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Kim Hill
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Gearhart Named Kemp Teaching Award Winner

April 6, 2016

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Rebecca Gearhart has been named the 2017 recipient of the Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence at Illinois Wesleyan University. The award recipient, announced at the Honors Convocation on April 6, is selected by the faculty Promotion and Tenure Committee from nominations by the faculty. Provost and Dean of the Faculty Jonathan Green announced Gearhart as the recipient.

A professor of anthropology, Gearhart is chair of the sociology and anthropology department. She received a Ph.D. in anthropology from the University of Florida and joined the faculty at Illinois Wesleyan in 1999. She takes an interdisciplinary approach (visual anthropology, history and performance studies) to her research on non-Western music and dance performance traditions. Her area of interest is East Africa, which she first visited as an undergraduate student in 1987. She has frequently lived in East Africa, primarily among the Swahili people of the Kenyan coast. She is co-editor of the book *Contesting Identities: The Mijikenda and Their Neighbors in Kenyan Coastal Society* (Africa World Press, 2013) and the author of numerous scholarly papers.



Linda French (left) and Rebecca Gearhart are winners of the 2016 and 2017 Kemp Foundation Award for Teaching Excellence.

Professor of Physics Linda French, the 2016 Kemp Award winner, was the featured speaker. [Watch her remarks.](#)

In her presentation, entitled “The Long and Winding Trail,” French quoted a line from *The Lord of the Rings*: “Not all those who wander are lost.” French told the seniors and other students honored for scholastic and activity achievements that she first announced her intention of becoming an astronomer after receiving *My Little Golden Book about the Sky* for her fifth birthday. As a student at Indiana University, she changed her major to English and then to elementary education before taking a survey of astronomy course for non-majors in her junior year.

“I fell in love with astronomy all over again,” she said, cramming an astronomy major into four semesters. “Somehow, the ‘wandering,’ the less direct path, worked for me.”

In graduate school at Cornell, French found herself as a teaching assistant for Carl Sagan’s astronomy class just as he was becoming a household name and the first celebrity scientist in French’s lifetime.

“To my amazement, students started coming to my office hours, even students who weren’t in my section,” she recalled. “It seemed that they felt I had something to offer. One undergrad told my officemate, ‘she doesn’t make me cry like my TA did.’”

As a diversion from the rigors of graduate school, French accepted a friend’s invitation to try hiking in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. On the first hike, she was hooked, telling the audience the view from the top of a mountain has been described best as: “therapy, church, the gym, and a love affair all at the same time.”



Linda French quoted Tolkien, “Not all those who wander are lost.”

Over the course of 20 years, French has climbed all 48 of the 4,000-foot mountains in New Hampshire, doing many of the hikes alone. “The sense of pride I took in this accomplishment was enormous, and clearly it’s still important to me today,” she said, displaying a slide of the patch she’s earned for that accomplishment which she has stitched onto her academic regalia.

Her work in Cornell’s labs was satisfying and groundbreaking, she said, yet she missed teaching. “Something was missing inside the lab where, to study how a rock reflects light, you have to turn off almost all the lights,” she said. “So, I ‘wandered’ again, still trying to fit those pieces together.”

As a postdoctoral researcher and instructor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, French found her true calling. French and others established a “Field Camp” where students go to Lowell Observatory in Arizona to do research with a staff member. In this setting, French began to develop the research program that would eventually bring her to Illinois Wesleyan – observations of the shapes and spin rates of special asteroids known as the Jovian Trojan asteroids.

Eventually French joined the faculty at Wheelock College in Boston, where she focused more on teaching than on observing research. Wheelock's mission is the preparation of elementary teachers and social workers, and French worked with science educators in encouraging students to explore their own learning and developing new curriculum, she said. "I loved working with future teachers – I still do – and I look back fondly on those times," she said. "But something was missing. Astronomical research. Chasing asteroids. Asking questions of the universe and looking for new answers."

The sensible thing for a tenured faculty member is to stay put, she said. But unable to carve out time to do research and work with majors along with developing and teaching advanced classes such as observational astronomical techniques and astrophysics, she began looking for new positions.

"And here I am," she said, noting how challenging it can be to re-enter a focused research track once an academic has gotten off one. However, "here's where the mountains come in," she said. "Without the determination and the tenacity I've developed in logging those miles and thousands of feet of climbing, I don't think I'd be here at all. The ability to ignore sensible advice, such as don't go hiking alone, probably helped, too."

"In many ways chasing mountains here on earth and mountains in the sky, I see as two aspects of the same quest," she added.

For more than a decade, French and her IWU students have been making regular trips to observatories in Arizona and Chile. She's proud of upgrades to the Mark Evans Observatory and of the research her students have conducted and published on their own right in refereed scientific journals.

Some people do indeed move from one career goal to another in a straight line, she said. For whatever reason, that has not been her way, she noted.

"I've learned from listening to, and working with, great scientists, but I've also learned from discussing Newton's Laws with a pre-service kindergarten teacher and from answering questions with Illinois Wesleyan students," she said. "My life has been enriched by working at world-class observatories, but also by having star parties and eclipse-watching parties on campus. We all need to recognize and cherish the things that nourish us, and we need to honor those things by spending time on them, for in that way we honor ourselves."

Quoting a Beyoncé song, "I did all that I wanted and more than I thought I could do," French said to the students, "My wish for each of us is to be able to say the same thing."

Toni Jenkins, representing the Kemp Foundation, presented French with the 2016 Kemp Award for Teaching Excellence. The award honors one faculty member who brings spirit, passion and scholarship to the art of teaching. The Kemp Family Foundation began funding the award in the 2009-2010 academic year.

During the Convocation, Provost Green also paid tribute to retiring faculty members Professor of Sociology Georgeanne Rundblad and Associate Professor of Nursing Susan Swanlund. A 1980 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan, Swanlund plans to retire in December.

