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.

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 Tukwamuane 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