

The Weatherman Who Tried to Bring Climate Science to a Red State

Chris Gloninger said he was hired to talk about global warming in his forecasts. That's when things heated up.



By Cara Buckley

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In 2021, Chris Gloninger, a television weatherman in Boston with a passion for climate science, was approached with an intriguing prospect. Would he consider a job as chief meteorologist at a television station in Des Moines?

It was a smaller market, and talk of global warming would be challenging in a politically conservative state. But research from 2020 showed that most Iowans were interested in news about climate change, and the state was a leader in wind energy. Mr. Gloninger's weather forecasts could be a breakthrough.

An interview with the station's news director, Allison Smith, clinched it. The station, KCCI, wanted to amp up climate coverage, Mr. Gloninger said he was told, not least because agriculture was so important in the state.

In announcing Mr. Gloninger's hiring to the newsroom, Ms. Smith highlighted his extensive climate coverage. Another meteorologist who was considered for the same job, Matt Serwe, said that in his interview with KCCI, coverage of global warming was underscored. "My big takeaway was that there's going to be a lot of climate involved," said Mr. Serwe, now a meteorologist at KSTP in St. Paul, Minn.

In the spring of 2021, Mr. Gloninger and his wife sold their house in Boston and relocated to a graceful ranch house on the outskirts of Des Moines.

For some in Iowa, news that KCCI had hired a chief meteorologist to talk about climate science seemed heaven sent. Channing Dutton, a longtime climate activist and personal injury lawyer in Des Moines, likened Mr. Gloninger's arrival to "a thunderclap among the climate community."

Mr. Dutton organized a welcome lunch, and the pair grew close. Mr. Gloninger would come to call Mr. Dutton, who is 69, "my Iowa dad."

Yet Mr. Dutton privately wondered how long Mr. Gloninger might last. Over 60 percent of corn grown in Iowa goes into producing ethanol, a biofuel that's been touted as environmentally friendly, but that recent research has found to be worse for climate change than burning gasoline.

"Ethanol is king. Raising corn is king," Mr. Dutton said. "Anything that would affect the fairy tale that ethanol is a safe fuel is going to generate huge pushback."

Mr. Gloninger arrived in Des Moines armed with data, buoyed by optimism, and driven by an almost missionary zeal.

"We thought it would be total chaos," Mr. Dutton said, "and lead to exactly what it led to."



KCCI in Des Moines. Kathryn Gamble for The New York Times

A hurricane left him speechless

Bright-eyed and poised, Mr. Gloninger has the vibe of a Boy Scout and seems younger than his 39 years. He grew up in Sag Harbor, Long Island, and knew from an early age that he wanted to forecast weather. He studied meteorology at Plymouth State University, and an internship with WABC in Manhattan led to television jobs in Rochester, Saginaw, Mich., Albany and Milwaukee, where he met his future wife, Cathy. Along the way, he won three Emmys.

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A turning point came when Mr. Gloninger covered Hurricane Sandy's devastating landfall in New York City, and saw how floods and fires demolished entire neighborhood blocks in the Rockaways. "I was just left speechless," he said. "I knew we should be doing more." He began threading mentions of global warming into his weather forecasts, and in 2020, launched a series at NBC10 Boston called "Adjusting to Climate Change" with the producer Matthew Glasser.

"If you want Chris on your team, you're getting Chris the meteorologist and Chris the climate scientist," Mr. Glasser said. "I don't think you can separate the two. They're one and the same."

Channing Dutton, a longtime climate activist and personal injury lawyer in Des Moines. Mr. Gloninger calls him his “Iowa dad.” Kathryn Gamble for The New York Times

First pushback, and then a threat

Harsh audience feedback is part of journalism, though meteorologists often fare worse when their forecasts miss the mark. “This is a community where people are always telling us how wrong we are,” said Bernadette Woods Placky, chief meteorologist at Climate Central, a nonprofit research and communications group that focuses on climate change.

In Iowa, Mr. Gloninger expected pushback. But he tried to talk about global warming in ways that would resonate with viewers.

“I really thought that this could be an opportunity to, as clichéd as it sounds, make a difference in a part of the country where, after four years of Trump, the issue had become quite politicized,” Mr. Gloninger said.

In his broadcasts, he spoke about how shifting away from fossil fuels would be cheaper than the multibillion dollar losses from extreme weather that have hit Iowa. He described how installing a wind turbine could offset crop losses. Meanwhile, signs of climate havoc abounded. In December 2021, as Mr. Gloninger’s first winter in Iowa approached, the state experienced record breaking heat and broke a state record for the most tornadoes in a single day.

And though Mr. Gloninger often received angry emails from viewers accusing him of pushing political views, he shrugged it off, believing that the station had his back.

“They wanted it,” he said. “I mean, they asked me to do it.”

But in June 2022, Ms. Smith, the news director, invited him to lunch. She told him that viewers were saying they just wanted the forecast, not the science behind weather, Mr. Gloninger recalled. They also wanted to hear a whole lot less about climate change.

Mr. Gloninger was devastated. He was still reeling when, a week later, menacing emails began arriving in his inbox. One accused Mr. Gloninger of “pushing nothing but a Biden hoax.” Another called Mr. Gloninger “a worthless Biden puppet, a liar, a conspiracy theorist, and an idiot.”

Then a threat arrived. “We conservative Iowans would like to give you an Iowan welcome you will never forget, kinda like the libtards gave Judge Kavanaugh,” it read.

Weeks earlier, a man carrying a gun, a knife and zip ties had been arrested near Justice Brett M. Kavanaugh’s home after threatening to murder the judge. Panicked, Mr. Gloninger called the police.

Emmys and other recognitions in Mr. Gloninger’s home office on Cape Cod. Cassandra Klos for The New York Times

A ‘polarizing’ phrase

At first, Mr. Gloninger said, the station offered support. It hired a security guard to stand outside KCCI and to accompany Mr. Gloninger to the Iowa State Fair. Mr. Gloninger and his wife installed an alarm system at home. Still, he’d find himself scanning the crowds when he and his wife went to the farmer’s market or out for dinner.

In August 2022, the police tracked down the man who'd sent the menacing emails, Danny Hancock, then 63. In a recording of a phone call with a local detective, which Mr. Gloninger obtained and shared with the Times, Mr. Hancock was contrite.

"I sure don't mean nothing by it. I guess I just express my opinion," he told the detective. "I apologize sincerely, and he's — he's doing his job." Mr. Hancock did not respond to requests for comment. He pleaded guilty to third-degree harassment, according to the Iowa Capital Dispatch, and was fined \$180.75. By that time, Mr. Gloninger had sought help from a therapist, who had diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Meanwhile, Mr. Gloninger said he pared back his on air mentions of climate change. But he also pushed back at climate denialists, sometimes sharing screenshots of their messages to Twitter. He told Mr. Dutton that he'd been asked to dial back his coverage, something Mr. Dutton relayed to fellow climate activists, who in turn complained to the station.

In September, Mr. Gloninger was called into another meeting, this time with both Ms. Smith and Brian Sather, the station's president and general manager. Mr. Gloninger made a voice recording of the meeting, and shared it with the Times. Neither Ms. Smith nor Mr. Sather responded to emails. A spokesman for the station, which is owned by Hearst Television, confirmed that the recording was of Ms. Smith and Mr. Sather.

Mr. Sather reprimanded Mr. Gloninger for his tone in responding to some viewers, and said he'd violated company policy in telling Mr. Dutton that he'd been asked to talk less about climate change. At the heart of the station's concerns was how much Mr. Gloninger talked about global warming on air. Mr. Sather said some viewers felt Mr. Gloninger seemed preachy, and also that climate change didn't belong in every weather forecast.

"For good or bad, the words 'climate change' elicit a response," Mr. Sather said. "It's this thing that just immediately out of the gate polarizes people."

Mr. Sather pressed on, telling Mr. Gloninger that the station had intentionally avoided the term “climate change” to avoid alienating viewers. Instead, it called a series about extreme weather “Forecasting Our Future.”

“When we talk about ‘Forecasting Our Future’, we have impact on people who would have shut down had we spoken about it in a different way,” Mr. Sather said.

Mr. Gloninger pushed back. “Showing these trends is, I think, part of our responsibility,” he said. “It’s not a political agenda. It’s science.”

But Mr. Sather held firm. The station was not trying to convince everybody in Iowa that climate change was real, he said. “We’re not winning viewers by trying to win the debate,” he continued. He asked Mr. Gloninger to be “moldable,” and open to what the viewers want.

“There’s moldable, which I understand,” Mr. Gloninger replied, “but then there’s doing something totally against who you are.”

Mr. Gloninger, with his wife Cathy, and a collection of printed-out emails and letters he received showing support for his climate reporting. Cassandra Klos for The New York Times

Scaling back

Mr. Gloninger wasn't alone in receiving audience blowback for talking about global warming, or in responding to climate deniers on social media. Still, among the nation's approximately 2,000 television meteorologists, the threats faced by Mr. Gloninger stood out.

"We have a lot of TV meteorologists all around the country in conservative areas who are connecting with audiences around climate change, and not experiencing this," said Ms. Woods Placky of Climate Central, which claims about 900 TV meteorologists as members. "Negativity gets a really loud voice and a headline, but the vast majority of people are interested, and that's the part that gets lost."

Some of the meteorologists who are most outspoken about climate change work in Florida. Steve MacLaughlin of NBC6 in Miami recently slammed Gov. Ron DeSantis for outlawing any mention of climate change in state statutes. Jeff Berardelli, of WFLA in Tampa, said in an email that he stuck to the science unflinchingly, and was very careful in his tone. "As long as we climate broadcasters are presenting the evidence responsibly, without judgment, we are doing the right thing," he said.

Still, in 2023, the hottest year in recorded history, research conducted by the nonprofit Media Matters found that corporate broadcast television scaled back on its climate coverage by 25 percent.

After his meeting with Mr. Sather, Mr. Gloninger felt his on-air performance begin to unravel. He found himself using filler words and hesitating. Physical ailments began to surface. Mysterious skin discoloration on his leg, stress induced acid reflux, heart palpitations and sleepless nights followed. In October, the station reprimanded him for talking to a British newspaper about the threats and not maintaining neutrality in social media posts; he'd used a hashtag that said #ActOnClimate and cheered on the outdoor apparel company Patagonia, which plows profits into land conservation.

Finally, in June 2023, Mr. Gloninger announced his departure, in a choked voice, during a broadcast. The death threat played a big role, he told viewers, and he and his wife also had to care for aging parents. He was taking a job in Massachusetts as a senior scientist in climate and risk communications at Woods Hole Group, a consulting firm. He bought out the remainder of his contract with KCCI for several thousand dollars, he said.

“It was not me running away,” Mr. Gloninger said. “It was being told ‘you can’t do this anymore.’”

And then, to his astonishment, letters, emails and cards of support came pouring in. Letters embossed with flowers and butterflies, American flags and Charlie Brown stamps. Mr. Gloninger has kept them, along with a binder filled with printouts of nearly 300 laudatory emails thanking him for connecting climate and the weather, with Post Its marking the ones sent from especially conservative areas.

A spokesman for the station, which is owned by Hearst Television, said in a statement to the Times that it supported Mr. Gloninger, and wished him the best.

Until that fan mail arrived, Mr. Gloninger questioned whether he had been naïve to think that he could help pull climate science out of the culture wars with a factual few minutes during a weather forecast on the nightly news.

The letters and emails could have come from people who already accepted the scientific facts around global warming. But Mr. Gloninger clings fast to the hope that he broke through to at least some viewers.

“No one ever said, ‘Gee, you changed my mind,’” Mr. Gloninger said.

But, he said, he still achieved his goal. “I stepped outside my comfort zone,” he said. “I went to a place that needed to hear about climate change. And I talked about it.”

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