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## **Secretary Gassman Praises Julie Ray, Winner of Vocational Rehabilitation Career Achievement Award, as Role Model for All**

### *Labor Secretary says Chippewa Falls Native Shows Disabled Can Change World*

EAU CLAIRE – Department of Workforce Development Secretary Roberta Gassman today praised Julie Ray, winner of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation Career Achievement Award, as a role model not only for people with disabilities, but everyone in overcoming major challenges in life and working to help others succeed.

“Julie Ray is a shining example of all that people with disabilities have to offer,” Secretary Gassman said. “They have much to contribute, and as Julie Ray shows, they are capable of changing the world, making a big difference for others. At an early age, Julie was diagnosed with a rare, genetic form of macular degeneration that today has severely impaired vision in both eyes. Yet she has become an accomplished scientist, helping us see and understand our changing world through her research in the jungles of Central and South America. At the same time, she is working to help poor people of Panama improve their lives as part of an exciting research project.”

Ray was one of four individuals featured by the Department's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) last October as part of the National Disability Employment Awareness Month. DVR provides employment services to people with disabilities. Of the four individuals DVR highlighted, she was chosen as the winner of the DVR Career Achievement Award. She became a DVR consumer while attending the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. She is now pursuing her doctoral degree in ecological studies at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia.

On behalf of Secretary Gassman, DVR Administrator Charlene Dwyer presented Ray the award today in a ceremony at the Eau Claire Job Center. Ray's studies, teaching, and research in Panama prevented DVR from scheduling the awards ceremony earlier.

“We are so proud to have been a partner in Julie's success,” Dwyer said. “DVR is truly honored to have played even a small part in all that she has achieved.”

Ray has studied reptiles and amphibians in Panama and Peru, as well as Florida and the Upper Midwest. She has had several articles on her research published internationally, and she is a sought-after lecturer. A recent article by the Associated Press told of her plans for a \$1 million research center in the mountains of Cocle Province, about 125 miles from Panama City. Besides serving as a research facility for visiting scientists, the center would help area residents by providing employment in its laboratories, library, cafeteria, and store with food that residents now walk miles to buy. She has begun raising funds for the project and will serve as the center's director when it is completed.

When Ray was 4, she was diagnosed with Best's Macular Dystrophy, which at that time affected only her right eye. During her first year at UW-Stevens Point, she began to lose vision in her left eye. She now has some peripheral vision, but images appear blurred.

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