

Transcript for : “Ashley Orehek-Rossi, a STEM librarian at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky”

Kelly Savoie:

Hello, Clear Skies Ahead listeners. This is Kelly Savoie and I'm hoping you can take a moment of your time to rate and review our show wherever you listen to podcasts. We have produced over 60 episodes and you can help us reach even more individuals that will benefit from the diverse experiences shared by our guests. Thanks so much for listening and I hope you enjoy this new episode.

Welcome to the American Meteorological Society's podcast series, Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations about Careers in Meteorology and Beyond. I'm Kelly Savoie and I'm here with Matt Moll and we'll be your hosts. We're excited to give you the opportunity to step into the shoes of an expert working in weather, water, and climate sciences.

Matt Moll:

We are happy to introduce today's guest, Ashley Orehek-Rossi, a STEM librarian at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky. Welcome, Ashley. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Hey, thanks. I'm real excited to be here.

Kelly Savoie:

Ashley, could you tell us a little bit about what sparked your interest in science and how it influenced your educational path?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

It's kind of a long story. I don't have the traditional spark of interest, like a lot of meteorologists do, where there's like that one big storm and that one big weather event. For me, it was my grandfather who served in the Navy during the Korean War. He was stationed in Guam for a few years and he shared about all these different meteorological phenomena that he witnessed. He road out a hurricane or I guess a typhoon, since it was in the Pacific. And then the most notable story that I remember is he saw a water spout where it sucked up fish from the water. So essentially rained fish on the beach.

Kelly Savoie:

Oh my gosh.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Yeah.

Kelly Savoie:

That would've been quite a thing to see.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Tell me about it. So he was one of my big influences. And my other big influence was one of my grandmas who's a very big into science. She grew up on Lake Ontario, so she got all the lake effect

storms and stuff, and she would take us out on the front porch to do storm watching and we would also go night sky observations in the field or yeah, we'd go out in the field and observe the night sky and find different constellations and stuff. And then my family in general are just a bunch of STEM people. Both of my brothers are into, or my one brother's in mechanical engineering. My other brother's in chemistry, my dad's a software engineer, my sister's a pastry chef. So I guess that's science.

Kelly Savoie:

Yes, sure is.

Matt Moll:

Yes.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

And then a lot of my family are in the health profession in the medical field, so there's a lot of us in the sciences.

Kelly Savoie:

So did you know in high school that you wanted to major in a science? How did you go about that? Where did you decide to go to school, and why?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

I can't really remember how I settled on meteorology. I just thought it was probably something different, something cool. I also wanted to stay in state and at the time I was living in Pennsylvania. And I was very headset against going to Penn State because that's where half my family went. Most of my classmates from high school went there. I just wanted it to be different. So thankfully I found Millersville University had a program. Luckily it was only an hour and a half from home, so it made it easy to come back and forth from going home.

Kelly Savoie:

When you started at Millersville, did you know right away that you wanted to be a meteorology major? Did you participate in any of the local chapters there or anything like that?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

No. Well I got started, I declared a major when I started at Millersville, so I immediately started in the meteorology program and then I just powered through it like everybody else. The curriculum was just as tough, but you got to find your group of classmates and y'all worked through it together.

Matt Moll:

What opportunities did you pursue inside and outside of school that you knew would be beneficial to securing a job in your profession?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Well, when I was in school, both as a grad student and an undergrad student, I got really involved with different student organizations. I tried to be a student officer of at least one for at least a year, so you can

get that kind of leadership experience and stuff. I also found myself in a lot of customer service jobs. As a student at Millersville, I worked in the library almost my entire career at Millersville. In another period of my life before and during graduate school, I found myself working at Starbucks. I also worked at Macy's for a hot minute. And I also worked at Applebee's for a little bit as well, waiting tables. So I found those customer service jobs really helped. And in grad school, too, my graduate assistantship I felt really prepared me for my current role.

Kelly Savoie:

And what was your first job in the field after you graduated? Is it the position you have now? Or did you start somewhere else first?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

So this is also a very long story because my very first professional job actually wasn't in meteorology. When I graduated from Millersville, I actually started at a local pharmaceutical company here at Lancaster and I was a data analyst there. I actually really hated that job.

Kelly Savoie:

Why did you hate it? Was it just stressful? Or you sound like you had a lot of customer service positions, so it seems like a sales position might be was your alley.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

It was my first actual desk job. And from being on my feet and moving around a lot, it was really hard to find myself stuck behind a desk for eight plus hours a day. And then I also had some other issues going on externally in my personal life. And I ended up going into what I like to call the quarter life. So I had my mid-life crisis in my early twenties essentially. And I stuck out on that job for a little bit. I ended up moving back in with my parents and working remotely. And then to help me get out of my quarter life crisis, I ended up joining an AmeriCorps program, which is kind of like a domestic peace corps if you want to think of it like that.

So I joined that, I was based in Mississippi. And then they sent me out to three different project locations throughout my service year there. My section was particularly focused on working with FEMA and other disaster related services. So I kind of took it as the emergency management internship that I never got when I was actually an undergrad student. What I liked most about it is that I actually got to get real hands-on experience. I got to go into those disaster recovery centers. I got to go inside. I was at FEMA region six in Denton, Texas, which is actually an old nuclear bunker from the sixties. That was actually pretty cool, but it's very dark.

Kelly Savoie:

Well that sounds like a really good opportunity. Is that an application process for AmeriCorps? Do you just apply online and any type of internship or position?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Yeah, so the specific program is called AmeriCorps, NCCC, so that's three Cs. And then the sub program is called FEMA Core. So that is the side that primarily works with disaster related projects. You can help out with Blue Sky or Blue Sky or either Gray Sky projects. The other half of it, they have a traditional core and

you work on different projects with national parks, state parks, scout camps, other things. So it depends on what you need. And I used that as kind of trying to reorient myself.

Matt Moll:

Could you walk us through a typical day on the job as a STEM librarian at Western Kentucky University?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

So there's a lot of different things that I do. One of the first things I do is usually I look at my schedule in my emails, because I may get emails overnight or from the previous day they may have missed. And each day is different. So I always have to check my schedule to see what meetings I have or what other appointments I have. Sometimes I meet with different students or faculty that I serve. I could be meeting with one of my department groups or my department chair. One thing I do is collection development. So that means I just maintain the titles that we have. I make sure that we stay current and relevant to what is going on in both science today and also what my students and faculty are studying. One of my current research projects that I'm working on on the side actually has to deal with student and faculty outreach.

So we're hoping to kind of plant ourselves where they are located, because I don't know about you guys, but I know when I was a student I kind of just blocked myself in the weather center and I never left. And then other things I do are I plan lessons because sometimes I go and I teach instruction sessions on various topics like how to avoid plagiarism or how to write a citation or this is the libraries and this is all you can do here kind of thing. I also do service to one of my various professional organizations. I also maintain these online research guides that are kind of like one-stop shops for resources within specific disciplines. Some days I do a little bit of all of these things. It really just depends.

Kelly Savoie:

And going back to the AmeriCorps position, did that help you get the job as the STEM librarian? Or was there something in between that led you to this position? Did you ever think you would be a STEM librarian? Is this just something that kind of an opportunity came about and you're like, oh that sounds interesting. I think I'll apply for that.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

I realized I missed that half of the story in the last question. So backtracking a little bit, I went to AMS Seattle in 2017. I had just graduated because I was a December graduate. And I still didn't know what I wanted to do in meteorology. I didn't want to be one of the traditional path, which was academics or broadcasting or forecasting. So I wasn't really sure what I was going to do. At the career fair, I discovered this organization called Atmospheric Science Librarians International. And I got talking to the people at that table and they said, "Hey, come to our conference. We'll be here towards the end of the week." And I go and I almost felt like I found my little niche in this society, in this profession.

And I was like, "Okay, what do I have to do to join your club essentially?" And they said, "Go get your master's degree." I didn't want to go back to school right away. So I was like, okay, let me put them in the back burner for a little bit. And then fast forward through my whole story from the previous question, after AmeriCorps, I did my research for different grad programs while I was working at Starbucks. I was either going to go to and go to Rutgers or the University of Tennessee. In the end, the University of Tennessee ended up offering me an assistantship. So I'd moved blindly to Knoxville, Tennessee. I'd never been to Tennessee in my life or Knoxville.

Kelly Savoie:

You're brave.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

That was really scary actually.

Kelly Savoie:

I know, I bet.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

And then I did my graduate assistantship there while also working at Starbucks because you don't get paid a lot of money as a graduate assistantship. So I basically had two jobs while going to school full time. And I went, after I completed my grad school, I ended up going to this college called Lindsey Wilson College. They gave me basically my big break in the field of librarianship. Because a lot of jobs I'm pretty sure I didn't get hired for or even interviewed for is because I was missing the actual professional library experience and I just needed that one place to give me a shot. And they gave me a shot, but they were located in rural Kentucky and basically middle of nowhere. And that was its own struggle because I'm such a city slicker. And living in the middle of nowhere just kind of didn't sit well with me. But I talked with my now husband about it and he's like, "Look, you got to get your foot in the door. Look at it like a stepping stone. It's going to lead you to a better job."

Kelly Savoie:

And it's temporary.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Exactly. It's temporary. I was only in the job maybe six months before the position announcement came out for my now current job, the STEM library at Western Kentucky University. It's located about an hour and a half from where I was in Columbia, Kentucky. And I already lived halfway between Bowling Green and Columbia. So it's like what are the odds of a dream job popping up within a commutable distance of where I already lived? So I took the chance and I applied for it. Sure enough, they interviewed me, not once but twice. And then I remember I cried when the dean called me to offer the job.

Kelly Savoie:

It was destiny. That's awesome.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Exactly. And even getting a little emotional thinking about it now, just because that was like a fairy godmother effect.

Kelly Savoie:

So did you have to get a master's in library science? Or were you okay with your meteorology background?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

So to be a librarian, especially in academia, you have to have a master's degree from an accredited institution by the American Library Association. If you don't have a degree from an accredited institution, your chances of getting hired into an institution mine are very slim.

Kelly Savoie:

Right, okay. So as a STEM librarian, what do you like most about the job?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

One thing I do is that it is different every day. It's kind of like how meteorology works. You never know what's going to happen. I also love that I get to learn something new. I get students that come to me with all these different topics that they're studying and it's just really amazing. And then I also get to form cool collaborations with both the students, my fellow librarians, and even the faculty here, too. I'm just starting a project with actually the climate center here on campus. They got a new state climatologist and he was asking us for some help for how to sift through some data and some old records that they have. So we're going to help them on that kind of project.

Kelly Savoie:

And it sounds like it's varied position. You can do a lot of different things. And I mean it's been a while since I've had to do research at a library and I'm sure it's a lot different now. So I'm sure you needed to learn a lot about the technology and the systems and the research capabilities in the library, especially at a university. What is that like in terms of when someone comes and asks you about a research project, what are the steps that you take to help somebody?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

So I start with asking them, "Do you have your research question? Do you know what you want to study?" If they don't really have a question, we think about some of the things that they're thinking about studying. And we try to formulate a question from that. And then from there we have to break down that question into what we call keywords or phrases. So basically they're like synonyms of your question. Then we take those synonyms and we create a search query that we then plug into the library's Google if you want to call it that.

Each university has their own internal Google of sorts and we use that so that way we can find specific resources about the question that you want to answer. And then we can also use those resources to try and find other resources. I like to tell students that if you find that one paper or that one book chapter that gives you everything that you're looking for, look at their sources, where they got their research from. And then certain databases will let you see what book chapters or papers or who else used that paper in their research. So you can see where the research is going and where the research went.

Kelly Savoie:

Oh, it definitely sounds like people should take advantage of their STEM librarians more often in college because it's really helpful. I mean you have somebody to guide you through a paper, which I always remember being a little stressful when I was like, okay, you have to do this research paper and it has to be 25 pages and you're like, oh my lord. But yeah, thank you for the work that librarians do.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

I was just at an outreach event last week for potential students and I kept advertising the library as we're your secret weapon to being successful. Come use us.

Matt Moll:

So what are some of the biggest challenges you face working in the field?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Time management. I mean you heard the list that I said a couple questions ago. I have so many different things that are going on and once I finish one thing, another thing pops up. So my list is never ending. And that also ties into project management, too. It's like I have to make sure I can correctly prioritize things so they can get done at an appropriate time. One of my other struggles is purchasing the books. Doing that collection development. You'll be surprised how expensive science and math resources are. I've seen text, not just textbooks, but other books that could be upwards of a thousand dollars and-

Kelly Savoie:

Oh my goodness-

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

I'm in a little bit bit of sticker shock.

Kelly Savoie:

So do you have a set budget for each year?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Yeah, so my department chair and the dean of the libraries and a couple other people, they sit down and they figure out how much money each of the subject librarians can get to spend on buying more books and updating their collections. And then they do their little magic and they apply their formula and it just so happens I have one of the biggest budgets of the librarians. I also have one of the biggest chunks of student and faculty populations, which is why I have one of the biggest chunks of the budget. And it's actually a lot of money. So I also don't know how I'm going to spend all of this money. But they also figured, hey, science and math is kind of expensive so you're going to need the extra money so you can buy these resources. So I have to get over the sticker shock of that. And I have to remember it's not my money I'm spending, it's someone else's money who's giving me permission to spend it.

Kelly Savoie:

So you're like, oh it seems like a lot of money, but the school can afford it because the funds have been appropriate for that.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Exactly. Then my other two challenges are demonstrating my value and also my fresh perspective on life. Just because I'm still in my twenties and I'm in this job. I work with a lot of faculty who are in their forties, fifties or older. So they may see me as a young person and be like, does she really know what she's doing? Kind of thing. And also some faculty don't really see the value in librarians. They just see us as people that are there to maybe teach a class once in a while or buy a book for them if they need it. But it's like I can do much more than that.

What's also been helpful for me is because I do have a STEM background that's given me some kind of credibility with my faculty at least. Because I remember in one of my faculty meetings when I went and introduced myself, one of the faculty members said, "We like that you get us." Because they've had librarians in the past who don't have a science or math background or they're afraid of it and they like that I can come in and I understand them. Because the most librarians you see, they have liberal arts degrees like English or history or foreign language. And those are traditional degrees that you find with librarians. But there's a trend where now people are looking or employers are looking for people who have those subject specific discipline backgrounds and then come into librarianship, so then they know how to talk the talk of everybody.

Kelly Savoie:

And that's a perfect segue to my next question about STEM anxiety, which is a well-researched and documented phenomenon. And do you feel that there are a significant number of non-STEM librarians that have science anxiety? And how do you think that can be changed?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

I think there are. I haven't seen much of the research on that. I'm now curious. But some of the research that I did do when I was a graduate student, I did interview atmospheric science librarians and data managers in particular. And about half of them, granted I had a small population, but about half of them had a liberal arts degree background. Yet they were serving these very hard disciplines. They kind of compared it to learning a new language or learning a new culture. Say we Americans moved to, I don't know, England, France, China, wherever. So it's just that, I think it's because science, at least hard science, is unknown and scary. There's also a lot of unfamiliar terms to people. I mean you can't just go to an English person and be like, "Do you know what a eukaryote is?" Or "Can you find me some sodium bicarbonate?" They'd probably be like, "What are you talking about?" I can even say, "Here's a picture of a and they'll be like, "What the heck is that?"

Kelly Savoie:

But they sound so cool, don't they?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

They do. So I know the fear is out there and it's very real. Even my boss, she served in my role before I came in here to fill a void temporarily. And she does like science, she does, but she does get that the fear is out there. And you also do a little bit of extra work to learn the lingo as well.

Matt Moll:

Could you describe a bit about how STEM librarians are changing the tradition of human's dominated libraries? And how has that been received in the field?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

There's definitely room for improvement, but at least places are starting to take awareness of it so we can make those changes. Some places, the STEM disciplines are neglected. And it's really unfortunate because they deserve just as much TLC as your English majors, your history majors, your business programs and stuff. And my last employer, when I was at Lindsay Wilson College nursing was the biggest program there. It wasn't STEM, their STEM department, it was very small, but nursing was the biggest

program there. And then it's also you have to keep up with the STEM research because it just moves so quickly and advances so quickly that the upkeep is needed. So we need people to serve these disciplines in particular. A lot of people that come in, they tend to be career changers. So I'm one of the, I don't want to say I'm a rare type, but I'm uncommon because a lot of people who come into libraries as a subject specialist, that was their midlife crisis, their midlife point.

So they go back and get that master's degree in library science so they can serve those disciplines. The other thing too is that STEM disciplines, they need a lot more outreach. Because like I had mentioned in a previous answer, the professors and faculty aren't sure what to do with us. They don't realize that we have this whole toolbox available, so we have to educate them to use us. It's a little bit easier in the humanities because your English and history and all your languages, they're always coming into the library to utilize the resources. So the outreach with them isn't as necessary kind of thing. And I kind of hope that answers that question. I also am curious about all of these changes and I'm also still new in this profession. I'm just at the very beginnings of it.

Kelly Savoie:

But there must be a lot of perks for being a librarian and working at a university, you probably get to take advantage of a lot of the things that the university is offering. And in terms of your work-life balance and hours, I know that some libraries are open pretty late. Are there certain hours where the research librarians work and are available? Or is that varied?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Right now, at least at my institution, the subject librarians are only here basically like eight to five. And I've been reading some things where it may be better to extend the hours into the evening because I don't... How many students are actually going to be doing their homework at nine o'clock in the morning? So I've been talking to my boss to seeing if she would maybe let me or let some of us try adjusting our hours. So we come in later and then we stay later, so that way we can target these students. So we'll see where it goes. I'm just still in the discussion process with her on this.

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah, I would think that maybe even one day a week, 12 to eight or something like, that would work. Because I know when I was in college I didn't start homework until much later in the evening. Well and then some of the students have jobs, on campus jobs, and they just don't get out until later. So for students in early career professionals who might be interested after listening to this podcast to having a career as a STEM librarian, what advice do you have for them? What are the things that you maybe wish you had done differently? Or the things that you know did right to guide them?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Well the first thing in my field is you need to have that accredited master's degree from the American Library Association. That's number one. My other advice would be, I have several pieces of advice actually. So one is to be open to moving because especially in the first few years of your career, I mean broadcast meteorologists see this a lot. Even people who go into the National Weather Service see this. You go to somewhere where you don't necessarily want to live. But you need that experience in those places in order to move on and maybe move somewhere that you really want to go. It's all just temporary. Someone gave me this perspective, if you look at your life being 90 years, for example, what's two or three years out of that 90 years to go live away from home or where you're comfortable?

So my other advice is also to not close any doors. If I hadn't taken my job in rural Kentucky, I wouldn't be here today. Also, if I hadn't taken my graduate assistantship and moved blindly to Tennessee, I wouldn't have been in this role either, because all of those things led me up into this moment or this place in this lifetime. And that also leads into being patient, too. Of course, I didn't know how long I was going to be in rural Kentucky, but I had to be patient knowing that's eventually I was going to move on. Whether it was two years, five years down the road kind of thing. Then also getting some kind of customer service experience. Because especially in librarianship, you need to know how to talk to people. You need to know how to think on your feet. You need to know how to work with difficult people or people that are just going to want to need your help all the time.

Kelly Savoie:

I guess you have to be careful that somebody's not like, okay, do it for me. You know what I mean?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

That's like my biggest pet peeve is when I have people come to me and they'll be like, "Do this for me." And it's like, "No, I'm going to show you how to do it and then you're going to show me that you paid attention." Because... That probably sounded wrong. But I'm going to have people... So when people come to me and they want to learn something, I'm not going to do it for them. I'm going to show them how to do it. And then, I'm going to have them demonstrate it back to me that they can do it, too. And we'll do it a couple of times, maybe a couple of different ways. But I feel like you have to do some kind of active learning in that aspect. And that also is helpful if you do really want to be in libraries, try and get some kind of library volunteering, like volunteer to put away books on the weekends or in the nights. If you can get that library assistant job, go for it. Anything helps.

And then I guess my last piece of advice is start participating in the conversations. One of the ways that I was able to stay with at least atmospheric science librarians was that I stayed in the conversation with the Atmospheric Science Librarians International. And then last year I got roped into being vice-chair elect, which ended up also being program conference chair for the upcoming meeting in Denver. So staying involved that way helps, too. I also jumped on a bunch of listservs that I found on Discord, which is like a messaging platform no one's familiar with. I've really liked it. And I learned about a lot of different things from a lot of different people from not just the US but all over the world.

Matt Moll:

We're so grateful for everything you told us about your career. However, before you go we always ask our guests one final question at the end of our show. So what is your favorite band?

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

My favorite band? I like to think that I was born in the wrong decade with my taste of music.

Kelly Savoie:

Me, too.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

I partially put this on my dad because he was a child of the late seventies and eighties, so there was a lot of classic rock going on. So I really loved the Eagles and I love ACDC. You'll find those the most on my playlist plus other bands that are of that genre.

Kelly Savoie:

Yeah, I think I read that, I love the Eagles too and I've seen them in concert a few times, and they sound so good live. I don't know if you've ever seen them live, but they just sound exactly like their albums. But I think I saw like that they have the highest selling album of all time. Or they're in the top like couple of highest selling artists.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Probably. I don't know. I love Hotel Cal, I love the guitar solo in Hotel California so much that I made it my bring tones. That way I can hear it anywhere in my house because it's that loud.

Kelly Savoie:

Thanks so much for joining us, Ashley, and sharing your work experiences with us.

Ashley Orehek-Rossi:

Oh, thank you. Anytime. And if anyone needs to needs it to reach out for anything, just let me know. You can find me at Western Kentucky University.

Matt Moll:

Well, that's our show for today. Please join us next time, rain or shine. Clear Skies Ahead: Conversations about Careers in Meteorology and Beyond is a podcast by the American Meteorological Society. Our show is edited by Peter Trepke. Technical direction is provided by Peter Killelea. Our theme music is composed and performed by Steve Savoie, and the show is hosted by Matt Moll and Kelly Savoie. You can learn more about the show online at www.aetsoc.org/clearskies. And you can contact us at skypodcast@aetsoc.org if you have any feedback or would like to become a future guest.