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By Brendan O'Meara

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Rodan The Weatherman



WETM Forecaster Chip Maxham Overcame a Stutter to Become a Star, with a Little Help From a Godzilla Character

By Brendan O'Meara

When talking to people about Chip Maxham, forty-one years old, the chief meteorologist for WETM-TV in Elmira, there are words like “cool,” “family guy,” “community-minded,” “awesome,” “honest,” “guts,” and, maybe even a little bit “shy.”

That latter description may come as a bit of a surprise to those who presuppose that television personalities are, in many if not all ways, extroverted. This may be the case with some, and even speaking with Maxham you get the idea that being shy and introverted is the default, out-of-the-box software running his computer. The words are all upright, lowercase, demonstrative, clear, but not...inflated.

But then there's a little switch, call it a red light, the producer's fingers Three...Two...One...Point, and something changes. Suddenly the voice doesn't feel as slow-traffic-right-lane-only, it zips into the far left lane and sounds commanded, damn near regal, “Hey, it looks like this storm is going to get here on Thursday morning, and it's going to have some rain, but it's going to be to our south. And by Friday as it gets colder there could be some snow.”

Which feels like it comes out of nowhere, but you feel like a Hall of Fame pitcher just used his fastball on you and you watched it whiz by you, hit the mitt, and all you can do is stare in awe of what you just saw, this alchemical transformation before your very eyes.

A longtime friend of Maxham, Jason Law, who started out in the business with Maxham in Greenville, Mississippi, and now works for a station in Boston, Massachusetts, says, “They think that everybody on television has to be an extrovert, they have to be comfortable with it. Talking in front of people is hard to do. Just because he's on camera doesn't mean you don't get nerves. He had to overcome that. I always remember that about him, thought that was really cool.”

And it wasn't overcoming shyness, per se, that Maxham endured on his long frequent-flyer-laden journey from Virginia (home), to Georgia (undergrad), to Florida (graduate school), to Mississippi (work), to South Carolina (work), to Texas (Wichita Falls, work, met future wife), back to Virginia (work), then back

to Texas (El Paso, oldest daughter born, also work) until he settled into the Twin Tiers region (where his second daughter was born, and...work) in 2012.

It was something far more taxing and far more brave when you consider how far he's come after knowing where he began. And we're not talking miles.

You soon find when talking to people who choose weather as a vocation that they were nearly genetically predisposed to the trade. As a kid, Maxham loved watching storms, and if he knew it was going to snow, he'd run outside every fifteen minutes to check for snowflakes falling from the sky.

He also remembers watching the local news during dinners with his family in Lynchburg, Virginia, and watching Charles Middleton deliver that evening's weather forecast.

“I would pay attention to what he had to say,” Maxham says. “I guess I idolized him. I thought that was such a cool thing to do.”

So when Middleton visited Maxham's elementary school, naturally Maxham was on the edge of his seat in the school cafeteria listening to Middleton tell them about how he measures atmospheric temperatures and how he, along with his team, forecast the weather.

Suddenly the key to the sky was put before him. Up there in swirls of clouds, down in the crashing waves, tornados funneling, and hurricanes making landfall, was something measurable, something elemental, and, with enough skill, knowledge, and experience, something predictable.

“I really was interested in why we had snow or why we would have a thunderstorm,” Maxham says.

Maxham would play with his sister and he took his Rodan toy—a pterodactyl in the Godzilla franchise symbolizing the Soviet nuclear threat—soaring this little figurine around the sky: Rodan the Local Weatherman.

In order to fully embrace a possible career as an on-air weatherman, Maxham had to deal with a speech impediment that would be patently unacceptable as the face of a television station's forecast.

“I grew up with the worst stutter,” Maxham says. “It made me

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Gateway to the Dark Skies

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uncomfortable speaking in front of people. I didn't have a lot of friends. I was shy. Kids are cruel, and there's nothing you can do about it. What makes a stutter harder, sometimes the harder you try to say something the harder it will be. When you put yourself in a public-speaking-type situation, it's extra difficult."

Maxham would learn that Bill Walton, an NBA Hall of Famer, a two-time NBA champion and a two-time NCAA champion, dealt with a similar speech impediment and eventually became a broadcaster after his career ended as player. Even as a star for the UCLA Bruins in the early- to mid-1970s, Walton—who stands at six-foot-eleven-inches tall—experienced shaming and ridicule from his peers in a college speech class.

"When I had to actually formulate words and make a statement," Walton told damelionetwork.com, "I could not do it at all."

Walton became a hero for Maxham.

"I've never heard him speak with a stutter," Maxham says, "but apparently he had a really bad stutter growing up. He went into broadcast and has a very smooth voice. I don't want to say that I was directly inspired by him, but I was aware of his background as a stutterer and how he got past it. It made me feel a little more confident that I could do it, that these other people could do it. I didn't want to be an adult stuttering. It puts you at a disadvantage socially, and it's hard to get dates if you can't talk to girls."

"He had a stuttering problem," says David Margolin, who met Maxham in the Florida State University graduate program. He also says, "I'll be honest. I was skeptical that he could overcome it and become a TV meteorologist. That wasn't a minor thing. You knew after talking to him for two minutes that he had that problem."

So, instead of hiding behind the camera, instead of hunching behind a computer screen and letting emails do all the talking, Maxham did something far more audacious and put his voice on air.

"He doesn't stammer or stutter at all," Law says. "He'll stammer in a conversation with me, but when he's on air, he overcomes that. If you didn't know him and you were watching him on TV, I don't think you would know. It takes a lot of guts."

At FSU, Maxham worked out some kinks while studying the nature of hurricanes making landfall. He soon took his first job in Greenville, Mississippi, a place where he reported (Maxham split time as a weatherman and reporter) doctors—who performed free medical screenings—saying "We come to Haiti, Africa, and here."

Prior to Maxham's first weather broadcast, a Saturday night, he had all day to stew over his first professional appearance.

College football ran late that day, so that meant he had to wait far longer and think about this crucial, maiden broadcast. "Terrifying, I was frightened," Maxham says.

He continues, "I was really tight, really nervous, and I held my arms close to my body like a Tyrannosaurus Rex, like I was giving myself a hug. I remember practicing beforehand, and I watched [the tape] a couple years ago. It was pretty bad.

"One thing I do remember: I made a prediction, 'It could rain by early tomorrow morning.' After that show, which was like the ten o'clock news, I left the studio and it was raining. I didn't get the forecast wrong; I got the current conditions wrong. So that was another lesson. Look outside before you go on TV.

Check the window."

Those years in Greenville provided the requisite experience any budding broadcaster needed. In 2005, after Hurricane Katrina annihilated Louisiana, Hurricane Rita, a storm every bit as strong as Katrina, followed on her coattails heading straight for Mississippi.

The weather team couldn't go live with a van because of the extreme winds. Maxham chose to do live updates from the parking lot of the news station, looking up into the clouds that appeared to be swirling in ever more unsettling circles. A wall cloud—a cloud that will, at times, become tornadic—passed overhead.

"Later that day a tornado came out of that swarm and went through a trailer park," Maxham says. "Someone was hurt in the buildings. It was the first time when I felt a connection to what I did and real people. That thing I saw hurt somebody a half-mile away. It was definitely humbling."

Law, who worked with Maxham in those early days in Greenville, says, "I remember he was outside. He was describing it on camera with this long cord. He had this long cable, he started getting excited for the rotation in the clouds."

That excitement is echoed by David Margolin. He says, "I don't think I'm alone on this, as almost for as long as I can remember, being like six years old, I had a thing for weather. It stood out even then. It was odd or different. I remember my mom yelling me to turn off the Weather Channel, bringing a thermometer to school to see if rain was changing to snow, sneaking to check the thermometers, driving up to nearby mountains an hour away to see if there was snow, driving friends crazy having sleepovers and it was snowing going outside every twenty minutes. My mom or dad were not weather wienies. That was me. Now being in the field, I don't think that my case is isolated."

No, it's not. Once there was a kid who played with a toy pterodactyl named Rodan the Local Weatherman.

As luck would have it, and as is the nature of local TV journalism, Maxham bounced around and eventually landed in Wichita Falls, Texas, where he met his future wife, Micaela. They now have two young girls—Felix, four, and Noel, three.

But back in Wichita Falls, Micaela's hometown, before the girls, Maxham and Micaela were co-workers at the local station.

"I was a reporter doing weekends, start the day with the morning show," Micaela says. "Chip would fill in. We would do shows together. Met him when I was there. I worked for a year before working for the city. I loved it. Being from a small town, I'd probably still be there if it wasn't for Chip. I grew up watching the local station, and left the station for the public information office and worked with the city officials I once interviewed."

Micaela admired how Maxham overcame his speech impediment to become a weatherman, something she would not have been comfortable doing. She has seen him become more community-minded now that the Maxhams have settled into the Twin Tiers.

Micaela, who volunteers at the First United Methodist Church on Broad Street in Horseheads, says, "Before, as a young, aspiring weatherman, it's career first. It's community too, now. He has children. It's not 'go to the next market.' It's lay down some roots."

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Alternate super powers: Chip's wife, Micaela (pictured with daughters, Felix and Noel) says his original focus was career, but settling down has brought forth new interests—community and family.

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And being more settled has allowed Maxham to not only hone his own craft, but to help and mentor others. Marissa Perlman, who got her start at WETM-TV and now works as a reporter in Buffalo, New York, says, "Chip is great. He has a lot of experience in the business. So when we first met it was my first job. He had been all over the country, so I definitely knew I was going to learn a lot about the business in general. Chip has this awesome, dry, sarcastic personality, so we hit it off right away."

Perlman, like anyone grinding away in daily journalism, was often pulled off the ledge of law school and other careers that tend to pirate the jaded, worn down, underpaid and undervalued journalist.

"Alternative career paths were definitely discussed, the lows of lows," Perlman says. "He would tell me 'You're good, you're going to go far.' He was a real confidence booster. He helped me put together resume tapes. I'm working in Buffalo; that's 150 market jump [in ratings]. I appreciated his support more than I can tell you. It's stressful. I would go back and forth and different career options and next steps. He would advise, not pushing me in any direction. He had confidence in me."

Just by watching Maxham, she realized what makes an on-air personality of that nature, successful.

"I think that viewers can relate to

Chip," Perlman says. "He is someone that when you watch on television you can see somebody you can welcome into your home every night. He's likable. He's just like me. He's my family member, cousin, uncle, brother, never pretending to be somebody he's not. He's very much Chip and he knows what he's talking about. Second, he's knowledgeable about weather. He knows what he doing. He studies. He's passionate."

Nicole Phillips, who moved to Elmira from Kansas City (and is subsequently back in Kansas City), took her first job under Maxham's leadership at WETM-TV. Maxham hired Phillips and said she made him "look good."

"I think for me it was the whole confidence thing—gaining it that I can do this every day because I have to," she says, "It was horrible at first. I didn't understand the weather as much as I would like. He was always there and supportive about it."

Just as Maxham attacked his speech impediment by going into broadcasting, Phillips went into weather as a way to approach her fear of tornados. Growing up in Kansas City, she often took shelter from violent twisters.

"I was afraid of tornados growing up," Phillips says. "It was me wanting to know more, and why those happen was the thing for me. I can remember a tornado when I was nine, terrified having to take shelter. Why do these happen? Why other areas

don't? That fear turned into curiosity. Some people thrive on things they're not good at and that propels them to what they want to do. I remember being so terrified, and crying all the time. I really wanted to know more. I think it might be the drive. 'I need to get over this.'"

Where once Maxham sought out the mentors, he now appears to be making that impact on those around him. Not too long ago, he visited a local school, and stood up in front of the kids and talked about weather models and how meteorologists measure air temperature and predict the weather. The science and technology has come a long way the past several decades.

Looking out over the crowd of children, he found his touchstone. He'd tell them about Madden NFL, the iconic video game, and how the game has changed in fifteen years, which to second graders is like forever ago.

Maxham told them, "If you watch somebody play it, it didn't look very realistic. As you get more information about the different players nowadays, when that game is made they know every detail about every player. They know how old they are, how quickly they get tired, what they're good at, and of course, within all the rules of the game, it makes a more realistic looking game. If you were to watch it, it would be pretty much like real life. The weather forecasting models are kind of like Madden NFL. As the computers get smarter you can make them look real, make the game and the forecast like real life."

And like how Charles Middleton inspired Maxham over thirty years ago, there could be a seven- or eight-year-old boy or girl in that audience looking up at this TV star—because that's what he is—and maybe they'll take their figurines and their dolls and they'll hold them high in the sky, silhouetted against the clouds, wondering what may fall to the ground and why.

Award-winning writer Brendan O'Meara is the author of *Six Weeks in Saratoga: How Three-Year-Old Filly Rachel Alexandra Beat the Boys and Became Horse of the Year.*



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