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Students demand action at Bowling Green's first climate strike

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Western Kentucky University student Jessica Williams was sitting in class when professor Fred Siewers mentioned that 16-year-old climate activist Greta Thunberg was organizing a climate strike – which brought an estimated four million people from across 150 countries onto the streets to demand climate change this past week.

Williams reached out to her friend Elaine Losekamp to see if there was a climate strike happening locally.

There wasn't.

So the two girls organized Bowling Green's first climate strike.

On Thursday, their effort attracted more than 100 students and a handful of adults to WKU's campus.

“The earth is a living and breathing organism,” Williams told the strikers Thursday, but it’s being harmed from wildfires, droughts, biodiversity loss and ocean acidification. “Why have we waited so long to do anything?”

“I’m fed up.”

While Williams spoke, more and more students, along with a few teachers and others, trickled into Centennial Mall to stand with her.

Students thrust posters labeled “What we stand for is what we stand on,” “United by nature, guided by science” and “What would Greta do?” above their heads.

There was a chalkboard where students could scribble why the climate crisis matters to them: “I love the great outdoors.” “I don’t want to die an untimely death.” “I love my home.”

Jacob Carroll, a WKU senior, said he skipped class for the climate strike. He was encouraged to participate in environmental activism after attending a student conservation association workshop over the summer in Maryland, where he said he witnessed the climate-related damages pervading through the marshland.

“I would like to see people become more aware and involved,” he said.

Fiona Wasson, who is studying environmental chemistry at WKU, said awareness is the foundation.

“We need to do more than awareness, but at this point that’s where we’re at,” Wasson said. “The first step is individualism. Collectivism is where we all come together.”

Bailey Brown, a WKU junior, happened upon the climate strike while walking to class. She welcomed the opportunity to briefly join the numbers.

“I take an individual approach to sustainability,” Brown said, which she admits is challenging in a town like Bowling Green. “There’s only so much a reusable water bottle can do.”

Albet Meier, a biology professor at WKU, addressed the students during the strike to discuss catastrophes.

“Typically we humans don’t act until after disaster strikes,” he said, adding that there are disasters striking now. “We need a Green New Deal immediately.”

Both professors and students tried to summarize climate change’s causes, impacts and solutions.

Experts say climate change directly causes warming, heat waves, precipitation, drought, floods, fires, storms, sea-level rise and changes in natural land cover and ocean chemistry. These climate hazards impact human health, food, water, infrastructure and security, and threaten the planet’s plants and animals.

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Heat records have been set this year from Delhi to Adelaide, Phoenix and Paris. July was the hottest month on record for Earth, and the 415th consecutive month with above-normal global temperatures, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

There have been wildfires in Alaska, Siberia and Greenland this summer, and massive carbon-dioxide releasing burnings in Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Indonesia and Madagascar in the past 12

months.

Hurricanes, droughts, mudslides and floods have displaced millions of people in recent years. In 2018, the World Bank estimated that Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia will generate 143 million more climate migrants by 2050.

High air pollution days, especially from wildfires and ground-level ozone, are increasing, and disease-carrying insects are migrating, according to the Fourth National Climate Assessment.

Limiting global warming requires systematic changes, according to the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change special report on global warming.

That requires 100 percent renewable energy, an electrification of the transportation sector and a transformation of the food, forestry and land use systems. Animal agriculture's contribution to global greenhouse gas emissions, for example, range from 14.5 percent to about 50 percent. On a smaller scale, there are climate change "super polluters" like hydrofluorocarbons, which are used in refrigerants and cooling and have a greenhouse gas warming potential between 1,000 and 3,000 times that of carbon dioxide.

Siewers attended the climate strike to support the students and the strike's key goal of ending global fossil fuel use.

"Talking to each other is really important," Siewers said. "In large part, people don't think they'll be affected by climate change. Awareness

starts as these kinds of things.”

Losekamp hopes the strike inspired more people to become involved in climate change-fighting organizations.

“We want to add our collective voices,” Losekamp said. “We want government at all levels to know that this matters to all people and we deserve a future.”

“It’s very easy to get discouraged by the climate crisis, but ... there is hope.”

– Follow reporter Caroline Eggers on Twitter @eggersdailynews or visit bgdailynews.com.

Caroline Eggers

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