

Sophie Mankins: This is Sophie Mankins, the assistant librarian at the AMS, here on January 8th, 2019 at the AMS annual meeting, talking to John about his career in meteorology.

John Toohey-Morales: Sure, so my name is John Toohey, I use a hyphenated last name, Morales, that's my mother's maiden name. On TV, I'm known as John Morales without the Toohey portion of it, and there's kind of a funny story behind that, but let me just say how I got into the profession in the first place, which I think most meteorologists will probably give you a similar version of the story, at, you know, preteen or teenage years I was very interested in weather. I grew up in Puerto Rico, there were tropical cyclone threats every now and then, I mean it was the '70s, there was kind of a down cycle in tropical cyclone activity. But I really considered careers in everything having to do with air and space, so I thought about being a commercial pilot, I thought about being an astronomer, but I think the clincher for me was Hurricane David, 1979, passed close, but south of Puerto Rico, gave us a good sideswipe, some damage, and then it took a sharp right turn, intensified, and struck the Dominican Republic, killed thousands over there, and that was '79, as I was ramping up to my senior year, I think it was the clincher. I visited the local National Weather Service office, sat down with the meteorologist in charge, Jose Colon, who some will remember, he's passed away now. And I said listen I'm interested in this career, what do you think? And he was super enthusiastic. The forecasters of the National Weather Service in San Juan were mainly US mainlanders who would come down to Puerto Rico as a US territory, stay for a couple years and then go back to the mainland, and there were no Spanish speakers as lead forecasters there. So to have somebody that had grown up in Puerto Rico, who spoke the language, who knew the island inside and out, would've been a tremendous asset for them, so Dr. Colon said, you know, go on to college for this.

I had to go stateside, I went to Cornell University, and as I was studying atmospheric sciences at Cornell, the summers I would spend as a summer aide for the National Weather Service. Basically when I graduated in 1984 from Cornell, I had a job waiting for me at the National Weather Service because I already had my foot in the door, and this is back in the days when perhaps a Master's degree in meteorology was not as crucial to landing a job at the National Weather Service. I started my career as a Met Tech, a Meteorological Technician, because there were no, they were transitioning from the old professional met intern program to a new one, but it wasn't in place yet, so I started as a Met Tech. Let me tell you, that was a tremendous blessing because I got to do things that oftentimes professional meteorologists don't get to do, so surface aviation observations, weather balloon releases, and doing the significant levels and everything you had to do by hand, radar observations when they were done manually to show what was out there on the radar. I mean all those things were things that were tasked from the Met Techs, and I got to do that for about a year and a half. I thought it was an important start to my career.

Eventually the National Weather Service put out blanket vacancy announcements for these new met intern programs. This was the first time that the local WSO's, Weather Service Offices, which didn't have any forecast responsibility back in the old structure of the National Weather Service, this is the first time that they were going to have degreed meteorologists located at the WSOs. I applied. I guess I was given a couple of choices, I ended up in Lake Charles, Louisiana. I actually interned there, the same couple of years with him and me, Jim Stefkovich who ended up being the MIC at Birmingham, also worked for Southern Region Headquarters for the

National Weather Service, it was him and I, we interned together, learned a lot from that experience.

Eventually I went back down to San Juan, now as a forecaster, as a journeyman forecaster. I'll mention that on my way to San Juan, a great stroke of luck, somebody canceled in this course offered by the WMO along with the University of Miami and the National Hurricane Center, a semester long course on tropical cyclone forecasting, in Miami, and it's designed mainly for member countries of the WMO in tropical belts, but somebody canceled, an international delegate canceled, and my timing for my move to San Juan was upcoming. This is in the mid to late 1980s. I was given the opportunity to take that slot. And it was fabulous. I learned so much about hurricane forecasting and observing, I actually garnered eight credit hours of graduate level work at the University Miami through all this, and then eventually made my way down to San Juan.

I worked my way up the ranks pretty quickly, again the facility with the language and the knowledge of the island and being Puerto Rican. I became a forecaster by age 27. So, at age 27 I'm already a shift supervisor, lead forecaster in San Juan, and then in 1989 we had a hurricane strike Puerto Rico for the first time in a long time, in decades. That was Hurricane Hugo, and Hurricane Hugo which went on strike South Carolina, hit Puerto Rico in the northeastern side pretty substantially, and what was happening at the National Weather Service offices that I had worked at was that I usually became the de facto spokesperson for each one of these National Weather Service offices, because I had a little bit more fluidity, ability, communication skill with incoming media requests.

That probably stems from the fact that while I was in college I worked for the student run radio station WVBR. I never did practice presenting the weather on TV while in college, but I did do radio and I had a little bit more ability with media. Well, when Hurricane Hugo struck, I was on media so much as the representative from the National Weather Service that after the event was over, and after we recovered from the event, I got a phone call from the news director from a TV station in Puerto Rico saying, "you know, you could do this on TV." Now that never led to anything, because I was already a GS-13 in the federal pay scale, the pay scale for weather presenters in Puerto Rico was like half of that money, and I was going to take a risk, because if people were going to like me, or not, or whatever. So I decided not to do TV in Puerto Rico.

But a couple years later I was playing golf with a weathercaster from Puerto Rico went back after playing golf to drop off the golf clubs at his house, he presses his answering machine, back when we had answering machines, and there's a message from a cousin of his who works at a TV station in Miami saying "hey, our weathercaster is leaving, they're going to be looking for someone. Would you be interested?" He's talking to his cousin, of course. I asked my friend, "Are you going to pursue this?" He said, "No, I don't want to leave Puerto Rico." "Do I have your permission to pursue it myself?" And I did, and eventually I got hired. Now there's a funny story about that too because meanwhile, I had interviewed for the TV job, they never called me, weeks and months passed. I went on with my National Weather Service career, I took a job at NCEP, back then called, NMC the National Meteorological Center, as the chief of the South American desk. Two weeks after I reported for duty in Washington, or the Washington area, I got a frantic phone call from the people in Miami, saying "where have you been, we've been

trying to reach you in Puerto Rico, they tell me you left the island, we want to offer you this job.” And I go “oh my goodness, I just took this new job.” “Well, you know, we need to know right away, you have 24 hours.” “Well, I need 48.”

I actually made a list of pros and cons, a physical list of all the pros and cons of leaving my secure federal career, which I think was on the upswing, to roll the dice and try the TV thing. The clincher for me was not so much of trying the TV thing, and I knew I had some communication skills. The clincher was that I was going to have, I spoke to the people at the TV station and said, you know, I want to do this but I also want to try my hand at entrepreneurship. I want to launch at least a small commercial weather firm, kind of on the side, would you write that into my contract, would you let me do that? And they agreed to it. So not only did I start my TV career, but I launched a small company called Climadata Corporation, and within just a couple months of me starting on TV I already had garnered some radio station clients in the Caribbean, because this was a novel concept for stations in the Caribbean to have an actual meteorologist present the weather on the radio, in Spanish or English, and I was doing both languages down there, and that's how Climadata got its very first few clients.

I started my TV career at Univision at the Channel 23 owned and operated station in Miami. I spent 12 years with Univision, so I started in '91, ended in 2002 and really Univision, I guess were my formative years on TV. I moved on from local to national, I was doing network weather every day across all of the Univision stations in the country, again as John Morales, not as John Toohey. So that's kind of the funny thing, because here's the funny story about that. I get to the TV station. They say John Toohey, this Toohey thing, are you going to be doing Spanish-language TV, nobody's going to be able to pronounce, spell, understand “Toohey.” Can you come up with a stage name? There's many people on TV that have stage names, that's not unusual, so I said yeah, you know what, I'll just use my mother's maiden name. I was used to it, and all Latin countries, and in the case of Puerto Rico a territory, we use two last names on all of our documents anyway, on driver's licenses, our birth certificates, everything has two last names. So I said, I'll just drop the Toohey and I'll use John Morales on TV, and ever since then I've been John Morales.

So through a network then I got a very nice opportunity to move to Telemundo, and I worked as chief meteorologist as well for the local station in Miami. This network worked for them too but not as much as I used to do at Univision. And then kind of in a roundabout way as well I left my Telemundo Channel 51 job in Miami, and about a year later I started as chief meteorologist for the NBC owned station in Miami, that's WTVJ, a job which I plan to hold until semiretirement, I guess, and I'm not too far from those years as it stands today. Altogether now it's 35 years as a professional meteorologist, seven years working for NOAA and the National Weather Service and the last 28 on TV. Of those 28, 18 in Spanish, the last 10 in English.

Hurricanes, after the National Weather Service, in other words hurricanes while on TV, that I've helped guide people through include Hurricane Andrew in 1992 in South Florida, the wave of Florida hurricanes in 2004 and 2005, including Katrina, which hit South Florida before it went on to become infamous, and also Wilma, which also in 2005 struck South Florida. And then more recently we've had threats like Matthew, we've had landfalls in South Florida like Hurricane Irma. And meanwhile as the TV thing has been very good to me and has progressed,

social media is a new platform that has grown just within the last 10 or 12 years or so, something that started in 2007, 2008 and is blossoming so, whereas, for example, Climadata, my company, no longer does radio in places like Puerto Rico, we do have a client in the British Virgin Islands that's still doing radio and obviously we served them with information for Irma, but through social media I'm also able now to serve the people of Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic and other Caribbean countries with crucial, potentially life-saving information that I put out there, and then people share multiple times. I've come to learn as you evolve and you see how things change in the modern world, I've come to realize that the platform that I had on traditional media in places like Puerto Rico, whether it be radio, or I was even doing newspaper weather segments every day, now I have this new platform which is I would say just as powerful as traditional media, because you post something and it doesn't just go away, it stays there, and people can refer back to it and if the information is good, it's guiding them through through life-saving decisions, it can be just as powerful and just as useful.

I mention all this because while I ran off the hurricanes that I've covered in South Florida, I think the most impactful moment of my professional career to me personally was covering Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. Again, I'm half Puerto Rican, my mother lives in Puerto Rico, all my family on my mother's side, all of my lifelong friends from grade school and high school are down there, and I was covering, while not on TV or on the radio, I was covering Maria on social media, including Facebook live posts. There's one Facebook live post on the eve of the hurricane, it lasts only about six minutes, and it was extremely difficult to record that, because I knew what was coming, and I knew that the people in Puerto Rico had never, unless you were 90+ years old you had never lived through anything like that, because it's the worst hurricane in almost a century to strike the island. To convey that message, to make people realize that this is like nothing they have ever seen before, to realize that it's impacting friends and family, it was very emotional, it was very personally impactful for me to do that. That video has been seen a million times already, a million views of that video from Facebook live from 2017.

So there's been difficult moments, there's been moments of great success. In the TV realm I guess I've won four Emmy awards, regional Emmy awards. I've also been inducted into the Silver Circle, this is an award for 25 or more years of exemplary service in the TV news industry. So it's a great honor to have been inducted there as well. I've won some other broadcasting awards. I'm extremely proud to be an American Meteorological Society fellow. Not too many broadcasters are fellows, and it's just something that is really one of my greatest accomplishments my career. There are other AMS awards, the broadcast award, the award for applied meteorology, I've won that as well, and a few others, so I'm very proud of those too, which leads me to talking a little bit about AMS. I think it's very important that I do, because you know I think I started my AMS membership when I was a student, and fine, I think people are members of different organizations, but if you don't truly get involved, you don't really know what it's all about. I started my career as an operational meteorologist in the National Weather Service, okay, I'm an AMS member but I'm low on the totem pole, I'm starting my career, early career professional, can't really travel to these things so I didn't really go much. Finally I start my career in TV in the 1990s, and I started to attend one or two AMS broadcast conferences and then in, might've been 1995 or 1994, there was an AMS annual meeting in Dallas, Texas, at the Anatole Hotel, in which the broadcast conference was integrated into the annual meeting. So I went to attend the broadcast conference, but suddenly I was exposed to everything that the

annual meeting brings, and I was just blown away. I loved it. And it's funny because while now I might attend one out of every three broadcast conferences, I never miss an annual meeting because of everything the annual meeting brings to the table, and all the opportunities that we have to interact with each other.

In the meantime, it's helped me grow professionally so much, because I started to attend the annual meetings, started to meet some people, I got roped in as we normally do to one or two volunteer opportunities, and you know, here I am, the Spanish-language TV weathercaster... parenthetically I should mention I was the first degreed meteorologist on any Spanish-language station anywhere in the United States when I started in 1991. So here I am, the Spanish-language TV weathercaster, perhaps not feeling too important, small fish in a big pond, but what the AMS allowed me to do was when I started to volunteer, people saw that I was much more than the Spanish-language TV weathercaster. They saw the work that I can do, the ideas I can bring to the table, and the opportunities in AMS started to blossom, and I am extremely proud of the fact that I started to become chair of different boards, so the Board of Certified Consulting Meteorologists, I am a CCM and proud of it as well, I chaired that for a while, I was involved in the Broadcast Board, I was involved in a few other boards and then suddenly I'm nominated to be Commissioner on Professional Affairs to take over for Ray Ban, a very distinguished member of the AMS. I mean, what a tremendous honor. And I was nominated a second time, so I served six years as Commissioner on Professional Affairs, overseeing all of the AMS certification programs, overseeing the broadcasters, the Private Sector Board, the Board of Operational and Government Meteorologists, all these different very crucial boards that we have, and it was just a tremendous honor to serve in that way.

And then I finished my Commissionership, and I'm nominated to run for president of AMS. Now, I lost that election, I'm told it was only a hundred and or 120 votes, and then it occurred to someone that I should be renominated, and I ran a second time, and I lost again. [laughter] The second time I lost to, and we all love him and miss him, to Matt Parker, and Matt hated the fact that we were running against each other, we were very good friends, Matt Parker and I, because we knew each other from working in organizations like NCIM, the National Council for Industrial Meteorologists, and other things. So my involvement with AMS grew beyond expectations, to have a broadcast meteorologist nominated to run for AMS President, again, I didn't win, and I think that honor of being a broadcaster and being AMS president still only belongs to one person, which is Bob Ryan. I would've been thrilled to do it, but it wasn't in the cards, but nevertheless you see how these things evolved. Nowadays I'm involved with the Centennial Committee, I'm always being asked to do different tasks, in not just the Centennial but in other committees as well, and I'm happy to do them. I'm a proud donor to AMS as well, I think that's important too, as we pass the Centennial and go forward into the future. So it's been a tremendous career, I'm very proud of where I stand today, both in what I've done at my job, but also what I've done thanks to AMS and thanks to the AMS peers and colleagues that I have, that have trusted me to get involved in the way that I have. So that's John Toohey-Morales in a nutshell.