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# WKU storm chase class embarks on 10th annual journey

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Members of the 10th annual Western Kentucky University Storm Chase class pose for a picture Thursday before departing on a two-week journey across the U.S. during which students will forecast weather in the field. From left to right, the students are Jonathan Oglesby, John Bowen, Luke Rogers, CJ Padgett, Bailey Stevens, Olivia Cahill and Josh Durkee, their professor.

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For as long as she can remember, Olivia Cahill has been captivated with weather.

What compelled Cahill, a meteorology student from Dry Ridge, to study at Western Kentucky University was the chance to conduct real-time forecasting and track storms across the Great Plains through an annual storm chasing class.

“The storm chase trip and the program here is what brought me to WKU,” Cahill said. “I didn’t look anywhere else.”

Cahill is part of a group of WKU students that embarked on the 10th annual Field Methods in Weather Analysis and Forecasting course over the weekend. The first few days of their trip haven’t been quiet.

On Monday, tweeting from their @wkustormchase Twitter account, the students caught up with WKU President Timothy Caboni.

“Busy day but we met up with @caboni for our first tornado and some large hail near Paducah, TX!” the team tweeted, sharing images of golf ball-sized hail and a storm overhead.

Caboni tweeted what appeared to be photos of a funnel cloud twisting down to earth.

“Hey, not a bad start!” Caboni tweeted.

According to CBS News, severe storms with tornadoes and heavy rains targeted the Southern Plains on Monday, mainly parts of Oklahoma and Texas. It followed a weekend of storms that generated tornadoes from Texas to Nebraska, the network reported.

A map from the National Weather Service showed an area of high risk of tornadoes and severe thunderstorms that encompassed much of western Oklahoma and northwestern Texas – where Paducah is located.

For Cahill, the experience is a reward for enduring a battery of tough courses in calculus and psychics and a chance to turn theory into practice.

“We’re taking everything that we’ve learned in the classroom and applying it to the field,” she said, adding that being in the field “puts us in the hot seat.”

“This is real life. We can’t get it wrong,” she said.

Josh Durkee, an associate professor of meteorology in WKU’s Department of Geography and Geology, didn’t start the class 10 years ago anticipating a great success.

“We initially just put the class together for the student experience,” he told the Daily News.

Durkee doesn’t see the design of the course changing much in the future, but it’s seeing more students interested in emergency management alongside meteorology.



“This class is perfect for that because we are basically forecasting for severe storms, documenting these for the learning experience, but we’re in the face of all these emergencies as a result,” he said.

The course has also helped the meteorology program gain more respect in the field.

“I know so because these students come back far more advanced from this experience. It makes them more employable for post-graduate placement,” Durkee said.

Bailey Stevens of Bloomington, Ill., is participating in the course for a second time.

“It’s kind of a dream come true to be able to go out there into the field and get to experience it firsthand,” she said, adding that doing your own forecasting “just makes it that much more rewarding.”

Even last year, Steven said, she could see herself picking up forecasting skills from her professor and her peers.

“As I saw them do that, I saw myself becoming more skilled in forecasting,” she said.

That adds up to an experience that you just can’t get in a classroom, Stevens said.

Other students participating this year include Jonathan Oglesby, John Bowen, Luke Rogers and CJ Padgett.

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## **Aaron Mudd**

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