

University of Mississippi

eGrove

University of Mississippi News

2-5-2020

Student to Make His Own 'Motorcycle Diaries' During Bolivia Trek

Michael Newsom

Follow this and additional works at: <https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umnews>

Recommended Citation

Newsom, Michael, "Student to Make His Own 'Motorcycle Diaries' During Bolivia Trek" (2020). *University of Mississippi News*. 6290.

<https://egrove.olemiss.edu/umnews/6290>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Mississippi News by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.

Student to Make His Own ‘Motorcycle Diaries’ During Bolivia Trek

Jess Cooley, 2020 Barksdale Award Winner, plans to document forest fire devastation in Bolivia

FEBRUARY 5, 2020 BY MICHAEL NEWSOM



UM student Jess Cooley visits the Salar de Uyuni, the world’s largest salt flat, in 2019 while studying at the Bolivia Field School. Winner of the 2020 Barksdale Award, Cooley plans to return to South America this summer to study and document damage from 2019 forest fires in the Chiquitania. Submitted photo

OXFORD, Miss. – **University of Mississippi** student Jess Cooley sat in an Oxford coffee shop last August scrolling through Instagram when he saw posts of devastating wildfires in an arid forest that serves as Bolivia’s natural barrier against global warming.

The international studies and accounting major from Laurel knew the area that was engulfed very well.

“What I saw left me baffled and brought tears to my eyes,” Cooley said. “The Chiquitania was burning.”

The **Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College** sophomore had been in the forest just three weeks earlier studying with **Bolivia Field School** students as part of his undergraduate work. He sat there in the coffee shop thinking about how one day in the forest there, he’d marveled over rolling hills and cow pastures, and seeing the “best sunset ever.”

As he sadly scrolled, in his lap lay a copy of “The Motorcycle Diaries,” the story of a 1950s motorbike expedition across South America. There in Uptown Coffee, an idea was born.

His plan is the 2020 winner of the Barksdale Award, which is given annually by the Honors College and presented at its Spring Convocation. The award, which he received Tuesday (Feb. 4), was established in 2005 to encourage students to test themselves in environments beyond the classroom, teaching lab or library.

Cooley is the 26th recipient of the honor, which comes with \$5,000 to fund his project.

This summer, Cooley who is proficient in Spanish, plans to travel through the Chiquitania, which burned from August through October, by motorcycle, documenting the devastation through photos and interviews, as well as surveys and field notes, for up to four weeks.

His work will form a visual ethnography, which is the act of showing culture through photos and write-ups, which he will post to a blog and an Instagram account. He also plans to make presentations when he returns about the long-lasting effects of the fires.

“This project will hopefully convey the true destruction and reality of the events that have occurred in the

Follow us on social



Campus Briefs

Donations Sought for 25th Annual Books and Bears Program

OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi is asking the community to help spread a little joy this holiday season by donating to the 25th annual Books and Bears program. Donations such as toys, books, dolls, bicycles and other children’s play items are being accepted through Dec. 14. All donations will be collected and sorted

[Read the story ...](#)

More Posts from this Category

Thank You To Our Donors

Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship Aims to Build Leaders

OXFORD, Miss. – Twenty-five inaugural recipients of the Mississippi Excellence in Coaching Fellowship – a program hosted by the University of Mississippi School of Education in partnership with the Mississippi Association of Coaches and the Mississippi High School Activities Association – are expected to increase their impact on student-athletes and their communities. The coaching fellowship

[Read the story ...](#)

More Posts from this Category

Ole Miss In the News

Clarion-Ledger: New Essay Collection Tells the Story of Meredith’s Enrollment

Essays celebrate 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s enrollment at University of Mississippi By Lauren Rhoades Oct. 1 marks the 60th anniversary of James Meredith’s 1962 enrollment at the University of Mississippi as the school’s first African-American student.



Ole Miss sophomore Jess Cooley (rear) rides on a motorcycle through La Chiquitania in Bolivia in summer 2019. Cooley plans to use his funds from the Barksdale Award, given by the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, to study the effects of forest fires in the region this summer. Submitted photo

region that have now been largely forgotten on the global scale,” Cooley said. “Additionally, Bolivia is more susceptible to climate change than many nations, due to a geography of forest and high-altitude societies, and the contemporary effects of climate change can be seen with this project.”

The damage has been severe, and the losses of forests could be significant enough to reduce the protection from climate change there. Millions of acres burned, and farmers claimed unprecedented amounts of land for agrobusiness expansion in the aftermath.

It’s estimated that 2 million animals, including 35 endangered species and 40,000 trees, were lost to the fires, which covered an area the size of Switzerland. Restoring the trees could take 200 years.

The loss goes beyond plant and animal life, though.

“About 1,800 families lost their livelihoods, and tourism that has recently thrived will see dramatic decreases,” Cooley said. “These effects are significant because Bolivia has the lowest GDP per capita in South America, which leads to many social problems which are sure to increase as Chiquitano revenues fall.”

Some articles indicated the fires also had political implications, as the lower-than-projected voter turnout cost Bolivian President Evo Morales his job.

Bolivia also has seven colonial Jesuit missions, which are world heritage sites. Last summer, while studying there, Cooley saw those missions. The group he was with studied the complex culture original colonialists shaped by forcing many semi-sedimentary societies into one group, the Chiquitanos, which means “little people.”

“I was intrigued by this story, as it was not the typical colonial narrative of obliteration,” Cooley said. “The Jesuits shared Spanish Golden Age artistry with the already artistically skilled Chiquitanos, creating a rich culture saturated with intricate woodworking, violin playing and painting that Chiquitanos are immensely proud of today.”

The Ole Miss student is looking forward to telling the full story of the Chiquitania fires, thanks to the Barksdale Award.

“Winning this award is a very humbling experience, and it makes me feel confident because the Honors College believes in me enough to produce good content and give me money to pursue these dreams,” he said. “I hope to do well with the subject matter and produce professional level content, and I’m going to spend the whole spring semester prepping for the summer.”



Douglass Sullivan-González (left), dean of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College, presents Jess Cooley with the Barksdale Award at the school’s Spring Convocation. Photo by Kevin Bain/Ole Miss Digital Imaging Services

Douglass Sullivan-González, dean of the Honors College, said he’s envious of Cooley’s adventure, and the Honors College is excited about the work he will do there.

“Jess’s adventure to create a visual ethnography of the eastern Bolivian arid forest in the midst of severe climatological challenges makes you wish you could accompany him on the motorbike and absorb the moment,” Sullivan-González said. “Talk about ‘make us jealous!’ What a citizen scholar.”

Cooley has worked closely with Enrique Cotelo, UM senior lecturer of Spanish and adjunct instructor of history, and Kate Centellas, associate professor of sociology and anthropology in the **Croft Institute for International Studies**, while planning the project. Both endorsed his project.

Cotelo, who has taught Cooley for two years, calls the idea of documenting the destruction “original and inspiring.” He’s certain Cooley will carry out the plan and produce an insightful report.

“His curiosity and enthusiasm are genuine and contagious,” Cotelo said. “While discussing the project with me, it was evident his plan was fueled by a true search for those underlying issues and local stories that always inform devastating outcomes.

“Moreover, his previous travels in Latin America and Bolivia have obviously nurtured a personal empathy and acute sensitivity. That will make his field work possible as his research astute and alert.”

The professor is impressed with his pupil, who has taken his Croft Latin American History course. In Spanish, Cooley finished at the top of his Honors fellows with a 96.6 percent average, which is a clear indication

“James Meredith: Breaking the Barrier,” a collection of essays edited by UM professor of journalism Kathleen Wickham, honors this historic milestone with

[Read the story ...](#)

[More Posts from this Category](#)



Jess Cooley poses in La Paz, Bolivia, where he studied with Bolivia Field School students in 2019. He plans to return to the country this summer to chronicle the damage from wildfires. Submitted photo

of his rare academic curiosity, dedication and hard work, Cotelo said.

“I am sure he will meet all the goals of his project, and his experience will enrich his life, his learning and our understanding of complex and intriguing issues,” he said. “Honestly, his plan makes me a little bit jealous. It is the kind of plan I wish I could do if I still were his age or if I were as savvy.”

Centellas has been impressed with Cooley’s work, including that with the Bolivia Field School in 2019, which she developed and ran. She notes that it’s not an easy program and includes five weeks of being immersed in La Paz, traveling throughout the country, living with a host family and doing original research in Spanish.

Cooley quickly took to Bolivia and was taking beautiful photographs of daily life and sharing them online, she said. He also pursued original research about a burgeoning coffee culture in La Paz for his final project.

She believes he is well suited to carry out this important new project there.

“Jess is passionate and well-prepared for this project,” Centellas said.

“His work is innovative, beautiful and moving. It is also the time for this project – with the recent fall of Evo and the devastating fires just a month prior, a project like Jess’ cannot wait for a few years to do.”

 FILED UNDER **COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS, CROFT INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, FEATURED NEWS, NEWS RELEASES, SALLY MCDONNELL BARKSDALE HONORS COLLEGE**