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WKU students set off to chase, study storms

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Western Kentucky University professor Josh Durkee (far left) is setting off with his ninth annual storm chase class. This year's participants from left to right include: Pierce Larkin, Bailey Stevens, Greg Docekal, Gerardo Diaz, Evan Hatter, Carson Meredith, Isaac Smith and Cait French.

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For Pierce Larkin, a meteorology student at Western Kentucky University, chasing and studying storms across the midwest last summer was the time he connected school to the real world.

“You don’t really understand it until you actually see it,” said Larkin, a senior from Lawrenceburg.

Now, Larkin is setting off again, along with seven other students and meteorology professor Josh Durkee, for this year’s Field Methods in Weather Analysis and Forecasting course.

Starting Monday, the team will embark on a two-week journey across the Great Plains to forecast, analyze, document and study severe convective storms that can produce tornadoes, large hail and flash flooding.

For Durkee, who has taught the class for nine years, there's always something new to learn.

"For me, it never gets old. These experiences cannot be replicated," he said.

Durkee described the class as the culmination of everything meteorology students learn during their time at WKU. Students take the lead when it comes to tracking storms and have to draw on all of their forecasting skills.

Larkin described his first experience last summer as being "thrown in the fire." He was the lead forecaster on his first day.

"With this we have to forecast specifically for a town," he said.

The team travels anywhere severe storms take them, Durkee said. Along the way, they document weather data and share their experience through social media. After their trip, they spend another two weeks preparing to showcase their work at research conferences.

Although the team avoids the most dangerous storms, Durkee said he has traveled through damaged areas and seen families affected by the fallout.

Durkee said the team typically stays within five miles of a storm. It's a safe enough distance that doesn't affect the ability to record data.



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“Five miles still feels like front row seats,” he said.

The closest calls for the team will actually be golf ball- or baseball-sized hail, he said. The team also tries to dodge traffic, which can be a hassle.

For Larkin, it’s good preparation for his plan to work for the National Weather Service.

Cait French, a senior from Rutledge, Tenn., also sees it as an opportunity to gain experience for a career in emergency management.

“You get real-world experience,” she said, adding that students often have to pick a town they think will have interesting weather and live with the consequences. “You’re not just doing it for yourself. You’re doing it for your team.”

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