

Jinny Nathans: This is Jinny Nathans, archivist at the American Meteorological Society. It's June 6, 2018, and I am here in Denver at the WAF/NWP conference and I am speaking with Arlene Laing. So, Arlene, tell me what your job is now?

Arlene Laing: I am the coordinating director designate for the Caribbean Meteorological Organization, which is the coordinating agency for sixteen English-speaking Caribbean territories which have meteorological services.

JN: That sounds like a very big job.

AL: Yes, and I only started it this week.

JN: Oh my goodness, and here you are in Denver. Well, I wish you luck. Can you describe your education in meteorology that led you there?

AL: I have a degree in meteorology from the University of the West Indies, and a Master's and PhD in meteorology from Penn State University.

JN: So you were in the states for quite a while.

AL: Yes.

JN: Can you also describe going back a little further than that, how it was you wanted to become a meteorologist. Was it something when you were younger?

AL: I actually received a book as a prize when I was in primary school, when I was nine years old. It was entitled *The Weather* and it was part of a series that's from England called the *Ladybird* series, and that was my first opening I should say to the weather. I became so interested in learning about clouds, the Beaufort scale. I knew all my different kinds of clouds and different weather systems. It was a very small book, but that was the beginning of my interest in meteorology.

And then later in high school, what was the equivalent of ninth grade here, which is third form in Jamaica, we had a really good geography teacher and we had a few instruments at my school. We didn't have a rain gauge, but we had a wet bulb thermometer, regular thermometer, barometer, and having known like the Beaufort scale we were able to--we took journal recordings of the weather and kept our little journals, got up early, took, you know, weather observations, and we also had a Caribbean weather map book that we were learning how to draw isobars and track hurricanes. That's when I really decided that's what I wanted to be, is a meteorologist. So I became interested when I was nine, but I decided when I was 13 that this was what I wanted to do.

JN: That's a wonderful story and I'm so glad it ended happily and you are a meteorologist, that's wonderful. How long have you been a member of AMS?

AL: Since 1992.

JN: And so I assume that you started as a student member?

AL: Yeah, I was a graduate student at Penn State.

JN: And then how has your membership or how you've related to AMS changed as your status has changed?

AL: I have actually served on a couple of AMS committees for conferences, and I was on the committee for the tropical conference one year, serving as the chair of the Max Eaton Award Committee, but I also was on the satellite meteorology STAC for three years and worked with the other committee members to plan satellite conferences and judge student competitions, things like that, all the usual things one has to do when one is serving on those committees.

JN: How is it that you became a volunteer so enthusiastically?

AL: I don't know, part of it is my nature, I like to contribute, and part of it's also because my role models like my mom are very community oriented people, volunteering all the time to help other people, so it was just sort of natural for me to want to do that. I also think it's important to give back, and the AMS was very kind to me. I remember when I was a graduate student, they offered ways to pay for us to go to conferences. So my first AMS meeting I was also a student volunteer, that's the way I met a couple of people who are here at this conference now as senior folks, like Anthony Lupo. We both were student volunteers at an AMS annual meeting in Atlanta or something, I can't remember exactly where. But you got to know other students and you got to learn about so many other topics because you'd be in a room where presentations were being given and you were helping, and you got to meet people and meet others who were higher than you in the field in terms of their status academically and who were professors or researchers or someone.

JN: What--I am trying to think how I would--basically I want to ask what is your favorite journal?

AL: Oh, I suppose the one that I read the most would be the Monthly Weather Review and I also read BAMS, and depending on the topic, if it's something much more theoretical then it's going to be in JAS. So I usually am reading about convective weather and dynamics in the JAS, and more recently have been doing more like Applied Meteorology and Climatology because my most recent job was in aviation meteorology, which is more of an applied side of our science.

JN: So, actually, so can you describe your jobs after your PhD because it sounds like you had some experience between then and the job you just started?

AL: Immediately after my PhD I did a postdoc at CSU, at CIRA [Cooperative Institute for Research in the Atmosphere] and there I focused on mesoscale convective weather systems, understanding their environments, tracking them using satellite data. Then I became a professor at the University of South Florida. I was the only meteorology professor in the whole department, in the whole university I should say. I was a member of the geography department and I went down there and set up a new meteorology lab, which is a big challenge, but I wanted

to do that. As part of the geography department I got to know GIS, I got to know people doing other things. I collaborated with volcanologists, I collaborated with oceanographers, civil engineers, because as the only meteorology professor, I really had to find other people to connect with in order to do research projects. I also connected with the local AMS chapter, the West Central Florida chapter, in which I was quite active. I was part of their scholarship committee where we chose scholarship winners every year, and went to all their activities. I was the keynote speaker at one of the annual banquets talking about my experiences in hurricane field projects.

JN: Now I can ask you about that next. [laughter]

AL: I collaborated with the National Weather Service locally in Tampa Ruskin, and with Melbourne on a wildfire research project. Then I was invited to be a visiting scientist at NCAR and a position opened up while I was there, so I became an NCAR scientist with a joint position with COMET. So I was doing both research and education, and then I started doing more and more education related things and then had only a small research component to my job. I ended up being part of the sequester cut at COMET, so that was not so good in terms of being able to stay in an organization that I really liked, but I was able to find another position with NCEP in the Weather Prediction Center in their Hydromet testbed, and I enjoyed that really very much because it was more of a connection with operations, so I worked all the time with forecasters. And then I came back to Boulder and started working with NOAA ESRL in the Global Systems Division and doing primarily aviation meteorology research.

JN: Very, very interesting. And then how did you get your new job?

AL: I was essentially recruited, because the current director is retiring and generally what they look for in that director is someone who is from the Caribbean, but has international experience and experience in research, understanding the scientific needs but also understanding the needs of the region and having maintained connections with the operational community in the region, which I continue to do even while I've been living here. So I was chosen to be the candidate and I accepted the position.

JN: You must be very excited.

AL: It is exciting and a little bit scary at the same time.

JN: So are you--What island are you on?

AL: The headquarters are in Trinidad, in the city of Port of Spain. But the job requires of course connecting and coordinating among all of these countries, so it does involve traveling regionally, as well as internationally, because I will be representing the region to the World Meteorological Organization.

JN: I have to say congratulations, and at this conference, there are not too many women. How do you feel about that? You're only my second female interviewee.

AL: I think it's generally matching what I saw in graduate school. There is a small percentage of women in our field. And so it's kind of reflective of that, what you see at the conference, but I think there a lot more younger women than there used to be when I was coming up as a young graduate student. I mean when I was at Penn State I remember when Shuyi Chen did her PhD defense, we found out afterwards that she was only the second female PhD in meteorology or something from Penn State at the time. I may be wrong, but I remember someone saying that, and we were quite shocked. But that has so changed.

JN: It has changed quite a bit, but it needs to change more.

AL: On the faculty that I remember at the time it was only Jenni Evans, the only female there, and there hadn't been a female for a long time. That's changed. Now they have a lot more female professors in that department.

JN: That's good, very good. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about or expand on or something that we haven't covered?

AL: One of the questions on there mentioned mentors, and who have been yours--I've been fortunate, when I was a child for example, the geography teacher that we had was [Stephen Hind] and I acknowledged him in my master's thesis and later on I was able to find him via the Internet search, and he was so thrilled to know that something he never even thought about, much more than having been a teacher, that this was a big influence on my life and that I continue to do meteorology, and that I had acknowledged him in that way and even before then. Though I had a really good primary school teacher, Mrs. Inez Jackson. I don't forget these people because I'm coming from rural Jamaica, a very small place, very poor place and to be able to have the advantages that I've had and the opportunities that I've had, I'm very aware of that. That's the other reason I also volunteer my time and I try to bring other people along the path with me, because I'm aware that there are other people who have the ability, but not the opportunity. One of the reasons I'm happy to take the new position that I'm taking is it's a way to give back to the region and take what I've learned internationally to help others to enhance their capability and to do better for meteorology in the Caribbean. And my graduate advisor Mike Fritsch, I owe him so much, too much to say right now. Dr. John Lee, he and his wife were like my parents when I was at Penn State and he's a meteorologist, a tropical meteorologist, and so I knew about him before I came to Penn State and then when I got there, they essentially just adopted me. Those are some of the people who have had an influence on my life. There's also my mother, who was a teacher, an elementary school teacher.

JN: That explains a lot.

AL: Yes [laughter].

JN: And I feel that AMS as the organization, you were inclined to want to do these things, but they gave the environment to make it possible for you.

AL: Yes. I think one of the wonderful things that has happened with the AMS that wasn't available when I was a student is a student conference, that came about when I was a young

professor. I got an opportunity to be part of a panel there, to talk to people about my career and so on, and it's so good to see how much the conference has involved. It's given the students an opportunity to become more mature, to lead things themselves, and it's wonderful. I think that's a great innovation.

JN: That's excellent, that's a high note for us to end on.