LAURA KONG | Director, UNESCO/IOC–NOAA International Tsunami Information Center (l.kong@unesco.org)

Degree: When, where, what, and what in?

I received my bachelor of science degree in physics and mathematics from Brown University in 1983 and then worked at the Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory for one year in the multichannel marine seismology group. I earned my PhD in marine seismology in 1990 from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology/Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution Joint Program in Oceanography.

Did you stay in academia at all, and if so, for how long?

I was involved in research for a total of about eight to nine years before taking my current position.

How did you go about searching for a job outside of the university setting?

I found that talking to co-workers in my field of interest, visiting and talking to universities and government agencies involved in disciplines I was interested in, and simply looking at job openings posted online were the most effective way to see what was available.

Is this the only job (post-academia) that you've had? If not, what else did you do?

After completing my PhD, I did a one-year postdoc at the Earthquake Research Institute, University of Tokyo, in their marine seismology group. I then took a position for two years with the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center as a geophysicist, followed by two years at the US Geological Survey Hawaiian Volcano Observatory where I did research in volcano seismology. I then decided to go back to mainstream academia and so took a research position at the University of Hawaii, Hawaii Institute of Geophysics, where I continued my work in marine seismology. As a change of pace, I next took a job as an environmental specialist in Hawaii with the Federal Highway Administration, US Department of Transportation, where I worked on and mitigated impacts on the environment where highways were to be built. In 2001, I took a job with the International Tsunami Information Center job and have been there ever since.

What is your current job? What path did you take to get there?

I am the Director of the International Tsunami Information Center. Prior to taking the position, I held a number of different jobs, almost all related to earthquakes or tsunamis, in which I built up a lot of different skills, experience, and knowledge that I use in my job today.

What did your oceanographic education (or academic career) give you that is useful in your current job?

My academic experience provided me with skills on how to investigate questions; where and how to collect, access, analyze, and interpret data; and how to present these results in scientific and public meetings in oral and written formats. In addition, I also was able to make professional contacts that are valuable for my current work.

Is the job satisfying? What aspects of the job do you like best/least?

The job is satisfying because it provides opportunities to develop new programs and activities that are directly guiding and helping countries to improve and start their tsunami warning and mitigation systems. The job allows me to travel to many countries because the center provides assistance not only to Pacific countries, but globally. We are often immediately involved after destructive tsunamis and work with the affected countries to help improve their warning systems. Unfortunately, my office staff is small, and budgets to provide assistance are very modest, so it can be frustrating because we are only able to provide a minimum of assistance.

Do you have any recommendations for new grads looking for jobs?

Permanent jobs in the US government can be difficult to obtain in Earth science fields, and in general they may be underpaid compared to academia or

to the private sector. However, the job is usually secure and can be very satisfying as it does offer opportunities for leading important programs that have national and international impact.