



## **Neasha Graves**

Environmental Education and  
Program Coordinator

**UNC Environment Initiative**

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### **Overview**

Neasha Graves, ERP Environmental Health Educator, coordinates outreach on environmental health and environmentally-related diseases for various audiences throughout the state. Ms. Graves serves on the board of the Environmental Education Fund and as the chair of the Environmental Committee for the Asthma Alliance of NC. Prior to joining the ERP, she was a public health program consultant for the NC Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention Program in the NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources. She also worked with the NC Office of Environmental Education and as a high school social studies teacher.

*This interview was conducted in 2010.*

### **Early Life and Education**

Neasha Graves, born February 12, 1971, currently serves as the Environmental Health Education and Program Coordinator at the UNC Institute for the Environment. Graves grew up in Chatham County, North Carolina. In 1993, Graves obtained her BA in history at Meredith College in Raleigh, NC. In 2000, she obtained her MPA at North Carolina Central. Graves' first job was as a social studies teacher. Teaching this subject, she began exploring issues of social justice along with state and federal government policy.

Growing up, Graves' uncles taught science and education, teaching her how critical the environment was to survival and the value of the environment from an agricultural perspective. She was given the

opportunity to pursue a state government fellowship working for the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources. She was hired in the Division of Environmental Health to promote environmental education. With this fellowship she was able to promote environmental education in minority and low-income populations.

## **Career**

Currently, Graves works as the Environmental Health Education and Program Coordinator for the Environmental Resource Program (ERP) Outreach and Public Service Unit for the UNC Institute for the Environment. In whatever manner necessary, Graves uses her title to provide environmental health education to the general public. “The goal is to make sure people see the connection between the environment and their health,” states Graves. She pushes for a “comprehensive meaning of environment.” She teaches community workshops, offers teacher and student training, does program planning, and creates public service announcements for local television and radio stations. She is also interested in drawing a connection between environmental researchers and the general public. In the past, she has worked with researchers to bridge the gap between academic and public knowledge concerning air quality indicators.

Graves promotes environmental education opportunities to communities of color, while also trying to provide environmental education resources for low income communities. Graves has recently begun working with African American churches. She believes that faith-based outreach is an effective way for advocating for environmental justice issues. She has led health and environmental education workshops at many churches and continues to network with these congregations.

## **Highlights**

The highlight of Graves’ career has been working for a university-based program. Although she never knew it would be working for an environmental program, Graves always wanted to pursue an opportunity to work in the college setting. She states, “It is wonderful to work in a place that promotes the thirst and longing for knowledge, while promoting that knowledge to children and adults throughout North Carolina.” The lowest point of Graves’ career occurred when she quit teaching in the classroom. She even cried on the day she decided to resign, not knowing if she would have the opportunity to teach again.

Graves has continued with a career in the environmental field because she believes there are so many environmental issues that should be taught to people. She hopes the education she provides can improve someone else’s life. She loves that she gets to learn something new every day and then share that information with other people from various backgrounds. Graves delivers her own opinion of education stating, “I just cannot think of anything more critical to vulnerable populations than education. There is nothing more precious than that.”

The most significant achievement that Graves believes she has achieved was becoming an educator because she was close to applying to law school instead. She believes if she had not fallen in love with teaching in those first five years of teaching, she would not be an educator today.

## **Importance of Mentoring to Career**

Teaching mentors led Graves to be more dedicated to teaching early on in her career. Henry Foust and Virginia Daniel acted as her teachers and her mentors. Also, her mother, aunts, and uncles, also teachers, inspired her to dedicate her life to teaching. In college, Carolyn Grubbs, her history professor, pushed her to consider all options when assessing career goals. Graves believes this guidance has a lot to do with why she decided to explore the environmental field in the first place. She also accredits Kathleen Gray, her current advisor, as a mentor because of the freedom and support she gives to her employees to be creative in efforts to help populations who lack environmental education resources.

## **Advice to Young Professionals**

When asked what advice Graves would give to minorities considering a career in the environmental field she states, "Take every opportunity you can to learn about as many opportunities as you can. Don't close the door on any opportunity that is sitting in front of you. With issues in the environment, the opportunities can only expand, so take them because it will only grow for you."