

Tornado Chasers: Atmospheric Science Students Journey West to Chase Extreme Weather

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Explaining the excitement of chasing an extreme thunderstorm across the Great Plains is a bit like trying to explain chocolate ice cream.

"You can talk about it, you can describe it, you can show pictures of it," says adjunct atmospheric sciences faculty member Elaine Godfrey, "but until you actually taste it for yourself, it's hard to understand why it's so exciting."

Standing on the platform of the new phased-array wind profiler at the NOAA/Radar Operations Center in Norman, Oklahoma.

Elaine Godfrey and Christopher Godfrey, associate professor of atmospheric sciences, decided to give their students that sweet taste of weather-chasing adventure with a hands-on field trip to Oklahoma, Texas and New Mexico, called the Severe Weather Field Experience.



“In a classroom, you can spout all the equations at them, show them pictures, but they don’t actually grasp what it is they’re learning about until they’re standing out there in the Great Plains, looking at a thunderstorm going up,” Christopher Godfrey said.

In addition to thunderstorms, hail and rainbows, the class also saw four tornadoes during their trip—from a safe distance, of course.

“The group and I saw a tornado near McLean, Texas. It was special because it was the first tornado I had ever seen in my life and it was my 20th birthday,” said atmospheric sciences major Ty Higginbotham. “Probably the best gift ever... Since it was my birthday, Dr. Godfrey let me call the National Weather Service in Amarillo, Texas to confirm that a tornado was on the ground. That was pretty awesome as well.”

The 12-day trip was about more than the hands-on experience of chasing weather, however. It was also a “comprehensive career development experience,” Christopher Godfrey explained.

The group visited the National Weather Center, the NOAA/Radar Operations Center, the Storm Prediction Center, Weather Decision Technologies Inc. and KOCO-TV, among other centers and companies.

“What we really want to do is show them what we can do with their careers,” he said. “There are private sector companies, there are government entities and labs, television studios, and university entities—they get a look at what they might be able to do in graduate school.”



Atmospheric science students chase a tornado in Seiling, Oklahoma.

The Severe Weather Field Experience course is one of the few in the nation offered to undergraduates atmospheric science majors, Christopher Godfrey said. For more information about UNC Asheville’s Atmospheric Sciences Department, visit atms.unca.edu (<http://atms.unca.edu>).