

Million-dollar gift enriches lives in Africa

December 19, 2011

Photo by Douglas Keddy Western Heads East, started in 2003 by a group of Western students, faculty and staff, teaches and empowers east African mothers – affectionately called ‘Yogurt Mamas,’ pictured above from the Oranda site in Kenya – to produce potentially life-saving probiotic yogurt.

Thanks to a \$1.06-million gift, The University of Western Ontario will expand its community-driven Western Heads East program that provides disease-fighting probiotic yogurt to people living with HIV/AIDS in Africa.

[Western Heads East](#), started in 2003 by a group of Western students, faculty and staff, teaches and empowers east African mothers – affectionately called ‘Yogurt Mamas’ – to produce potentially life-saving probiotic yogurt.

The Yogurt Mamas will see an immediate upgrade to four existing yogurt kitchens in Tanzania and 16 new kitchens throughout eastern Africa. This translates into increasing capacity to feed 1,100 people each day living with HIV/AIDS during the next 10 years.

Working with a probiotic bacterial strain donated by Lawson Research scientist and Western professor Dr. Gregor Reid and [Chr. Hansen \(Denmark\)](#) in a yogurt formulated by Dr. Sharareh Hekmat from Brescia University College, the product helps alleviate infections related to HIV/AIDS, and provides nourishment to many adults and children.

Western professor Marianne Larsen, a Western Heads East chair, made the donation knowing the organization provides a great way for faculty, staff and students to become active global citizens.

“I have been completely inspired by Western Heads East,” Larsen says. “It’s incredible what the Yogurt Mamas have accomplished in their kitchens and the tremendous impact the production of yogurt has had on their lives, and the lives of their families and people, young and old, living with HIV/AIDS.”

Larsen established the Johansen Larsen Foundation after receiving an inheritance from a family friend in 2007.

“I am still overwhelmed by the generosity of Ms. Larsen and by the thought of the many lives that will be brilliantly affected by this kindness,” says Bob Gough, Western Heads East director. “The impact of the donation will be truly phenomenal. It will build significant health and nutrition awareness in the community and bring sustainable economic development to the area.”

Photo by Douglas Keddy Meaghan Horgan, a former Western Heads East intern, sits with some of the probiotic yogurt.

