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In search of how we became human

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In search of how we became human

At Michigan State University's Wharton Center, an upcoming lecture will offer first-class insights into the origins of human evolution. 7:30 p.m. Oct. 30, Louise Leakey, a paleoanthropologist and National Geographic Explorer-in-residence, will speak about "Origins and Evolution: In Search of How We Became Human." The lecture, sponsored by MSU's Honors College, is free.

Since the 1960s, research by the Leakey family of Kenya has greatly advanced the study of human origins.

Louis Seymor, Louise Leakey's grandfather, was a British anthropologist who convinced scientists that Africa was the most important place to search for evidence of the earliest human beings (scientists had previously centered their searches in Asia because of fossils discovered in China and Java). In 1978 her grandmother Mary Douglas found footprints preserved in hardened volcanic ash in Tanzania dating to 3.6 million years ago, which suggested that humanlike creatures had begun walking upright by this time. Louise Leakey's mother, Meave, helped identify some of the oldest known humanlike fossils, and her father, Richard, discovered a nearly complete 1.75 million-year-old skull of a hominoid creature.

Richard Leakey directed the National Museums of Kenya over four decades. He headed the Kenya Wildlife Service and worked to eliminate the illegal killing of Kenyan elephants for their tusks, a source of ivory.

Louise Leakey completed a Ph.D. program in paleontology at the University of London, where her dissertation focused on the influence of climate on faunal evolution at West Turkana between 3.3 million and 1.6 million years ago. Today, the 31-year old scholar leads annual expeditions to the Turkana Basin, along with her mother, including the one which resulted in the 1999 discovery of a 3.5 million-year-old skull and partial jaw, named Kenyanthropus platyops. Unlike other hominid fossils of this period, such as those of Australopithecus afarensis, this skull has a much flatter face and smaller molars. Some paleontologists think this new species may be an early, direct ancestor of human beings.

□ Daniel Sturm

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