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Oldest Human Fossil Scheduled to Debut in Houston

By Te-Erika Patterson

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The continent of Africa has produced the oldest human fossil, affectionately nicknamed 'Lucy.' Never seen by the general public in its homeland or abroad, Lucy is coming to Houston as part of an 11-city U.S. tour and many are asking why.

In 1974 archaeologists discovered several hundred bone fragments during an archaeological dig in the desert-like Afar region of northeastern Ethiopia. After reconstruction, archaeologists found that the fragments comprised 40 percent of a female skeleton that appeared to have lived nearly 3.2 million years ago.

The team of researchers and archaeologists named the fossil Lucy after a Beatles song that was played repeatedly throughout the evening as the team celebrated their groundbreaking discovery.

According to scientists, Lucy is the oldest human fossil known to man, which they say indicates that mankind originated from the continent of Africa. Leading anthropologists also claim that Lucy's existence supports the theory of evolution after being classified as an upright walking hominid. A hominid is any member of the biological family Hominidae (the "great apes"), including humans, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans.

Lucy's bones are kept in a vault at the Ethiopian Natural History Museum and many in the scientific community believe they should stay there. The exhibition, which will be hosted by the Houston Museum of Natural Science, "Lucy's Legacy: The Hidden Treasures of



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Ethiopia” exhibition will begin August 31st and will mark the first time Lucy has ever left the continent of Africa.

Anthropologists and many museum curators believe that traveling with Lucy could damage or destroy the irreplaceable scientific find.

In a National Geographic article in November 2006, Rick Potts, director of the Smithsonian’s Human Origins Program said, “Any risk of damage or removal from scientific study, especially when exact replicas of the fossils are indistinguishable for display purposes, seems unnecessary and in this particular case, not well conceived.”

But that didn’t deter Ethiopian President Girma Wolde-Giorgis from offering the United States a first-hand look at his country’s national treasure. President Wolde-Giorgis, who visited Houston recently to discuss the plans for the first-time exhibition, believes Lucy has great significance.

“[It is important] to know your heritage and your background [and] how long ago people existed on this planet, from the time of evolution, from homosapiens, homoerectus and all of those things. It’s a very useful thing to know,” stated President Girma Wolde-Giorgis. Lucy’s American tour is expected to attract tourists to Ethiopia.

“Ethiopia is not very well known in American parts of the world,” stated President Wolde-Giorgis. “We’d like America to know that we are a big country... a good country and what a historic country it is.”

As one hand washes the other, local leaders recognize that this exhibit not only sends a positive message about the prominence of Ethiopia, it also propels our city into the public eye of the nation.

“Lucy, hands down, is the King Tut of the anthropology world and ranks as one of the most significant discoveries to date,” said Jeff Moseley, President and CEO of the Greater Houston Partnership. “The Houston Museum of Natural Science went up against some of the biggest names in the museum community, including the Smithsonian, and came out on top. Lucy’s first visit to America for exhibition is a prestigious accomplishment for the Houston arts community, and it’s a testament to the international nature and world-class leadership of this region.”

While museums across the country scramble to be included in this

historic tour, the city of Houston has already secured their place as the front runner. Texas State Senator Rodney Ellis claimed that Houston was a natural choice for the first exhibition.

“What connects Houston to Ethiopia more than anything else is the late Congressman Mickey Leland,” Senator Ellis said of the late Texas congressman who was a champion for the hungry and poor. “Mickey Leland died in Ethiopia. We certainly used his name in order to secure this exhibit. A part of the impetus for doing this was the fact that Gezaghen Kebede the local consulate general lives here in Houston. It was his idea. He took over folks from the Mickey Leland Center with him along with Jew Don Boney during the early discussions about this. This discussion has been going on for five years. It’s been a long road to get this [exhibit].”

The courtship of this exchange could prove beneficial for both parties involved according to Senator Ellis.

“Lucy is going to be a major tourist attraction,” he said. “It’s going to be a major status coo for the Houston museum. People at the Smithsonian, in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles are all now saying, ‘Why Houston?’ We were told when we were there, it’s because we Texans were bold enough to ask. Obviously there are security risks and costs associated with it. Insurance would have to be put in place. The federal government plays a role in making sure that Lucy comes and she is secured.”

In addition to meeting with the Governor and the Texas Senate, Ethiopian President Wolde-Giorgis also met with representatives from Maximus Coffee Group concerning increased trade opportunities between Ethiopia and the city of Houston.

“We’re here to represent the coffee industry here in Houston,” said Leo Vasquez, Executive Vice President of Maximus Coffee Group.

“Ethiopia is a major coffee exporter with very high quality coffee. People wouldn’t normally know that. We’re trying to help get more business going here through the port of Houston and through our different warehouses and finished product plants...It’s all part of that circle of life that we are talking about; a small world bringing everything together.”

The world may seem smaller when we recognize the significant ties between Houston and Ethiopia. According to the Greater Houston

Partnership, in 2005 trade between Houston and Ethiopia totaled \$101.9 million. Waterborne trade with Ethiopia through the Port of Houston totaled \$63.9 million in 2005. That's more than a 600 percent increase from just \$9.1 million in 2000.

Imports from Ethiopia to Houston totaled just \$493,000, or less than one percent of the total. Coffee, tea and spices accounted for the bulk of imports. Cereals, animal and vegetable fats, oils and waxes accounted for the bulk of Houston's exports to Ethiopia. In addition to increased opportunities for trade, the world's stage is set for Houston to take the spotlight as this much anticipated historical discovery is made available to the general public for the first time.

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