



Frank Gonzalez (1939-Present)

Leader and Chief Scientist

**Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory
(PMEL)
National Oceanic and Atmospheric
Administration**

“Everybody is dedicated here, so there is no question that our work makes a difference.” Frank González, 2004.

Overview

Frank I. Gonzalez earned his Ph.D. in physical oceanography from the University of Hawaii in 1975 and joined PMEL two years later. In 1984 he received NOAA's highest award for outstanding scientific research--the NOAA Administrator's Award--for his work on hazardous ocean waves. He has participated in field surveys and documentation of three devastating tsunamis that occurred in Nicaragua 1992, Indonesia 1992 and Japan 1993.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

Frank González was born in 1939 to the late Frank González Sr., a sheet metal worker, and Catherine Sanchez González, a piece worker in a box factory. He grew up in San Antonio, Texas with his parents and younger brother and sister. González remembers educational opportunities being very limited and extremely expensive in San Antonio when he was coming of age. Consequently, after completing high school in 1957, he enlisted in the Marine Corps for three years. González was stationed at a base in Guantanamo Bay. Marines were not allowed to leave the base due to poor relations with Cuba, so the soldiers turned to recreational water sports such as snorkeling and scuba diving for entertainment. By participating in these sports, González became fascinated with the ocean. Although he did not know it at the time, he would turn his fascination with the sea into a career.

After his time with the Marine Corps, González attended St. Mary's University in San Antonio where he studied Physics. He says he was “heavy into the hard sciences,” but eventually grew tired of working with things that he could not touch. Soon after, he decided to pursue another course of work in physical

oceanography. Through this scientific study, González was able to apply his expertise of physics to the ocean. González accepted a research assistantship with the department of oceanography at the University of Hawaii, where he was later awarded a master's degree in 1971 for his study of tropical estuarine physics, and a Ph.D. in 1974 for his work on long ocean wave theory.

Career

According to González, scientists are governed in large part by the research that they do, the papers they publish and the leadership responsibilities that they take on. These are all factors that have led to his promotions. In 1977, he accepted his present position with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory (PMEL) in Seattle, Washington, where his research has focused on the observation and understanding of hazardous ocean waves of all types. He is currently Leader and Chief Scientist of the PMEL Tsunami Research Program and has succeeded in establishing the first deep-sea tsunami-monitoring network on the bottom of the northeastern portion of the Pacific Ocean. PMEL staff work with state governments and state scientists to develop observational systems and Tsunami Forecast systems to reduce the hazards that tsunamis pose to people who live on the coast. In addition to his domestic work, González has extended his expertise overseas.

In 1984, he received NOAA's highest award for outstanding research--the NOAA Administrator's Award--for his work on hazardous ocean waves. He was an integral part of the field surveys done after the tsunamis that devastated Nicaragua, Indonesia, and Japan.

Highlights

Frank González says that he has had many highlights throughout his career. He is proud that PMEL won a NOAA gold medal for tsunami research. He also says that his experience with Seasat was fascinating; Seasat was the first Earth-orbiting satellite designed for remote sensing of the Earth's oceans that housed the first space-borne synthetic aperture radar (SAR). González continues to work in the environmental field because his research team tasks are very important. They are a part of an effort to save property and lives. It is a worthwhile effort in his opinion. "Everybody here is dedicated, so there is no question that our work makes a difference."

Importance of Mentoring to Career

As for those people who have helped him get to where he is today, González believes that his master's and Ph.D. advisors were his mentors. He says that they shaped his scientific and life philosophies. Now he serves as a mentor to the people who work for him. He makes an effort to hire women and minorities on his research team and gives them advice on topics ranging from life issues to career strategies. He is proud of his relationship with his team; it allows him to be both a mentor and a supervisor to them. He makes it a point to give his employees challenging work and rewards them generously for their hard work and effort. González also supports diversity through his membership in the Society for Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science (SACNAS).

So far, González cannot cite a low point in his career. He is very satisfied that he has made a contribution and that his work has always been interesting and exciting. He simply says, "You're always learning, so that's been good."