

Jinny Nathans: This is Jinny Nathans on June 7th, 2018 and I'm here in Denver at the WAF-NWP conference. I am speaking with Becky Depodwin, and we're going to start by having her talk about how she decided she wanted to become a meteorologist.

Becky Depodwin: This will actually be a little bit less about how I decided to be a meteorologist and the story behind what drove my focus in meteorology, because I'm one of the few people, or many people that always knew I wanted to be a meteorologist, I think I was born that way. There wasn't a storm or single thing that drove my interest, it was just always there. But when I was a freshman in college, here in Colorado, about an hour north at the University of Northern Colorado, my home town of Windsor, which is about twenty minutes off to the west of Greeley, was struck by an EF-3 tornado that traveled northwest at noon. It was on the ground for 37 miles and like I said went through my hometown of Windsor. So the next day as I drove back through the damage, I saw all these homes, you know my friends' homes, my piano teacher's home. My parents' home thankfully was spared most of the damage besides hail. But it was really eye-opening to me to see this place I had grown up my entire life and the sheer power and nature of destruction, of what a tornado could do. There's this tree that's still there called the tornado tree, and it's still completely stripped and twisted and jagged. And it really impacted me in a very powerful and emotional way, we were driving through the town and crying. Because this is the thing I loved, it was my passion. I loved the weather, right, but the weather did this, this horrible thing to these people that I knew, these people that I loved.

I knew from that point on that I wanted to focus less on the science and more on the human side, the impacts, and I talked to a lot of people who spoke about not really knowing what was going on, they didn't have a warning, thankfully only one person, that's a terrible way to say it, one person passed away, which was actually miraculous given the nature of the storm and the fact that it was at noon, it was one the last days of school so there was a class outing at the park. People still managed to get to safety, they had plenty of lead time, but for the most part people didn't know it was going to happen that day, they didn't know there was going to be a huge tornado. It was very unusual. Really, it struck me.

The other part that struck me was the kids. Kids were terrified of the storms after this, they were terrified of weather. So as part of my undergraduate program we developed a presentation completed with our tornado simulator, one of those wispy... I don't know how to describe it, but it was a tiny tornado machine that we took with us, and we went to schools all up and down the front range, we talked to kids and we told them all about the weather. We told them what kind of things they can look for when there's going to be severe weather, what they can do to stay safe, what they can talk with their parents about. And it really empowered them to take back control and take back that fear that they felt after this tornado had ripped through their hometown.

That experience for three years in college, going all up and down and talking to students was really really impactful, and eventually drove me six years after undergrad to go back for a Master's in emergency management, which I will be completing here shortly. That's my story of what shifted my perspective within meteorology.

JN: That's really, really interesting. Going back even a little bit more before you were in college, were you one of those kids that was always looking out the window?

BD: Yes, absolutely. I remember as early as elementary school, I would run to the top of the highest point of the playground and look west, because in my mind the storms always came over the mountains from the West. And then my dog, we had a springer spaniel, she was terrified of thunderstorms. So always at night I would secretly let her into my room and I would sit there and pet her and watch the lightning for hours. So it's sort of been a lifelong love of weather, and I'm so fortunate to be able to do it for a career now.

JN: That's fascinating and quite a story, very close to home.

BD: Yes. The backyard.

JN: When did you become an AMS member?

BD: When I was in college I became very involved in AMS, I actually was the president of our local chapter at UNC my senior year, started as the secretary and worked my way up. I was a student assistant at the Seattle conference in 2011, I attended the conference in New Orleans in 2012, and then I went to the field, ended up like many early career people do and I sort of fell away from AMS. Unfortunately. I wish that wouldn't have happened, but it's one of those things that's kind of hard to keep up with. We don't always see the positive benefits of it.

I came back to AMS probably three years ago, I was fortunate to be asked to speak at a conference and attended and was just blown away. I was like "Why did I ever leave this, it's a phenomenal community." Since then I've become very involved and am now on the Board for Early Career Professionals, making sure that no one makes the same mistake that I did, which is getting away from it. Because there's so many benefits when you're just starting out in a career that I never even realized. There's the network of people, the resources the AMS offers, whether it's at a conference or throughout the year, mentorship opportunities, stuff like that. It's really valuable.

JN: And mentorship was the next thing I was going to ask you about, can you talk a little bit about that and who was significant at particular times?

BD: Yeah, that's a really good question. There's been a lot of different people that have come up throughout the years. Definitely shoutout to Jared Rennie, who's the current chair of the Early Career Board. I've had mentors within my company, I work at Accuweather, and they were very encouraging to get back involved in AMS, they're always encouraging the meteorologists in the company to really stay involved and active. I've had the privilege of being a mentor through the Board of Private-Sector Meteorologists just recently, I'm mentoring someone that goes to Central Michigan University. So that's been really cool as well. Making a full circle and giving back a lot of the mentorship that I received.

JN: Exactly. Is there a particular AMS journal that you make sure never to miss when it comes out, or was there an article at some point along the way that really hit you?

BD: Not really. I usually peruse BAMS, I definitely read BAMS when it comes out. I've really been enjoying actually the online community that just launched, I think that's been really

valuable. I'm not necessarily a magazine person, but I'm, like most people my age I'm a digital person. But I also love to network and see what other people are doing, what other people are working on. The Community Forum has been really valuable for getting more of an inside look as to who these people are that are involved in AMS and what they're doing, what they're interested in, what their challenges are, experiences are, so I think that's been really valuable and has stood out to me.

JN: It's developing, because it just started and of course it just started from nothing and conversations have just sprung up and it is very interesting to get the notification that there's something new on it, then you go look and see what it is. I hope you participate and continue to monitor all the groups and that sort of thing. That's very cool, and such a new thing, so I'm glad that you touched on it. And BAMS, I have to put a little plug, for the Centennial is being scanned online so that it will be on our journals website finally, from cover to cover, and also way back so that you will be able to search it fully and find lots of amazing stuff. There's a lot of stuff on conferences and the development of policies and statements. It really is the institutional history of the Society.

BD: That's fantastic, that's a huge project.

JN: Yes, it is. But if we didn't do that for the hundredth, you know, what else. So are you planning to be in Boston?

BD: Yes, absolutely. I would not miss that.

JN: I hope so, I hope you'll be speaking there. Is there anything else that you'd like to bring up?

BD: I think just one final anecdote I guess, it's just to give a shoutout to Matt Parker, he's probably someone that I should have mentioned as a mentor, even though we knew each other for only a brief time, but really the time that I did know him he was a mentor. He reached out to me, I was talking on Twitter about migraines I was having and he actually reached out and was like, "oh, my wife could help," and I had a phone call conversation with his wife. This was before I ever met Matt Parker. That was the kind of person that he was. He was so encouraging and supportive of the Early Career Board, and that meant the world to us, and we're hoping we're carrying on his vision for getting young people involved. He will be missed.

JN: I know a lot of people who feel exactly the same way, so I'm very glad that you mentioned that. We're just hitting time, I thank you very much.