

MALTIOX

News for Donors to the Mayan Scholarship Program

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UPDATE ON THE NEW WOOD-BURNING STOVES FOR AMIDI WOMEN

As of the last report, funds were available for 30 fuel-efficient stoves for the members of AMIDI. Sixteen stoves had been installed. However, none were in use as they were in the process of being cured. In the interest of being culturally sensitive to traditional cooking methods, Ana Maria Chali Calan, the AMIDI leader, was asked if all 40 members would want to have new stoves should the funds become available. Her response was swift, emphatic, and affirmative. So, fundraising continued and, with a \$400 donation from Slow Food Sonoma County, the goal of providing 40 stoves has been reached. In addition, a donation was made specifically for a community center stove. Of the stoves that have been built to date, all are in use.

The custom-built stoves, made of locally available materials, are constructed against an interior wall, typically of homemade adobe bricks. The women receive a series of three classes to learn how to assist with the installation and how to best use and care for the stoves. As some of the women live up to a kilometer away from a road suitable for a truck, they transported the materials in cloth sacks on their backs. After

construction, the stoves and the cooking surface have to cure for several weeks. The stove top is made of a cast iron-type metal with removable discs that are seen resting against the wall in the photo below of Ana Maria at her neighbor's stove. Tortillas, eaten at every meal and sometimes the only food available, can be cooked directly on the cured metal.

The first group of stoves is now in use, and the women are "muy, muy contentas". They calculate that they use anywhere from 50% to 70% less wood to fuel the fire. Because live coals tend to last longer, renewing the fire is much easier. Even the dried corn cobs burn more efficiently. Also, they appreciate the even heating provided by the metal surface. At an elevation of 7,000 feet, the nights are cool and the residual heat from the stoves offers warmth.



Maltiox, pronounced mal-ti-osh, is a Kakchiquel Mayan word that means "thank you". Kakchiquel Mayan is the language spoken by our scholarship students, and the sentiment is theirs.

COOKING STOVES (cont'd.)

As for the health related benefits, one woman stated that her favorite thing about her stove is that she doesn't cry anymore while she cooks. For the unaccustomed, ten minutes in a smoke-filled Mayan kitchen is an eye and throat burning experience. The black soot that covers the walls serves as evidence as to why serious respiratory diseases are so prevalent, especially in young children who stay close to their mothers, often wrapped in a hand-woven cloth secured on their mothers' backs. In order to avoid some of the accumulated smoke that becomes denser the closer it gets to the ceiling, women traditionally kneel on the floor and stoop over wooden cutting boards as part of the meal preparation. Now, with the smoke vented through the roof, the women can perform that work on a table or on the edge of the stove itself. The women refer to the stoves as "muy comodas", meaning very comfortable.

When asked if her stove had been built, Ana Maria mumbled some excuse and carried on to the next topic of conversation. For those of you who met her, you would probably agree that it would be her intention for the other 39 AMIDI women to get their stoves first.

With all their hearts, the women of AMIDI thank the donors for their kindness and generosity.



Gabriela Mejia Guicoy, the treasurer for AMIDI, happily poses by her stove with her grandson on her back.

MEET A SCHOLARSHIP STUDENT

Meet Mayra Gricelda Jacobo Chali, the daughter and “chip off the old block” of Ana Maria Chali Calan, the village leader whom some of you met when she visited California in November of last year. Although our program provides scholarships for students through high school, some generous Slow Food members have provided funds for a full university scholarship to a deserving student, Mayra.

One of Mayra’s finest qualities is her willingness to respond to adversity. She has had practice all of her life as she was born during the war on a day when the Guatemalan Army had encircled the village and opened fire. Her first three weeks of life were spent hiding in the surrounding hills with her family. Mayra’s latest brush with adversity occurred last week when she heard that the local middle school students were each asked to buy uniforms and a full set of school supplies. Mayra brought her impressive leadership skills to bear by organizing the mothers and respectfully informing the teachers, who were not Mayan, that the new policies would cause economic hardship as well as go against both the Mayan culture of wearing traditional dress and their value of sharing. The issue has yet to be resolved, but Mayra is tenacious and dedicated to her community.

Mayra has just begun the 4th semester in a 10 semester program to become a social worker, a field in Guatemala in which she can realize her dream of dedicating her life to the plight of the Mayans, particularly the children and those who are the most economically challenged. As many university students, including Mayra, hold full-time jobs, she attends school all day long on Saturdays. She recently changed jobs and is now a bilingual (Kakchiquel and Spanish) teacher in the local elementary school. Mayra,

who has a high school teaching credential in that field, will be the only bilingual teacher in the area. She is particularly enthusiastic as she can play a role in actively preserving the language, a need that has arisen over the years as Spanish has increasingly replaced Mayan languages in many of the areas of Guatemala.

Mayra is married and has a son who will be two years old in August. Her husband, also a born leader and a Kakchiquel Mayan, supports her enthusiastically in her studies even though he has not had the opportunity to attend a university. Mayra is extremely grateful for her scholarship.



Mayra, on the left, is chatting with two AMIDI women. The raised bed is part of a soil improvement project for vegetable gardens that was inspired by Ana Maria’s visits to various gardens and farms in Sonoma County.

THERE AT THE GIVING OF LIGHT

The Maya believe that to give birth is to “da luz”—to give light. Traditionally, Mayan women have relied upon midwives to both prepare them for birth and to attend at the birth of their children. Since at least the 1930s, the Guatemalan government has implemented programs to train Mayan midwives in “modern” medical practices, believing that to do so will improve village care at the time of childbirth. One result has been a growing awareness, among the medical profession, that the skills and contributions of Mayan midwives go far beyond what modern medicine offers. The skills of the midwives are imbued with traditional spirituality, personal concern, and age-old practices that Mayan women trust and rely upon.

Ana Maria Chali Calan spoke with Marilee Wingert and Lynda Chenoweth about her role as a village midwife during her visit to Sonoma County last year. She became a midwife after she was forced to give birth to her daughter, Mayra, by herself. The Guatemalan military had encircled her village and, although there was a midwife in the greater area, she was not within the circle. When Mayra was three hours old, Ana Maria and her husband gathered their other children, some bedding, and some dry tortillas and went into hiding in the hills above the village. After 21 days, they returned to their home and Ana Maria decided that no woman she knew should ever have to deliver her own child. She learned the skills of a midwife.

In Pachay las Lomas, the job of midwife is viewed as a community service because the villagers don’t have the funds to pay doctors. Pregnant women are afraid, with good reason, to go to the government hospitals so their preference is to give birth at home. According to Ana Maria, being a midwife is a “very, very important job” which begins when a woman is 15 weeks pregnant with measuring the size of her belly.

After her initial measurement, Ana Maria makes frequent visits to chart the growth of the fetus and to determine if it is in a good birth position. Up until the

beginning of the 8th month, she can gently turn the baby using massage so that it is in the correct position for birth. If at 8 months the baby is in a breech position, she will not attempt to deliver it and will urge the woman to go to a hospital.

At the time of birth, Ana Maria gives the mother chamomile tea, shows her breathing exercises to use, and also massages her torso to help her relax during labor. The husband can be at the woman’s side during this time if he so chooses. No tools of any kind are used in the delivery of the child. Clean rubber gloves are all that are needed.

The family prays after the child is born. Then, a hole 25-30 inches deep is dug in a dry place under the roof of the house. This hole is lined with hot ashes and the child’s placenta is placed in it, buried with the invocation “you will rest here”. If this is not done, it’s believed that the health of the mother will be harmed.

Ana Maria bathes and dresses the baby for the mother and, for a period of two weeks after the birth, she visits the mother and child every three days. During these visits she may provide counsel to the new mother and attend to any post-delivery problems or questions the mother may have.

If the family can afford it, they pay Ana Maria \$7 to \$12 for her assistance. She estimates that 90% of the women in Pachay las Lomas give birth at home.



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