HEALTHY ECOSYSTEMS, HEALTHY PEOPLE

Medical schools have historically had little interest in ecological services, sustainability, population growth or economics, but to Western’s Ecosystem Health Program, these factors are central to determining health outcomes.

“We often consider problems of the environment to be separate from those of human populations, but especially in areas where subsistence is so closely linked to the land, a healthy ecosystem is essential to maintaining good health,” says Beryl Ivey Chair in Ecosystem Health, Charles Trick. “To understand the true value of ecosystem health, one needs to stand on the edge of a community in crisis,” he adds.

Through the Ecosystem Health – Africa Initiative he helped establish in 2005, Trick is doing just that.

Working with Jack Bend, Irena Creed and Regna Darnell, Trick closely examines shifting ecological factors affecting health in Kenya’s Lake Naivasha region, which has grown from 19,000 people in 1990 to more than 400,000 today. Importantly, the project partners with stakeholder groups to focus on issues deemed critical by members of the community – not by researchers from Western.

Given the rapid influx of people and industrial operations, the Naivasha region has become a source of economic wealth in the form of ecotourism, geothermal energy production and floriculture, but these benefits have not come without cost. The land is no longer as fertile, fisheries are failing and the region has witnessed an increased incidence of social diseases and HIV/AIDS.

There are also major concerns about levels of pesticides, fertilizers and metals making their way into the lake – which has become the source of all water needs and the sink to all residential and industrial wastes. These factors are clearly affecting the population’s health.

“Inhabitants rely on the lake as a direct source of drinking water and food, and it serves as the foundation of their economy and social structure, but the lake and the land around it are under siege from unsustainable use of resources, pollution and the threat of climate change,” Trick says.

While adapting ecosystem health strategies developed at Western to such challenges in Kenya, the Africa Initiative has also created 10 student internships and 15 collaborative research projects with Egerton University. In the process, this partnership has built cross-cultural capacity by providing training at Western for Kenyan students that creates an understanding of healthy ecosystems and encourages a culture of responsibility to the health of their communities back home.

“The humanitarian aspect of the Africa Initiative is that it is not just a ‘band-aid’, ” Trick says. “Rather, it fosters a culture of understanding of the relationships between sick ecosystems and human illness so that underprivileged individuals learn to manage their future.”

The team’s international efforts will also provide additional benefits in Canada, particularly for much-needed humanitarian initiatives within aboriginal communities. Trick and his colleagues will use the $5,000 earned from the Western Humanitarian Award to fund a documentary filmed by local Kenyan residents about their views of the ecosystem and their health, which will be shared around the world.

The calibre of nominations to this first awards competition is nothing short of remarkable. Without question, universities such as Western offer very fertile ground indeed for fostering humanitarian commitment, and for nurturing individuals who are passionate about improving the world in which they live – in any number of different ways. And they are succeeding.

At the end of the day, it all makes sense. As members of a community of discovery, learning and service, we have an inherent social responsibility to contribute to the greater world, while inspiring and training the global leaders of tomorrow.

In this issue of Research Western, you will read about the efforts of this year’s award nominees, including our three recipients - representing a project team, an individual student and faculty member - who will receive a cash award to continue to advance their important work. I am convinced their endeavours – which include outstanding initiatives that protect our ecosystem, identify those who disappeared during decades of conflict in Peru and promote press freedoms in Southeast Asia – will generate interest in humanitarianism within the broader Western community and inspire still others to action.

Please join me in congratulating this year’s Western Humanitarian Award winners!

RECOGNIZING AND REWARDING HUMANITARIANISM

Faculty, staff and students at Western are engaged every day in humanitarian efforts right at home, and across the globe.

And, as part of an effort to more formally recognize the Western community’s commitment to social justice issues and to improving the quality of life for individuals and groups, the University has established the Western Humanitarian Awards.
THE SOCIAL (JUSTICE) NETWORK

By actively engaging marginalized communities around the world, Sandra Smeltzer brings an international perspective to the classroom that transcends the traditional teaching experience and prepares students to lead as global citizens.

"I don’t think of the work I do as a job – rather, it is my life," the Faculty of Information & Media Studies professor says. "As researchers and educators, we are rewarded by training entire classes of students who will step out into the world and make very tangible differences in the lives of others."

Smeltzer’s research, teaching and personal commitment to people is bound by an overriding passion for social justice. "At its core, I believe humanitarianism is based on a concern for the welfare of others, and that it is my duty to promote and support this ethos in principle and in practice," she says.

Carrying out extensive research in Southeast Asia, Smeltzer is keenly interested in the ethics of development, implications of free trade agreements for marginalized communities and issues related to Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D).

Many of these efforts focus on civil society’s use of alternative media – including blogging and social networking – to circumvent media control, and undergraduate students have become particularly salient given the rapid pace of technological change and the role technology has played in recent revolutions in Egypt and the Middle East.

These research activities also provide unique learning opportunities for Smeltzer’s students in the media and the public interest program. As part of her broader commitment to international development, she has coordinated and supervised 20 student internships with a range of humanitarian, non-governmental and community-based organizations, primarily in Southeast Asia and East Africa.

Half of these students have partnered with Malaysia’s Centre for Independent Journalism (CIJ), a non-profit organization dedicated to defending marginalized communities and improving citizens’ ability to communicate. Gaining practical, on-the-ground experience, students have provided community radio training, organized advocacy campaigns, facilitated media workshops and participated in conferences that address issues related to poverty and inequity.

Other students have interned with the Western Heads East (WHE) project, which is the University community’s response to the HIV/AIDS crisis in Africa. "I think one of the most valuable lessons I learned from Sandy was to recognize that the best humanitarian act is to acknowledge another person’s humanity," says Jackie Strecke, a former student and WHE intern.

Smeltzer has also coordinated more than 50 local practicum placements for her students with non-governmental, non-profit and community-based organizations ranging from the Humane Society and London Abused Women’s Centre to the Canadian Cancer Society and Unity Project for Relief and Homelessness in London.

"The goal of these placements is to provide local organizations with additional support for activities dedicated to improving the lives of a range of citizens, while also providing Western students with an opportunity to gain practical experience in the non-profit sector that complements their theoretical training in the classroom," she says.

Smeltzer will use her $2,500 Western Humanitarian Award to fund two additional undergraduate student internships with CIJ and the Malaysian Popular Communications Centre for Human Rights.

RE restorIng names to the disappeared

The process of identifying remains and restoring a sense of humanity to people who have vanished and been ignominiously murdered may be one of the most humanitarian acts one can commit.

"To me, the very essence of humanitarianism is a respect for human dignity and human life in the face of forces that seek to strip those rights from the powerless," says bioarchaeology PhD student, Maricarmen Vega.

Having worked with the Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team (EPAF) since 2006, Vega returns a degree of dignity to los desaparecidos (the disappeared) of Peru by identifying the remains of those who went missing during two decades of internal strife. The struggle, between successive governments and a pair of terrorist organizations during the 1980s and 1990s, led to an estimated 8,500-15,000 disappearances. The 2003 Peruvian Truth and Reconciliation Commission report into these atrocities paints a picture of systematic torture, kidnapping and assassinations by all parties involved, but left many questions unanswered. To this day, families continue to search for justice and closure for the thousands who remain missing.

"I am particularly interested in human rights and want to apply my knowledge of bioarchaeology on behalf of the living," Vega says.

The skills she employs during exhumations and analyses of victims of war crimes and human rights abuses allow EPAF to provide evidence for judicial prosecution and to help identify victims so families can recover the remains of loved ones, give them a dignified burial and gain a degree of closure about their deaths. In the process, Vega is shedding an important light on a dark period in Peru’s recent history.

Over the past five years, she has worked with EPAF on a variety of cases, including the notable excavation of a mass grave for 123 people shot in Putis by the Peruvian army in 1984. Vega’s expertise in the analysis of children’s bones and commingled human remains enabled her to become an expert witness for the prosecution of perpetrators of the largest single massacre of the country’s armed conflict.

Given the far-reaching nature and high number of perpetrators, these cases – including one that led to the prosecution of former President Alberto Fujimori – require a high degree of courage, professionalism, sensitivity and awareness of potential dangers.

Vega’s background as a forensic anthropologist has also led her to prepare a series of manuals EPAF now uses worldwide. "They are a part of the material EPAF shares with justice and human rights organizations around the world to clarify the importance of forensic anthropologists as key contributors to the investigation of crimes against humanity," she says. "They also guarantee the ‘right to know’ of families of the disappeared, which is one of the most important steps of grief closure in these cases."

Vega will use the $2,500 she earned from the Western Humanitarian Award to return to Peru and to continue her work with EPAF, which is putting faces and names to the bones of the disappeared.
FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Working with farmers to introduce grains and perennial legumes, geography professor Rachel Bezner Kerr is helping improve soil fertility, food security, nutrition and overall health in Malawi.

As the research coordinator of the Soils, Food and Healthy Communities project, she works with more than 4,000 farmers and a hospital to examine the social, environmental and medical aspects of child health and nutrition, including the relationship between HIV/AIDS-affected families and their agricultural practices.

These efforts combine sustainable development and community-based participatory research to examine the ties between agriculture, health and nutrition, and have had a particularly profound impact on rural populations. “One of the most important and exciting findings we have had has been evidence of improved child growth among under-five children participating in a project related to child feeding practices and legume production,” Bezner Kerr says.

www.soilandfood.org

A RESIDENT ABROAD

As a resident-in-training, Dr. Kevin Fung participated in a medical mission to Guyana that would shape his global outlook and future efforts.

An otolaryngology and oncology professor in the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, cross-appointed to the Don Wright Faculty of Music, Fung has since been involved in two medical missions to Honduras, where he served as a head and neck surgeon with an international team of medical professionals. Given his experiences, he now hopes to establish a global health funding initiative that supports other residents in their humanitarian activities.

“The clinic typically sees hundreds of disadvantaged adult and paediatric patients afflicted with a variety of disorders of the ears, nose, throat, head and neck,” Fung says. “Many patients also receive surgical care, including procedures we would otherwise take for granted in North America.”

REDUCING RISK OF HIV/AIDS

Sociology postdoctoral fellow Eric Tenkorang’s commitment to reducing HIV/AIDS among young people is immediately evident in both his research and his involvement with HIV advocacy groups and communities affected by the pandemic.

“As they have tremendous implications for HIV transmission in several African countries, I am keenly interested in examining factors that predispose young people to risky sexual behaviours,” he says. Tenkorang’s research is critical of individual-focused AIDS risk reduction models in sub-Saharan Africa, and he proposes more complex alternatives that incorporate structural factors that inhibit safer sex behaviours.

A native of Ghana, Tenkorang is the president of the Tigress Youth Club in Accra – despite spending most of the year in Canada. The non-profit organization mobilizes youth for community development purposes, creates HIV awareness programs and provides social support for those affected by the disease.

LENDING A HAND

During a 2007 visit to her childhood home in Nhema Village, Zimbabwe, master’s of education candidate Edelyn Musara noted the number of children running around, unable to attend school because they could not afford the cost of tuition.

As a teacher in Mississauga and student herself, Musara recognizes the importance of schooling. She founded Helping Hands, a non-profit organization through which Canadian students and educators raise funds to provide supplies, sanitation, potable water and library resources to the children of Nhema.

“Having been born in the Nhema community myself, I know our efforts will go a long way to improve the quality of life for the children of the village,” Musara says. “Giving these children an education is an initiative that will help alleviate the needs of poverty-stricken children and provide them with much-needed opportunities.”

HEADING EAST

When she first served as a Western Heads East (WHE) intern in Mwanza, Tanzania in 2006, current geography PhD candidate Ellena Andoniou had no idea she would continue to shape the project five years later.

As Western’s community response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, the research and service-learning program partners with women’s groups to introduce probiotic yogurt that helps address the illness. Andoniou’s experience was so profound she has spent more than 18 months in Africa to ensure WHE’s sustainability.

“The time I spent in Mwanza taught me humility and a deep sense of caring that can only come from interactions with some of the most vulnerable people in society,” she says. “I was forced to rethink the meaning of my identity, and the experience helped shape the future course of my life path.”

www.westernheadseast.ca

AN OPEN HEART

Clinical psychology PhD student Kim Edwards offers her heart when others are failing.

For the past six years, she has volunteered with Save a Child’s Heart, an Israeli initiative designed to improve training and paediatric cardiac care for children in the developing world. In her role, Edwards helps ease the transition and provide comfort to families of children who have travelled to Israel for three months to receive open heart surgery unavailable in their countries.

Moving forward, Edwards, who also volunteers extensively within her community, hopes to establish Project PECKS – Psychology Ethiopia-Canada Knowledge Share – to foster international research collaborations with Jimma University that help improve education related to mental health disorders and treatments in the East African country.

“Volunteering is not only a passion and interest of mine,” she says, “but a way of life.”

www.saveachildsheart.org

NOMINEES

Rachel Bezner Kerr
Ellena Andoniou
Kim Edwards
Kevin Fung
Eric Tenkorang
Edelyn Musara

Western Humanitarian Awards uwo.ca/research
NOMINEES

ENGINEERING DEVELOPMENT

This past summer, undergraduate engineering and environmental science student Lauren Hockin experienced firsthand the mission of Engineers Without Borders Canada (EWB).

Spending three months in Malawi as a junior fellow in international development, the current president of Western’s EWB chapter helped implement and improve a water-monitoring tool used to increase water quality and access across the country.

The international NGO creates opportunities for rural Africans to improve their livelihoods through access to services, infrastructure, clean water and income generation on small-scale farms. For five years, Hockin has played a leadership role in Western’s chapter, which boasts 100 members and has recently sent students to Ghana, Zambia and Malawi.

“I am committed to sharing my passion for global citizenship and humanitarianism with my community in all ventures of my life to promote global awareness,” she says.

PROMOTING GLOBAL HEALTH

Through innovative training, research and clinical efforts, Dr. Neil Arya has helped provide significant health benefits to disadvantaged communities around the world.

A practicing physician, Arya is also founding director of the Office of Global Health within Western’s Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry. This initiative strives to develop socially responsible, collaborative leaders in the advancement of healthcare and health outcomes for all individuals and populations.

In the process, Arya has helped restructure medical curricula to increase emphasis on global health, ecosystem health and marginalized communities. He is also keenly interested in issues related to the mitigation of conflict through the promotion of health – writing and speaking extensively about Peace through Health. “Once war and violence are understood as public health problems, we can work on mitigating their effects and evaluating our impacts,” he says.

A GLOBAL VISION

“When I first volunteered for Global Vision three years ago, my future boss replied: ‘If you work for free, I can’t depend on you,’” says Western undergraduate economics student Philip Chow. “I proved him wrong.”

Chow has led a 49-person trade mission to China and, upon establishing the London chapter of Global Vision, recruited more than 120 youth to join him in the first year. The organization creates partnerships with governments, businesses and educational institutions to help prepare students to contribute meaningfully to their communities.

He has also created a social networking platform used at the G8/G20 youth summit that brings youth together to discuss national and international issues. “Doing good and doing well can go in hand,” he says. “Social innovation saves lives, lifts people out of poverty and adds value to our society.”

ANATOMY OF GIVING

Already committed to volunteering locally within his community, master’s of science student Ryan Rawski developed a more global outlook after participating in Western’s Alternative Spring Break program in 2009.

The service-learning experience encourages active participation in the community and increased civic engagement by students. Rawski’s team worked in a health clinic in rural Nicaragua, helping examine patients, provide vaccinations and teach children about the importance of hygiene to their health. These efforts dovetail with Rawski’s studies in clinical anatomy and longstanding experience with the Student Emergency Response Team.

“I believe that international service learning is a valuable experience for students because it fosters the development of a worldly perspective in the leaders of tomorrow,” he says. “I hesitate to call myself a humanitarian because, in earnest, I simply take part in activities I believe in.”

PROTECTING PERSONAL DATA

Not only is Amy ter Haar a practicing lawyer, she is a graduate student in Western’s Faculty of Law, directing her efforts toward improving lives around the world.

With the escalating use of mobile technologies, issues related to data collection and information dissemination are creating unique concerns for vulnerable populations in the developing world. In an effort to ensure personal data is collected fairly and legally, ter Haar co-founded the Personal Data Protection Initiative, which works with NGOs and Information and Communication Technologies for Development (ICT4D) projects to develop personal data protection processes and policies.

“Increasingly, many NGOs and ICT4D projects are evolving into data management businesses and hence, need to implement security and data protection processes and policies,” she says. “They are often aware of the issues, but lack guiding principles or sufficient resources to implement privacy-related efforts.”

EDUCATING THE WORLD

Master’s of education student Kendra Slee embraces opportunities to teach the world – at home and abroad.

These teaching experiences have taken her from Peru, to spending eight months working at a school in South Korea, to instructing English at a preschool and an orphanage in Japan as part of Brock University’s Turn Around Project (TAP). The TAP creates and maintains integrated arts projects for youth, which foster and promote reciprocal exchanges to strengthen and build communities.

Slee is also actively engaged in a variety of local initiatives, several of which are literacy-based. “I volunteer because it is the right thing to do,” she says.

“I have the legs to run for a cure, and why not spend a night in a soup kitchen or an hour or two with the residents of a nursing home?”

CONTRIBUTIONS

Editor: Douglas Keddy
Publisher: Ted Hewitt, Vice-President (Research & International Relations)
Photography: Shawn Simpson
Design: Rob Potter

Please forward your comments to: dkeddy@uwo.ca
www.uwo.ca/research

Produced by Research Western, in cooperation with the Department of Communications and Public Affairs at The University of Western Ontario.