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12 March 2021

UCT climate change scientist selected for global STEMM female leadership initiative



Associate Professor Gina Ziervogel

Photo: Michael Hammond

University of Cape Town (UCT) geographer and climate change adaptation expert, Associate Professor Gina Ziervogel, has been selected to join Homeward Bound, an international leadership programme that encourages women working in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM) to take up leadership positions.

According to the World Economic Forum, only 30% of global researchers in STEMM are women. Overall, women also still hold far fewer leadership positions, both in science and technology, than their male counterparts. In the United States women currently make up 48% of the workforce but hold less than 18% of leadership roles at top tech companies. In South Africa, according to Stats SA, women make up 23% of the STEMM workforce.

Homeward Bound, an international initiative started in 2016 by Australian entrepreneur, Fabian Dattner, aims to change that. Each year 100 women from all over the world are selected to join the 12-month leadership programme, culminating in a voyage to Antarctica. Ziervogel will be one of 25 nationalities joining this year's programme. She has a particular interest in water and governance. During Cape Town's recent drought she was appointed to a water advisory committee for the municipality governing the city.

"During Cape Town's recent drought I was excited to bring my years of experience in climate adaptation research to bear in my own city, contributing to looking at what actions we can take to reduce vulnerability to climate change," she says. "Now I am looking forward to joining a programme which is centred around both personal development - encouraging women in STEMM to seek leadership positions - as well as a core understanding of the pressing need for scientists to collaborate to create a more resilient future in the face of climate change."

The Homeward Bound initiative consists of 11 months of collaborative online learning, focusing on leadership capacity, strategic capability, visibility and collaboration. In the final month, the programme's voyage to the Antarctic, subject to pandemic travel restrictions, includes onboard learning with all participants attending in-person lectures and workshops presented by a group of global experts in their fields. Prior cohorts have also been addressed remotely by science luminaries such as Jane Goodall, marine scientist Dr Sylvia Earle and former Executive Secretary of the United Nations, Christiana Figueres.

According to Dattner the aim of Homeward Bound is to identify and foster outstanding leadership potential in STEMM.

"When I founded Homeward Bound I believed the world needed a programme to unlock the leadership potential of outstanding women in STEMM, to upskill and support them to lead, influence and contribute to decision-making about the future of our planet. It is also no accident that we end up in Antarctica, as it is part of the vision. It is where we can see the impact of our crisis of leadership and inaction first-hand. It is sensitive and challenging, awe-inspiring and motivating, and I can think of no more fitting experience for a group of leaders."

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Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

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