

Texas State University-San Marcos
College of Liberal Arts
Distinguished Alumni Achievement Award 2009
To Dr. Jill Preutz
Professor of Anthropology
Iowa State University

Dr. Jill Pruetz is interested in the origins of our species. Five years ago, she began studying a certain chimpanzee community in the African savanna of Senegal because she thought it might offer clues to our own evolution. It wasn't long before the chimps presented her with some startling information: they made spear-like tools and they hunted with them. Until she reported this discovery in 2007, the regular making of tools for hunting and killing mammals had been considered uniquely human behavior, but here was clear evidence to the contrary. This and other discoveries of Jill's have made a major impact on the field of anthropology.

Jill was born and grew up in Yoakum, Texas, the eldest of two children. At Texas State, she started out as an education major with plans to become a public school teacher, but her plans changed when she took an anthropology course taught by Dr. Jim Garber. She thought it was the greatest class ever, and after her second Anthropology course, she changed her major.

During Dr. Garber's summer field school in Belize, Jill helped to excavate an ancient Maya archaeological site and discovered that she liked fieldwork. She also took a class in primatology, which piqued her interest in primates.

She was double majoring in Sociology, and one of her favorite classes was Dr. Susan Day's course on Deviance and Social Control. As her interests in human behavior and its origins began to gel, she decided humans were too complex in terms of what she wanted to study and that non-human primates would be a better model. She chuckles now because, as she learns more and more about chimps, she realizes how naïve she was to think that they would be less complex subjects.

Outside of class, Jill participated in track and cross-country, running the 5K and the 10K. Her team won two conference championships, and she still wears the rings. She says that her participation in collegiate sports helped her build discipline both in and out of class. And she thinks the intensive training program made it easier for her to adjust to harsh field conditions like those in Senegal.

As graduation neared, Anthropology professor Norm Whalen, had a conversation with Jill about her future and suggested that she go to graduate school in primatology. This encouragement was a turning point in her life. She enrolled in the doctoral program in anthropology at the University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign and spent several years in Central and South America, studying a variety of monkeys and teaching field courses on primate behavior and ecology.

While she was in Costa Rica, she met Dr. Thomas LaDuke, her partner of many years. They taught field classes and helped to establish El Zota Biological Field Station, which offers university courses and contributes to the conservation of plants and animals in Northeastern Costa Rica.

A few years after obtaining her PhD degree, Jill began studying the chimpanzee community in the Fongoli savanna of Senegal, a grassland habitat with few trees, similar to where our earliest human ancestors lived. In 2007, she reported that a chimp named Tumbo was seen sharpening a branch with her teeth and wielding it like a spear. She used it to stab at a bush baby—a pocket-size, tree-dwelling nocturnal primate that springs from branch to branch like a grasshopper. Over the last few years, Jill and her team have seen members of the chimp community hunt bush babies some 56 times.

Anthropologists have known for a long time that chimps hunt—they can bring down an animal as large as a fawn. But Jill's was the first report of chimpanzees hunting with tools, and her discovery was unexpected in another way: hunting by chimpanzees was considered primarily a male activity, but Jill found that adult female and juvenile chimps were hunting bush babies the most often.

Jill's observations support a theory that it may well have been our female ancestors who first steered the culture toward tool use.

The report of her discovery first ran in a major journal *Current Biology*. The following week, Jill's findings were featured in more than 300 news and science outlets, including *New Scientist*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and on National Public Radio. Jill's discovery was the most widely talked-about primatology news since Jane Goodall's research in the 1970s. The Smithsonian Institution requested one of the spears for their collection. And in a light-hearted tone, *National Geographic* magazine quipped that, if chimps are making spears, barbecue tongs can't be that far behind.

The excitement over Jill's discoveries overlooks the fact that, while her work can be glamorous, it is also hot, dirty, exhausting, and dangerous—and she loves it deeply. When she is in Senegal, she spends each day from dawn till dusk in stifling heat, following the chimps. Their range—over 24 square miles—is so large that she has to stay with them until they stop for the night or she might not be able to find them the next day. She lives communally with villagers, and sometimes she arrives home so late her dinner has literally gone to the dogs. Rather than hike the five miles back to camp, she sometimes curls up and sleeps on the ground or takes a nap in an abandoned chimp nest. She has to watch out for poisonous snakes, and she has gotten dengue fever once and malaria eight times. A few weeks ago, Jill had to make an emergency trip to Senegal when she learned that two chimpanzees in her research group—a mother and an infant—had been attacked and injured by dogs and that the infant had been captured by the boys who owned the dogs. The story has a happy ending—the baby was recovered and returned to its mother and they are both fine. However, Jill is fearful that encroaching population and agriculture and mining interests will continue to endanger the chimps and their habitat. So, she has created a nonprofit organization called “Neighbor Ape” to

fund school tuition for local village children and to train villagers in conservation stewardship of the savanna.

In recognition of her unique and inspiring work at this early point in her career, Jill was one of nine individuals in 2008 given the title “Emerging Explorer” by the National Geographic Society. Her work—conducted with diligence and insight, with dedication to humane ideals, and in an attitude of humility and learning—is done in the tradition of the Liberal Arts, and it will certainly inspire new generations of scientists to investigate the natural world. On behalf of the College of Liberal Arts, I am very pleased to present Dr. Jill Pruetz with the College’s highest honor, the Distinguished Alumni Achievement Award.