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Dr. Karyl Swartz leads mentoring session with Iowa State women in science programs

*Narrow focus on specific research project to prepare for a career
working with great apes, Great Ape Trust scientist tells students*

Des Moines, Iowa – November 25, 2008 – Narrowing their focus to a specific topic for scientific research is the best way for students to prepare for a career working with great apes, Dr. Karyl Swartz, a scientist at Great Ape Trust of Iowa, told a group of 15 Iowa State University students.

Swartz led a Nov. 7 discussion with students enrolled in Iowa State University's Program for Women in Science and Engineering (PWSE) on professional development opportunities, leadership training and networking strategies. Women are under-represented in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields, and PWSE's goal is to provide them opportunities to explore career paths and relevant opportunities for further education. Established some 20 years ago, PWSE has evolved into a nationally-recognized program with a wide range of programs and partnerships, including K-12 outreach efforts that reach thousands of girls and women each year.

Emily Jensen, a graduate assistant working with PWSE, said the visit to Great Ape Trust provided students a unique and extraordinary opportunity to learn about careers and internships covering a broad spectrum of scientific research. "Our women were able to learn about the mission of The Trust, observe and interact with the apes, see demonstrations of research in progress, and ask questions of knowledgeable staff,"

NEWS RELEASE

Jensen said. “This opportunity was inspiring to young women who are still deciding on a career path and allowed them to expand upon their ideas of research.”

Swartz, who chaired the Psychology Department at Lehman College of The City University of New York (CUNY) before joining Great Ape Trust in 2004, encouraged the students to avoid generalities when talking with scientists about their interest in becoming primatologists or in other careers involving work with great apes.

“It is important to focus on the topic of the research, rather than say something like, ‘I have always been interested in great apes,’” she said. “Go a little further. Find some research you are interested in doing, read about it and find the scientists who are doing this kind of research and approach them. Let them know that you are interested in becoming involved.”

Involvement at Great Ape Trust or other scientific research organizations could include internships, assistantships and coursework. At Great Ape Trust, students may have opportunities to study in Rwanda and assist with the Gishwati Area Conservation Program, a historic reforestation effort in Rwanda that will increase the survival chances of an isolated group of 13 chimpanzees living in a small remnant forest. Great Ape Trust’s Dr. Benjamin Beck, director of conservation, is overseeing the Gishwati project, one of Africa’s most ambitious reforestation efforts ever, and Swartz encouraged the students to develop mentoring relationships with him as well.

In addition to her academic work at Lehman College, Swartz also has been affiliated academically with the Smithsonian National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C., and the Regional Primate Center at the University of Washington. She also has conducted research with chimpanzees and gorillas at Centre International de Recherches Medicales de Franceville in Gabon, Africa, and memory studies with orphaned orangutans in Indonesia.

Swartz is an affiliate professor in Iowa State’s Department of Anthropology, along with colleagues Dr. Robert Shumaker, and Dr. Serge Wich, both scientists at Great Ape Trust, and Dr. Sue Savage-Rumbaugh, a scientist with special standing. Great Ape Trust and Iowa State signed a formal agreement in 2007 to establish a world-class collaboration for primate studies. The agreement builds on the shared scientific and ethical values of primate research, and recognizes multiple benefits to both institutions.

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GREAT APE TRUST BACKGROUND

Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a scientific research facility in southeast Des Moines dedicated to understanding the origins and future of culture, language, tools and intelligence. When completed, Great Ape Trust will be the largest great ape facility in North America and one of the first worldwide to include all four types of great ape – bonobos, chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans – for noninvasive interdisciplinary studies of their cognitive and communicative capabilities.

Great Ape Trust is dedicated to providing sanctuary and an honorable life for great apes, studying the intelligence of great apes, advancing conservation of great apes and providing unique educational experiences about great apes. Great Ape Trust of Iowa is a 501(c) 3 not-for-profit organization and is certified by the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA). To learn more about Great Ape Trust of Iowa, go to www.GreatApeTrust.org.

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Insights Through Collaborations with Apes