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D.C. celebrities set to make home in Iowa

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Washington, D.C. - Two inside-the-Beltway celebrities are set to arrive in Des Moines later this month, but they're different from most.

The twenty-something media darlings are in Iowa to stay, and they have no political agendas.

Azy, 26, and Indah, 24, brother-and-sister orangutans internationally known within the world of primate study, will leave their longtime home at the Smithsonian's National Zoo on Sept. 28 to settle in as the first residents of the newly constructed Great Ape Trust of Iowa in Des Moines.

There they will be reunited with Rob Shumaker, the scientist who is the director of the trust's orangutan research program. Shumaker, as a National Zoo researcher, developed a popular and groundbreaking language program with Azy and Indah in which the orangutans use a computer monitor to select symbols and communicate their thoughts.

Highly intelligent and gentle in nature, long-armed orangutans share some 97 percent of their DNA with humans. Their natural habitat is in Asia, where they live in trees.

The relationship between Shumaker, 40, and Azy and Indah is extremely close. Shumaker began working at the National Zoo as a volunteer while a teenager growing up in the Washington, D.C., area, and with the apes while a college undergraduate.

"I think of them as friends, as partners in this research project," he said of the apes. "Really, we've kind of grown up together . . . we've gone through so many of the same life stages together."

Shumaker signed on with the trust about a year ago. He moved his wife, Anne, and 3-year-old son to Iowa, and has commuted to Washington every two weeks since, while the 200-acre trust five miles southeast of downtown Des Moines was under construction.

The transition to a new home, rather than being difficult for the apes, will make them more at ease, predicted Shumaker, because he will again be with them on a daily basis. "It's back to

Public visits

Small groups will be able to see orangutans Azy and Indah working with scientist Rob Shumaker later this fall after the transfer of the apes from the Smithsonian's National Zoo in Washington, D.C., to the Great Ape Trust of Iowa in Des Moines.

normal for them," he said.

The orangutans will take a 2 1/2-hour chartered flight to Des Moines in spacious, specially built transport suites, with heavy bedding in the bottom and openings so they can see out. Shumaker will fly with them, along with two other workers.

"They'll wake up in D.C. and go to sleep in their new home in Des Moines that night," he said. "We are investing resources in making sure they are comfortable and that we can reduce as much stress as possible."

The apes' urine will be collected as part of a study to analyze their hormones and determine just how stressful the trip turns out to be.

On a recent afternoon at the National Zoo, a sprawling 163-acre site that attracts some 3 million visitors a year, Shumaker conducted one of his last sessions there showing how he explores the orangutans' ability to communicate by using a symbol-based language, a project under way since 1995.

The session was in the Think Tank, a building that houses primates in one section, behind glass, and provides kid-friendly educational exhibits and information in another, with comfortable chairs and tables. Shumaker, who helped design the center, estimates he has spoken to some 200,000 people there about the apes in the past nine years. They've been featured in documentaries by the Discovery Channel and PBS.

It is all voluntary for the orangutans; they are not forced to work, Shumaker stressed to some 50 visitors watching from benches. Azy, who weighs 270 pounds, seemed to demonstrate that, climbing up to sit expectantly at a computer screen without being asked to or being lured by food.

"I am convinced that the No. 1 reason they do this every day is because they like the challenge and the mental stimulation," Shumaker said.

As Shumaker talked to visitors at the same time he worked with Azy, the orangutan attempted to match up symbols on the screen with objects such as an apple held up by Shumaker, getting food rewards. More difficult for Azy was matching a number to a symbol; Shumaker said Indah is better at numbers.

In Des Moines, the apes' home will not be constantly open to the public the same way it is at the National Zoo, but there will be plenty of scheduled opportunities for the public to view Azy and Indah, Shumaker said.

"Everything will be done guided by a staff member, so you can get a much richer, higher-quality experience," he said. "One of the things I insisted on when I talked about taking the job there is that I would be able to continue doing public education there because that is a very, very important piece for me in all of this."

There's a "tremendous misunderstanding" for the average person about great apes, Shumaker

said. "What's been stressed in our culture is that apes are to be laughed at, or demeaned in some way," he said. "That's not what they are at all."

Many apes kept in captivity are in poor circumstances, including being used for entertainment, biomedical research or in roadside zoos, Shumaker said. The situation in the wild is "horrific," he said, with predictions that orangutans will be extinct in the wild in the next 10 to 20 years.

Azy and Indah are very much individuals to him. While he described both as affectionate, curious, enjoyable and gentle, Shumaker said Azy is more patient and will spend time focusing on learning a task. Indah is "much more impulsive," he said, and very playful. She enjoys seeing people whom she knows.

In Iowa, Shumaker and his colleagues at the trust will have the opportunity to pursue expanded research projects, though the core for Azy and Indah will be language and symbols. One proposal at the trust is to focus on the orangutans' perceptions of music, for example, such as rhythm and tone.

But Shumaker's strongest wish is that Iowans and the trust's other visitors will grow to know, respect and appreciate Azy and Indah. "I would say the same thing for every other ape that comes there," he said. "It's never the same after you know an ape as an individual. You're never the same."