

IT'S NOT ALL THAT OFTEN that our childhood career aspirations actually come to pass. If they did, there would probably be a lot more firefighters and center fielders in the workforce. But Robbie Hood, this year's winner of the Professional Award for Executive Excellence, is that rare exception.

As a young girl growing up in Neosho, Mo., and Picayune, Miss., Hood experienced enough tornados and hurricanes that she knew she wanted her career to involve ways of better understanding and predicting these formidable weather forces. "We lived in Mississippi in 1969 when Hurricane Camille came through," she says. "I had never seen that kind of devastation, and it fascinated me that something could be that powerful." The 1974 Neosho tornado also stands out in her memory.

These days, Hood heads up the Unmanned Aircraft Systems Program for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). That job puts her

in the vanguard of enlisting technology to help scientists and the general public observe the world in ways that advance everything from ecosystem assessments to weather forecasting. From the large Global Hawk drone capable of flying up to 30 hours at a time to backpack-sized devices that can be launched from a NOAA ship, Hood says the use of unmanned aircraft can boost and possibly cut costs. "NOAA is all about observation," she says. "Satellites are great, but they fly so high that the resolution of their images isn't always high enough."

Hood gives her parents much of the credit for her successful journey to this leadership position at NOAA — which was preceded by a stint as a research meteorologist for NASA who studied storms and hurricanes. Her initial interest in STEM, which eventually led her to obtain an undergraduate degree in atmospheric science at the University of Missouri and a master's in physical meteorology at Florida State, came

from her father, who managed a Missouri test facility that evaluated rocket engines used in the Apollo missions. While that ini-

Executive Excellence

ROBBIE HOOD

Cherokee

tial spark of interest in science and technology was clearly vital, Hood feels that her mother's influence was instrumental in her

career achievements and enduring success as a manager and executive.

Hood says that among other values, her mother taught her empathy, which has been crucial to her ability to inspire the people she works with. Hood's mother was a direct descendant of John Ross, the first elected chief of the Cherokee Nation, who led his people through the Trail of Tears forced relocation to Oklahoma. "I'm a people person, and I help scientists talk to engineers and to people with no technical background," she says. "My mom always emphasized looking at things from other people's points of view. She helped me develop those skills early. My people skills have taken me where I want to be, and I credit that to being Cherokee."



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