAA lines are all doing amazing work, but something that we could work on is to work better across the NOAA lines. So NOAA Regional Collaboration was created. I was asked to be a team member there. Probably the easiest way to explain it is we're introducing NOAA to other parts of NOAA, working on common problems, and maybe that connection is not made. So we've got eight NOAA regions, and I was a part of that team. Then a couple of years later, I was asked to lead that team. So I lead the NOAA Central Region, which is in the middle part of the country. Every other region either has a Great Lake or some saltwater; we have murky river water. But the idea is to make connections within NOAA on common problems. So one of the more unique projects that we worked on – and we don't have authority, we don't even have a lot of money, but what we do have is we know a lot of people, and we can make connections. So one of the unique problems we had was that we had one of our Central Region team members in New Orleans a few years ago. We were learning about NOAA in the Gulf and some of the problems they're having and trying to address in National Ocean Service and National [Marine] Fisheries [Service]. I'm a meteorologist, and I don't know anything about harmful algal blooms. I don't know anything about hypoxia and things like that. So we're listening to some of the problems that they're having in the Gulf region and trying to address. We're thinking, "Okay, great. What do we got in common here?" But they were

talking about the dead zone in the Gulf and the hypoxic conditions and the impacts on fishing and things like that. They were like, "It's just strange that when there's a drought in the Midwest, we don't have as much of a problem with hypoxia conditions." Of course, our lightbulbs are going off. "Well, yeah, it was a drought year. So if there's drought, there are less nutrients making it into the river it into the rivers, and therefore there are less nutrients making it into the Gulf of Mexico, and the impacts on that." So a couple of our team members were in hydrology and said, "You know what? We're working on this project up in Minneapolis on creating an advisory system for farmers called the Nutrient Runoff Risk Advisory. So what we're trying to do is advise farmers on when it's smart to put fertilizer down and, in most cases, spreading manure in the farmer fields in the upper Midwest because it's mutually beneficial. The farmer doesn't want to see their fertilizer go into the river any more than an environmentalist wants to see the nutrients go into the river. So, if farmers were smarter about when to apply fertilizers, then less of it will make it into the water systems, and therefore, eventually, less make it into the Gulf." It was just amazing watching the lightbulbs go off. So we had people from National Ocean Service and National Fisheries and the National Weather Service and satellite groups and researchers all in the room talking about hypoxic conditions in the Gulf and what possible solutions were out there. It turned out, unbeknownst to anybody, we had this group in Minneapolis working on a numerical model and an idea, working along with the state of Wisconsin and the state of Minnesota on how to advise farmers on when to fertilize. So that's been a project that has been expanding. It's really grown through the Great Lakes because we have the same problems in the Great Lakes. So, did we create it? No. Did we have connections that were working on it? Yes. Did we create some connections between the National Weather Service in Minneapolis with the National Fisheries people in the Gulf of Mexico? Absolutely, along with Sea Grant and everything else. So, to me, it's a wonderful example of NOAA working together to try to resolve problems. How can we do more of that? That's where that regional collaboration thing comes together. That's been a fun side project if you will because as a meteorologist, I never thought I'd be working on anything like that. So it was an opportunity for me to learn and grow. Again, getting back to that value of partnerships and working together to meet common missions, if you open your eyes and look around, you can find out there's so much more you can do than what's just in your immediate sphere of control.

MG: Was that borne out Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher's administration?

JO: Yes.

MG: I know that was a big effort of his.

JO: Yes. Absolutely. Admiral Lautenbacher was the one who created NOAA Regional Collaboration, and it has survived over numerous administrations. In fact, with Neil Jacobs and Admiral [Timothy] Gallaudet, they are absolute fans of regional collaboration and some of the work we do. We get a tiny little budget. Each region gets fifty-thousand dollars. I manage it like a venture capitalist, except I don't have a lot of money. [laughter] We look for cool little projects that are being done. Then we look for connections. Where we connect them – so we'll put a tiny bit of seed money in it. Maybe it's just to have a meeting to bring together Sea Grant with Weather Service with Fisheries on a common problem, and it's really been rewarding. Through Sea Grant, we have worked on a farmer to fishermen exchange program, where we

bring fishermen from the Gulf to meet farmers in the upper Midwest to understand each other's problems. It's been mutually beneficial to have the farmers hear from the fishermen what the impacts are of having nutrients getting loaded up into that. Then the fishermen bring all kinds of great seafood to the farmers to eat. They get to know each other. But they understand each other's problems that much better. It makes that partnership better. Again, as a weather person, I never dreamt I would be working on projects like that.

MG: It reminds me of what I hope happens with the Voices Oral History Archives, which is to make it NOAA-wide so you can search across regions and line offices to see how all the stories are connected.

JO: Right, and they are. There's so much more power in working together on these projects. It's so easy within NOAA to stay within your line office and stay in your lane, but if you can reach across to the other NOAA lines and understand what their problems are, some of the projects they're working on, it's not that hard to find connections where you can work together and have a much better result.

MG: Are you aware of other efforts towards this end, beyond the NOAA Regional Collaboration, in terms of connecting line offices?

JO: Yes. One NOAA has been something that's been around for a long time. That realization that yes, you work for Ocean Service, or yes, you work Fisheries or the National Weather Service or NESDIS [National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service], but we all have one bigger, larger goal, and that's environmental stewardship. So how do we do that better? How do we pull together ourselves? So regional collaboration is a tiny part of that, and I think we're doing amazing things. But yes, the more we can cross the NOAA lines and work together on environmental stewardship, we're going to be stronger in the future.

MG: Well, I'm so glad I turned the recorder back on.

JO: I am, too.

MG: Thank you.

----------END OF INTERVIEW----------
Reviewed by Molly Graham 3/26/2020
Reviewed by John Ogren 5/3/2020
Reviewed by Molly Graham 6/7/2020