

Student Profile: Leah Genge

Reaching out to Aboriginal communities, at home and abroad

To Leah Genge, ‘global health’ means much more than reaching out to developing nations. “Global health is global, and therefore includes Canada,” she observes. “There is so much disparity between mainstream and marginalized communities in this wealthy country.”

Leah saw this disparity during her year as an outreach worker at an Aboriginal health clinic in Vancouver’s lower east side. The proportion of Aboriginal people in this community is high, as are rates of HIV and AIDS, intravenous drug use, prostitution, homelessness and poverty. She found the experience enriching and was able to work with an Australian tribal elder while teaching art therapy workshops. She was moved by the healing power of heritage and identity.

Leah had volunteered on a research project in Guyana where she taught HIV and AIDS awareness programs to people living in remote regions. This and the Vancouver experience piqued her interest in gender issues and HIV, leading her to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine where she obtained a masters degree in reproductive and sexual health research. But community medicine had always hovered in the back of her mind, inspired by her father’s work as a family physician in Baddeck, NS. She joined Dalhousie Medical School after her studies in London.

Now a second-year medical student, Leah is the senior International Health Liaison, representing Dalhousie’s Global Health Initiative to the Canadian Federation of Medical Students’ International Health Program. In addition to organizing awareness campaigns for students, faculty and staff – on such topics as AIDS, malaria and world abortion policies – Leah and her colleagues in the Global Health Initiative have launched a new program, ‘Gangreen.’ As Leah explains, “Gangreen drives home the reality that we can’t have healthy communities without a healthy environment.”

Leah and fellow students Aisling Porter and David Shaw have also launched the Aboriginal Health Interest Group at Dalhousie. “We’re promoting culture and positive two-way exchanges between Aboriginal communities and medical students,” says Leah, who spent last summer on a reserve in North Carolina, teaching healthy living and learning about First Nations culture. “We hope to host a ‘day at the medical school’ for Aboriginal youth, and are lobbying for policies and programs that will help young Aboriginal people pursue careers in health care.”

Leah’s next project will take her closer to her hometown of Baddeck. “I’m doing a community-based health research project in cooperation with the five bands of First Nations in Cape Breton,” she says.

This project demonstrates how Leah plans to approach her future work as a physician: “I want to stay connected to my public health background, to Aboriginal communities, and to research that will influence policy. As the next generation of physicians, we have to

take a stance on social issues. We have to get involved and lobby for change, in Canada and around the world.”