## UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN · CHICAGO · SPRINGFIELD

## News Release

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(Note to journalists: A publication-quality photograph of Jean Driscoll is available at <a href="www.uillinois.edu/our/images/">www.uillinois.edu/our/images/</a>). Driscoll will have access to e-mail in Beijing beginning on Saturday (Sept. 6). Her e-mail address is jdris@illinois.edu.

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## U. of I.'s Jean Driscoll to represent U.S. at Paralympics in Beijing

Upon return, will attend state dinner at White House

URBANA—The University of Illinois' Jean Driscoll, a world-class wheelchair athlete, says that she's accustomed to representing the USA in international competition.

But she was excited when the White House called and asked if she was interested in being part of the Presidential Delegation that will be attending the 2008 Paralympic Games in Beijing.

Driscoll will be part of the seven-person Presidential Delegation, headed by Dr. James B. Peake, Secretary of Veterans Affairs, representing President George W. Bush and the nation at the Paralympic Games Opening Ceremonies in Beijing on Saturday (Sept. 6).

The two-degree U. of I. graduate, who works for the College of Applied Health Sciences, leaves Thursday (Sept. 4).

"I'm proud to be representing the country, the office of the President and the President," she said. "I'll be representing the University, too.

"The U. of I.'s reputation is worldwide, and everywhere I go, I talk about the U. of I."

Driscoll asked to stay in Beijing a few days longer than the rest of the delegation so she could see some of the Paralympic track events.

She retired after winning the last gold medal presented at the Sydney Paralympics in 2000, but the compelling reason to stay is for her to see two wheelchair athletes from Ghana.

Driscoll first went to Ghana through Joni and Friends, Inc., in 2001 and directed a one-week wheelchair track camp.

"Thirty-two people showed up, some of whom were crawling, with sandals on their hands and thick calluses on their knees," she said. "There were only six antiquated racing chairs and a track that hadn't been resurfaced for 30 years."

The fledgling Ghanaian wheelchair athletes were undeterred.

After returning to Ghana in 2002, Driscoll worked with private donors and Rotary International to raise \$60,000 to bring eight Ghanaian wheelchair athletes and two coaches to the U. of I.'s Urbana-Champaign campus the next year. They also received their first everyday wheelchairs and custom-made racing chairs.

"Ghana has never won an Olympic or Paralympic medal," Driscoll said. "Two of the Ghanaian athletes I worked with have a real shot to medal in Beijing."

She said the benefits for the Ghanaian wheelchair athletes go far beyond the track.

"In Ghana, people believe that a disability means a person has been cursed by God and they are often treated no better than an animal," she said. "So when the Ghanaian wheelchair athletes got to come to America, their status went way up because traveling to our country is the dream of so many people from Ghana.

"One of the women athletes told me after she visited the United States, things at home got much better: 'Now my family talks to me,' she said."

Driscoll discussed her work with the Ghanaian wheelchair athletes during the screening process for the Presidential Delegation.

A few days after her interview, she got another call from the White House inviting her to a state dinner on Sept. 15 when one of the guests of honor will be John Kufuor, the president of Ghana.

"So, I'll get home from the Paralympics on Sept. 10 and then leave for Washington on Sept. 14 for the White House state dinner, complete with a formal receiving line and pictures with the President and First Lady and the President of Ghana and his wife," she said. "This is all so cool. You just can't plan things like this."

Driscoll earned a bachelor's degree in speech communication with honors from the University of Illinois at Urban-Champaign in 1991. She went on to receive a master's degree in rehabilitation in 1993 from the U. of I. In 1997, she was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Rhode Island. In 2002, she received an honorary law degree from the Massachusetts School of Law.

Driscoll's career as a wheelchair athlete is filled with championship accomplishments. She won the Boston Marathon eight times and is the only person in history to achieve that feat. She is an Olympic athlete who won silver medals in the 1992 and 1996 Summer Olympic Games in the 800-meter women's wheelchair exhibition event. She won a total of five gold medals, three silver medals and four bronze medals in the 1988, 1992, 1996 and 2000 Paralympics.

Driscoll is also a world record holder in the 10,000-meter track event and marathon road-racing distances. *Sports Illustrated for Women* recognizes Driscoll as one of the top 25 female athletes of the 20th century.

Sixteen U. of I. male and female athletes (students and alumni) and two coaches are representing the University at the Beijing Paralympics in wheelchair basketball and track and field.

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