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## Environmental Author, Activist, Alumna Speaks, Donates Papers to Special Collections

Oct. 18, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Environmental author and activist Sandra Steingraber returned to her alma mater at Illinois Wesleyan University on Monday, Oct. 18 to donate her papers to a new special collection at The Ames Library, and to discuss her writings that bring awareness to the link between cancer and the environment. The struggle is a personal one for Steingraber, who not only is a noted biology researcher, but is also a cancer survivor.

### **Fighting a ‘chemical trespass’**

Steingraber, a 1981 Illinois Wesleyan graduate who is the author of two books with a third to be published in 2011, led the audience in Hansen Student Center on a very personal journey. She condemned manmade toxins in the environment as a threat to her children, and all children. She called toxins, such as the chemical herbicide atrazine used heavily in Illinois as a corn herbicide, a “chemical trespass” and “violation” of the safety of children.

“There is a crisis arising,” said Steingraber, who is a scholar in residence at Ithaca College in New York, and is traveling around the Midwest to help promote a new documentary that follows her professional and personal challenges in battling cancer. “It is really a crisis of family life, which is robbing parents of the right to keep their children safe from harm.”

Steingraber, who has both a doctorate in biology and master’s degree in English, uses her books as a bridge over the gap between scientific findings on cancer and public knowledge. Her books include *Living Downstream: An Ecologist’s Personal Investigation of Cancer and the Environment*. (Da Capo Press, 1997) and *Having Faith: An Ecologist’s Journey to Motherhood* (De Capo Press, 2001). Much like her books, her talk was a combination of scientific study and sharing of personal stories. During her talk she walked neatly between intricate scientific studies showing developmental problems in laboratory rats exposed to toxins, and personal stories about her children, 12-year-old Faith and 9-year-old Elijah, and the heart-breaking knowledge of her three lost pregnancies.

All her work, she said, is an effort to help people see the dangers of toxins, which may be causing everything from asthma to attention-deficit syndrome. “New light on developmental toxicology is mounting an important challenge to our old assumptions of our current environmental regulatory system,” she said.

Though she is noted for both her role as a writer and a biologist, Steingraber said her job as a writer is more difficult, because she gives people news they do not wish to hear. “It requires all my abilities as a creative writer to keep readers turning the pages and not turn away,” she said, noting people are disturbed when they learn that exposure to chemicals, through the air, food and water, can alter our genes, and the development of our children. “Our genes are less an inherited set of China tea cups locked away in a cellular China cabinet than they are an instrument, a piano if you will,” said Steingraber.

“Our genes are the keys of the piano, and the environment as the pianist.” Although we cannot change our genes, we can change our system of agriculture and energy that use damaging chemicals, she said.

### **A New Collection**

The talk was followed by a reception on the fourth floor of The Ames Library to celebrate the dedication of the library’s Environmental Studies Collections in the Tate Archives and Special Collections area. The collections include the papers of Steingraber, and three local environmental groups – the Ecology Action Center, the ParkLands Foundation and the John Wesley Powell Audubon Society.

Representatives from all three organizations were on hand at the reception to help celebrate the addition of the papers. “This grand collection opening celebrates the contributions of local individuals and organizations in educating our community and sustaining local ecosystems,” said Illinois Wesleyan University Archivist Meg Miner. “And now, because they have chosen a secure but accessible home for the documentation of their work, others are able to learn about their efforts.”

Miner said the collection “offers the public and students a place devoted to the history of local environmental efforts. She noted the new collection supports the University’s commitment to sustainability. “These materials are available for researchers from any part of IWU’s community, both on and off campus, and serve as a resource for the IWU Environmental Studies Program,” she said. To learn more about the collection, visit [the collection website](#).

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