

# Western Heads East

## Going Global

Inspired by passion and driven by research, **Western Heads East (WHE)** is an innovative multidisciplinary initiative responding to a key global issue – combating HIV/AIDS. The program engages students and applies pioneering research to real-world problems for direct humanitarian benefit. Working with local women's groups, WHE has introduced probiotic yogurt as a means of addressing health issues related to HIV/AIDS, developed micro-finance initiatives and provided students interested in international development with hands-on service learning opportunities.



*While interning with Western Heads East, students also spend time teaching English, volunteering at local orphanages and participating in community initiatives.*

### Inspiration

- Stephen Lewis, then *UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa*, spoke at Western in 2002 and struck a chord while explaining his difficulties gaining attention for the 2.3 million people dying in Africa every year
- Inspired Housing Department staff created WHE as a sustainable community development project to go beyond financial contributions and to directly help address the HIV/AIDS pandemic
- Began as a partnership with local women's groups in Mwanza, Tanzania in 2004, and has since spawned sister projects in Kenya – with plans to expand throughout East and Central Africa

### About the Project

- Western's community response to the HIV/AIDS and malnutrition crises in Africa
- Overall goal to establish probiotic yogurt programs in Tanzania, Kenya, Rwanda and Uganda
- Original partner, the *Tukwamwane Women's Group* in Mwanza – affectionately nicknamed, "*The Yogurt Mamas*" – has been licensed as an NGO
- The group has become a community hub, providing lay counselling and school lunch programs, while producing and distributing probiotic yogurt
- Provides probiotic yogurt production training to women's groups in communities throughout East Africa
- Until 2009, provided probiotic yogurt free-of-charge for more than 150 people living with HIV/AIDS and sought subsidies to pay for yogurt for those who could not afford to buy it

### Research

- Probiotic yogurt developed by Western's **Gregor Reid** and **Sharareh Hekmat** – and called *Fiti*, meaning "*Health*" in Kiswahili – provides a nutrient-rich food containing 'friendly' bacteria
- Probiotic literally means 'for life' and refers to live microorganisms that have been proven to confer a health benefit to the host – with the goal is of re-establishing a balance between good and bad bacteria in the body
- In African communities, probiotics can make an important difference in the remediation of diarrhea – a condition that kills a child every 12 seconds and afflicts up to 90 per cent of those living with HIV/AIDS
- Probiotics can also enhance immunity, a major factor for patients living with compromised immune systems
- Researchers have witnessed increased energy levels – particularly in children – possibly due to the reduction of energy-draining diarrhea, and found that women without sufficient lactobacilli bacteria in their vaginas may be more than four times more likely to contract HIV
- They also hope to establish *Fiti's* benefits by measuring children's growth, studying incidences of infection and by analyzing levels of CD4 (a glycoprotein expressed on cells and an important marker for healthy immune systems)

### Service Learning

- Each year, several students spend four months living in East Africa, where they assist with probiotic yogurt production and maintenance of the WHE project, and work within the community
- Other goals upon returning to Canada include promotion of education related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, promoting Canadian AIDS awareness campaigns and raising funds for specific needs in East Africa
- To date, more than 50 students, staff and faculty have participated in the WHE program

**For more information, please visit:** [www.westernheadseast.ca](http://www.westernheadseast.ca)



**Western  
Research**