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Larry Levanti

A DREAM FULFILLED

Freehold Township man earns doctorate

By KIM PREDHAM
Staff Writer

FREEHOLD TOWNSHIP — Paul Wichansky's life is dedicated to making a difference in the lives of others.

Wichansky, 37, of Freehold Township has touched countless lives with motivational

speeches about his life with cerebral palsy, and how everyone should follow their dreams.

And with the fulfillment of one of his own goals — a doctorate in environmental sciences

— Wichansky's work could have an impact on future development in the state and around the world.

Roughly eight years of research culminated on May 21 for Wichansky when he joined nearly 11,000 graduates to receive his Ph.D. from Rutgers University.

"I feel that it's finally time to move on," Wichansky said last

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Paul WICHANSKY is shown during graduation with Barbara Sirman, senior administrator for degree certification for Rutgers Graduate School-New Brunswick.

Dream

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week, a day before he accepted his third degree from Rutgers.

Wichansky has been a college student for the past 19 years, and earned bachelor's and master's degrees in meteorology before going on to pursue his doctorate.

Wichansky has always loved weather, he said, especially extreme weather.

"The heavy snowstorms, the heavy thunderstorms ... I loved the intensity!" Wichansky recalled.

Wichansky has channeled that love into research that showed how changes in New Jersey's land cover have affected surface air temperatures, surface dew points and cloud cover.

Farmland in the state has seen a sharp decline since 1880, when it totaled 2.9 million acres. By 1992, the amount of farmland had dropped to 848,000 acres, according to Wichansky.

And with that increase in urban land cover has come increased surface air temperatures, reduced surface dew

points and decreased cloud cover in parts of the state, according to Wichansky.

These changes mean that as the state has become more developed, it has become warmer and drier, Wichansky said.

That discovery could have an impact not only on the state's future decisions, but could also affect how places that are still agricultural choose to develop, he said.

Another impressive part of his research was an effort to digitize a land cover map of the state created in 1880 by Professor George H. Cook, whose work has become the model for the U.S. Geological Survey.

Though recently renamed the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences, the college where Wichansky studied had been named Cook College.

Using the map and data taken from satellites, Wichansky was able to perform simulations comparing previous and present-day land cover, he said.

"He (Wichansky) has done absolutely wonderful things with the research that no one thought to do," said Carol Rutgers, a program director at the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences.

Rutgers has known Wi-

chansky since he first stepped on campus 19 years ago, helping to guide him through four cooperative experiences. He so impressed her over the years that in 1995, she nominated him for the New Jersey Cooperative Education Association's Student of the Year award, which he won.

Not only has Wichansky accomplished impressive research, Rutgers says he has also been a welcome fixture on campus.

A perpetually friendly presence, Wichansky is constantly reaching out to people and can usually be seen with what Rutgers calls his "Tom Cruise smile."

"He's a real true person to everyone," she said.

With his college career finally at an end, Wichansky will take that positive outlook on to wherever he decides to pursue his career.

As to where that will be, Wichansky isn't entirely sure yet.

He hopes to wind up as a professor of meteorology, a job he says will likely allow him to pursue his other love: motivational speaking.

Wichansky has been speaking to crowds since he was 10 years old, appearing before elementary, high school and college students, corporations and Special Olympics crowds in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

He loves meteorology, he says. But no matter how much he enjoys the field, he couldn't imagine a life that didn't include speaking, especially to students.

The students are the ones he talks about the most — the ones who reach out to him days, weeks, even years later to let him know how much his speeches meant to them.

"It (speaking) is where I can make the most difference," he said.

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