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NEWS & EVENTS

The Lyons' Den is Moving into the Tiger's Lair

Dr. Leslie Lyons, a world-renowned researcher in cat genetics, has accepted a position at the University of Missouri College of Veterinary Medicine. Lyons will be the Gilbreath-McLorn Professor for Comparative Medicine.



Lyons is a professor of genetics at the University of California-Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, Department of Population Health and Reproduction. Her research laboratory, the Lyons' Den, is part of the university's Center of Companion Animal Health. The Lyons' Feline Genetics Laboratory research focuses on the genetics of the domestic cat, the development of genetic tools and resources that assist gene mapping in the cat and other companion animals, the discovery of mutations that cause inherited diseases and phenotypic traits, and population dynamics of breed development and domestic cat evolution.

"Everything you need to know about genetics, you can learn from your cat," Lyons said. "Most species have all the same genes, but when they get turned on and off, and for how long, is what makes us different. We (people) have genes for whiskers and tails, but they aren't turned on, likewise cats have genes like humans that cause blindness, heart disease, and kidney disease," she explained.

Lyons said as the Gilbreath-McLorn professor, her goal is to build a world-renowned cat genetics program at Mizzou, with high expectations for comparative and translational medicine approaches. The endowed professorship was funded by Olive Gilbreath-McLorn in appreciation for the treatment her cat received at the Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital. The position advances research into the cause, prevention and treatment of disease to benefit people and their companion animals.

A native of Pittsburgh, Lyons earned a master of science in human genetics at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health. She went on to earn a PhD in human genetics, also at Pittsburgh. From 1992-1996, she was a post-doctoral fellow and young scientist in the National Cancer Institute Laboratory of Genomic Diversity in Frederick, Md., studying feline and comparative genetics. She left the East Coast in 1999 to join the UC-Davis faculty.

The opportunity to collaborate and expand her feline research efforts attracted her to the University of Missouri. Lyons said she is looking forward to becoming a Tiger. "There are fantastic resources available and a great group of clinicians and geneticists in the veterinary and animal sciences there. Being able to work with them will augment our cat program greatly," she said.

College of Veterinary Medicine Dean Neil C. Olson said the genetic expertise Lyons will bring to MU is a perfect complement to the University's esteemed One Health/One Medicine Mizzou

Advantage program.

"The University of Missouri has leading researchers in bovine, swine, dog and rodent genetics. We are gratified that we have been able to attract someone the caliber of Dr. Lyons whose area of expertise, felines, so perfectly complements our existing translational and comparative medicine studies," Olson said.

While at Davis, Lyons helped develop DNA tests for polycystic kidney disease (PKD), an inherited condition that causes cats to develop kidney cysts. She plans to continue her research into the disease at Mizzou. She is also planning to collaborate with researchers in the School of Medicine to seek cures for inherited blindness. Other translational medicine projects in Lyons' plans include studies in the human-animal bond, particularly examining the effects of interaction with cats on people who have autism, and launching the "99 Lives Project," a joint project with UC-Davis and industry partners to genetically sequence 99 cats.

In addition to a number of cats with heritable diseases from her lab, Lyons will bring several colleagues to MU, including Dr. Barbara Gandolfi, who earned PhD in biotechnology, from the University of Milan and who has been pursuing post-doctoral studies at Davis. Lyons plans to begin her work here in early July.

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