

TV METEOROLOGIST OPERATES IN MIDDLE OF WHIRLWIND OF ACTIVITY

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Television meteorologist Mike Rucker sits in near-quiet about 30 minutes before his 5:30PM top-of-the-news weather dispatch Thursday.

After sleeping for about three hours early in the morning, the WCTV-Channel 6 weatherman was continuing his round-the-clock monitoring of Hurricane Kate.

Now, his striped, pastel-hued necktie hangs loose at his neck, and his lavender shirt's top button gapes open.

But everything else about him reflects composure.

His back hugs the rear of his armless chair. He carefully scans the incoming wire-generated weather reports, while keeping an eye on the computer-colored weather radar screen.

Rucker's telephone rings. His right hand grabs the receiver. Simultaneously, he shouts instructions to an associate. He has to do a one-minute weather bulletin, telling residents of low-lying areas in Jefferson and Taylor counties to evacuate.

"It looks like it's coming at us," he tells news anchor Frank Ranicky.

It is Rucker's third hurricane watch in three months. He says that he likes his weather cool and dry. "The kind of weather Tallahassee gets in a normal spring or fall."

But as he runs a gauntlet between almost \$190,000 worth of state-of-the-art computer-assisted weather equipment, it looks like Rucker doesn't mind top-of-the news weather either.

Rucker, 30, says he has loved weather since he was a 6-year-old in Nashville, TN. His first inspiration to become a meteorologist was longtime Nashville television weatherman Bob Lobertini. "He also hosted a Popeye children's show," says Rucker. "I thought that he was the neatest person for kids to watch."

Rucker admired Lobertini enough to go to the studio, and appear on the show in order to meet his early role model.

"From then on I knew that this was what I wanted to do."

As Rucker turns back to his computerized weather charts, he reflects on the biggest problems and goals he faces:

“I always hope people will understand what I’m talking about. (The job is part) public education, identifying with people, and trying to get them to understand. ...

Time is the biggest thing I think about then.”

He came to Tallahassee in September 1975 after spending two years at Middle Tennessee State University. Because he wanted to be a meteorologist, he chose Florida State University to get a degree, and he says, because FSU was one of the best schools in the country. Plus, it was in Florida, in the sunshine.

The ringing telephone again breaks the silence in WCTV’s Weather Center. Rucker picks up the receiver.

One of the eight radio stations he provides weather updates to wants an on-air short report.

“I’ll have to do you a quickie,” Rucker says.

He leads with a countdown: “Three, two, one. Good evening, This is Mike Rucker with the weather for Z-103 listeners.”

The storm has moved a little closer to nearby North Florida “to the west of the Big Bend,” he says. Later he explains that he uses the Panhandle to refer to areas further west. He finishes up lickety-split.

Dennis Boyle, president of the television station’s parent company, John H. Phipps Broadcasting Stations Inc., drops by later to say that Rucker is the best weatherman.

Rucker demurs, and brings out a black notebook, while apologizing.

“These are letters we received after Hurricane Elena,” he says, averting his eyes. “I was so surprised.

He sits down on the edge of his chair, looks at his color radar, and prepares to outlast Hurricane Kate.