

TCEQ EMPLOYEE

SPOTLIGHT

STEPHEN DAVIS: FINDING A PLACE

TCEQ's Air Modeling Manager Is Where He Was Meant to Be

Young people often defy society's expectations because they haven't yet learned the limitations they are supposed to adhere to.

This was especially the case for Stephen Davis, who is currently manager of the Air Modeling and Data Analysis Section of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

As a black youth growing up in segregated South Carolina in the 1960s, Davis memorably crossed the barrier that kept many others like him "in their places."

One day, while Davis was out walking, he saw his town's public library. Its hidden treasures beckoned to the bookworm, who was obsessed with science fiction. He went in and naturally got a library card.

This seemingly routine act by a black child was actually unheard of in the friendly town of Westminster in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the northwestern corner of the state. Even though everyone knew everyone else, the town was still divided across racial lines, with whites living on one side and blacks on the other.

When he arrived back home with his bundle of books tucked under his arm, he got a surprised reaction, he says. "My mother was like, 'You did what?'"

And that is how the town's library officially became integrated.

Davis, who has five brothers and two sisters, was also obsessed with the news, and engaged with his school. He was



Stephen Davis explains that Texas is a leader in air modeling because funding from the Legislature allows the TCEQ to be able to buy what it needs to produce the highest-quality science, such as the powerful computing hardware that he is standing in front of.

co-editor of his high school newspaper and was a member of the team that put together the yearbook.

The integration of public schools, especially high school, opened a lot of doors, he says.

Davis was determined to win a college scholarship and see the world outside Westminster: "I wanted to have the opportunity to participate in a lot more things.

"For me, it worked out."

Now that he has traveled considerably since leaving his hometown for the University of South Carolina in the 1970s, he could not imagine living the small-town life



Stephen Davis gets in position to see the landing of the space shuttle Columbia at Edwards Air Force Base in 1981. There was a great deal of excitement surrounding the completion of the first space shuttle's first mission. Davis wrote a story about it for the base newspaper.

again. While he does visit his family back in Westminster often, Austin, where he has lived for the last 28 years, is home.

A Successful Manager

Davis, who is now 60, started working for the TCEQ in 1989 at one of its predecessor agencies—the Texas Air Control Board—and has been with the TCEQ ever since.

In the TCEQ's Air Modeling and Data Analysis Section, Davis has 30 or so people who report to him, including the agency's air modeling scientists and other technicians. His section does air modeling and air quality research to help the state comply with environmental laws and to help the TCEQ and lawmakers make informed decisions about rules and policy.

"There is a need for modeling and for an understanding of where pollution comes from and how much needs to be reduced," Davis says. "We are seen as trailblazers in modeling and research."

His staff, which includes nationally known experts, has to make sense of complex air quality issues, especially ozone. While a lot of atmospheric ozone is caused by emissions from human activities, much of it is natural—trees are a source of emissions—and that has to be accounted for in the modeling process.

"Steve truly excels not only in his ability to lead highly technical staff and programs, but also in communicating the issues and work to any audience," says David Brymer, director of the Air Quality Division. "It has been and continues to be an honor and a lot of fun to work with Steve. We could not be happier with his work."

As evidenced by their low turnover rate, his staff are also very happy with Davis' management style.

"He does a first-rate job," says Dr. Jim Price, an air modeling scientist who has been with the agency since 1973. "He's the best supervisor I have ever had."

Davis says that it is important that his scientists and technical experts are given



Stephen Davis, manager of the Air Modeling and Data Analysis Section, and Weining Zhao, who is the computer expert for the section, discuss the blade server that they use for air modeling. The server combines the computing power of 50 computers. "It makes it possible for us to turn around answers faster than contractors," Davis says.

the freedom to do their jobs without any expectations of what the results on their air modeling analysis should be.

"What works for me as a manager is to give people freedom—within reason—to do their jobs," he says. "Listening to people is so important. If people feel like they are heard and valued, they feel respected. It may sound like a cliché, but it really is the case."

He also says that he makes certain that his staff understands that he will not punish them when they make mistakes.

"There is not a fear factor," he says, adding that it is important for staff to be able to learn from their mistakes.

He also encourages staff to cross-train and learn each other's jobs. In this way, staff members are able to find out what they are really good at and like to do.

"My folks are all about the science and the facts. They are as good as any in the country," he says. "There is never any pressure from anybody in the agency to come up with a particular scientific conclusion."

State support has given the TCEQ the necessary funds to support advanced training and to buy the technology that is necessary for complex air modeling.

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—David Brymer, Director, Air Quality Division

"I give credit to state leadership," he says, adding that various programs and legislation have contributed to the state making significant progress on the air quality front.

That has been possible because "the state has spent money on science."

An Unplanned Career Path

For as long as he can remember, Davis wanted to be a journalist. As with thousands of other young people during that time, this desire only intensified with the phenomenal and nearly implausible efforts by *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in 1972 that exposed the details behind the Watergate scandal during President Richard Nixon's administration.

"When I was in college, journalism schools were huge," he says.

But newspaper journalism would not be his path. After graduating with a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of South Carolina, in 1978, Davis joined the Air Force and became a public-affairs specialist. During his 10-year military career that saw him rise to become a captain, he was stationed in California, New York, Florida, Alaska, and Texas.

Davis' first duty station was at Edwards Air Force Base in California and this period included the most memorable news event that he has been involved in. In 1981, NASA successfully completed the start of its reusable-spacecraft program with the landing of the space shuttle Columbia at Edwards.

He also served at Bergstrom Air Force Base in Austin, which he loved. So after the completion of his military career, Davis returned to Austin. And he was hired as director of media relations at the Texas Air Control Board.

"It was a small agency," he says, but it had a huge challenge coming its way when the Clean Air Act was amended by Congress in 1990.

The changes included new rules for air permitting and addressed such concerns as ozone-layer depletion and acid rain.

"Getting out and educating industry and the public was a challenge," Davis says.



While at the Texas Air Control Board, Stephen Davis (center), director of media relations, joined his co-workers during a visit to the state Capitol in the early 1990s to promote the Smoking Vehicle Program, which is still in operation today at the TCEQ.

In 1993, the Texas Air Control Board and the Texas Water Commission merged to form the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission. Now working for the larger, more comprehensive environmental agency, Davis missed dealing exclusively with air issues, which he was now passionate about.

However, when the TNRCC was tasked with implementing an air emissions testing program for vehicles that was intentionally separated from regular safety inspections, he was put in charge of the public outreach.

But after a year into the controversial program, the Texas Legislature killed it,

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— Stephen Davis

and the EPA backed off on the requirement. The TNRCC reassigned staff who were involved in the program, and in 1999 Davis was offered a position as a team leader in the air modeling program. He has been there since, and is now section manager.

"My career path has never been one I could have laid out for myself," he says. "I have been very lucky." 🇺🇸



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