

Air Quality Champion in Our Community

Name: Dr. Vernon Morris

Titles: Director of the Cooperative Science Center in Atmospheric Science & Meteorology (NOAA); Emeritus Professor of Chemistry & Atmospheric Sciences (Howard University)

Organizations: NOAA Cooperative Science Center for Atmospheric Sciences and Meteorology (NCAS-M), Howard University



How does your work relate to air quality?

At N-CASM, I lead teams of scientists, university students, and professors to work on problems of air chemistry, weather, and climate. We work on projects to improve predictions about air pollution, develop new ways to measure chemicals in the environment, and study how climate change and air quality affect each other. As a professor, I teach, develop new courses, and support education and career opportunities in environmental science, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

What motivates you to come to work every day?

- ✓ Curiosity. I love learning and finding out how and why things in nature work the way they do. My job allows me to uncover the mysteries of the Earth's environment.
- ✓ The possibility of making a difference. Whether I'm providing educational tools and programs or conducting research that will lead to a better quality of life for people all over the world, I feel like the work that I do makes a difference. Sometimes, I even get to see the fruits of my labor when a student becomes a successful professional or my research leads to policy or process changes in an organization or society.
- ✓ Engagement with students. I absolutely love to be around people who want to learn new things. I am fortunate to have a job that continually seeks and shares knowledge. Being around people who love learning is energizing.

What education and career path did you pursue to have the position that you have today?

Growing up, I thought that I would enter the military and travel the world. In high school, I envisioned myself becoming a professional fighter. A dramatic event changed my mind and I literally stumbled into my current career. Shortly after entering Morehouse College, I found myself unable to pay some of my tuition. I was dashing through the chemistry building on my way to find a job and ran smack into a chemistry professor. This professor not only paid my tuition, he found me a part-time campus job and convinced me to major in Chemistry and Mathematics. I went on to become the first African American to earn a PhD in Geophysical Sciences (now Earth and Atmospheric Sciences) at Georgia Tech. After that, I began my research in a mountain monastery in Sicily and have now conducted research on five of the seven continents, three of the five major Oceans, and visited over 30 countries.

What is your workspace like?

On a typical day, I may be in a meeting room in the morning, a classroom in the afternoon, and a rooftop lab after that. My favorite workspace is aboard research ships that sail out into the remote oceans to conduct experiments. On the ships, I launch balloons that carry delicate instruments up in the atmosphere to measure the properties of the air. I also monitor air chemistry on deck, and even send devices into the sea to measure gases.

What accomplishment are you most proud of?

My proudest accomplishment has been my children. I have three intelligent and beautiful daughters and a son on the way. A close second is enabling the success of the 150 students whom I have mentored over the years. Many of these students have gone on to become successful doctors, scientists, engineers, and business owners. I take a lot of pride in opening doors and enabling people to achieve their dreams.

Is there something important that you want to share that we haven't asked?

A little advice: believing in yourself is important but not enough. Hard work is essential but not enough. Combining these two elements and building meaningful professional relationships will take you a long, long way towards achieving your dreams. You have to find people who will fight for you and help open doors for you. You have to be prepared to do your job well when the door is opened. And once you get through the door, make sure that you reach back and help someone else.