



## A Graduate Embraces His Mayan Roots

Efrén Mejía, one of the outstanding scholarship students, graduated from high school in 2014 with a diploma in education. From early on, Ana Maria Chali, the founder of AMIDI, recognized his leadership abilities and fostered Efrén's development by inviting him to shadow her while she attended community development activities, both local and national. Those meetings were enriching and confidence-building for this young, male Mayan.

One of AMIDI's founding principles is the revitalization of *Kakchiquel*, their native language. Efrén decided to address the issue of the dwindling number of native speakers. He enrolled in the Academy of Mayan Languages located in a nearby town and has earned a teaching certificate specializing in *Kakchiquel*. The AMIDI membership has opened the doors of their community center for Efrén to teach Academy-sponsored *Kakchiquel* classes there. Enrollment will be open not only to the children of AMIDI members, but to any who want to preserve their native language and culture.

Efrén's mother farms and weaves, and he has a younger brother. At present he supports himself by working with his uncles making doors and windows. With the help of a scholarship donor, Efrén is majoring in education at a highly regarded university located one hour from the village. All of his classes are held on Saturday, a schedule that allows him to work and volunteer in the community.

*Efrén Mejía, a highly respected graduate supported by the scholarship program, now plans to teach his native language, Kakchiquel, to youth.*



Matiox, pronounced ma-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.

# Being Prepared for Natural Disasters

In 2010 destructive Hurricane Agatha struck the mountainous region around Pachay las Lomas, the home of AMIDI. Although the area is heavily forested, the trees could not hold the saturated earth. Three waves of mudslides invaded homes, slid over agricultural fields, and blocked the only road in and out of the area. Relying on their skills and established network, the AMIDI women readily accepted the challenging assignments of distributing government donated food on foot and of finding shelter for those displaced by mudslides.

After a natural disaster, such as a major storm, it might have been tempting to focus on cleanup efforts and hope for the best in the future. Not so for AMIDI. They found out about an in-depth disaster preparedness course, and enrollment began. By the end of the course they had mapped the entire zone in which they live, including many homes of non-AMIDI members. They identified areas where future slides were likely to occur and where evacuation routes could be established. AMIDI members were assigned as guides to lead people to safety; the guides' identity and the evacuation plan were communicated to the people living in the entire area. A wall-sized map, made of long lasting oil cloth, now hangs in the AMIDI community center; it details the locations of homes, cultivated areas, the road, and the areas where mudslides have and have not occurred. Brown circles indicate areas of mudslides. Each home is color coded to identify the degree of risk: red for high probability, yellow for medium and green for low. The map also includes the evacuation route marked in red.



*This map includes information about the risk of mudslides in the area around the AMIDI community center.*

# The Goal: Plant 15,000 Coffee Trees

AMIDI leader Ana Maria Chali traveled to northern California in 2012 and visited organic farms, herb gardens, a bee sanctuary, and a coffee roaster. At Ritual Coffee's warehouse in San Francisco, she spotted a pile of burlap-bagged coffee beans stamped ANTIGUA Guatemala. Her dream is to send coffee to San Francisco in big burlap bags marked AMIDI Guatemala.

Coffee has long been a staple crop in the Pachay las Lomas area where the trees benefit from volcanic soils, high elevations, and favorable climate. The women of AMIDI grow coffee, enjoy drinking their flavorful brew, and have a reliable, local market for the beans not set aside for home consumption. At an elevation of 7000 feet, AMIDI coffee qualifies as "mountain grown," a phrase professionals and aficionados use to describe the spicy, floral, fruity qualities that develop in beans grown above 5000 feet. Premium coffee growing has the potential to bring considerable economic gain to the farmers of Pachay las Lomas.

As a group, over the past few years, AMIDI members have taken monthly, half-day classes offered in their community center by the national coffee institute (Anacafé). Organic growing practices have improved, and production has increased. Anacafé values working with the dedicated, action-oriented women of AMIDI and cite their success as models for other small, coffee-farming households in the Guatemalan Highlands.

Another organization has stepped forward to assist AMIDI with coffee growing: the Hanns R. Neumann Foundation of Germany. Late last year the foundation donated to each of AMIDI's 50 members 15 coffee seedlings to care for and evaluate. The pilot project is studying two varieties: Anacafé 14 and Bourbon 300. Both are resistant to the devastating, world-wide coffee rust that has shown signs in Pachay las Lomas, and both are known for their excellent taste.

As a focus of this project, the foundation will give the AMIDI members 15,000 seeds (300 per member), small plastic bags to hold young seedlings, and free technical assistance. The women will provide



the land and labor to nurture the plants through the trees' productive years. All family members (including the scholarship recipients) will participate in growing coffee. The potential is 15,000 trees, significant economic return, and possibly international markets.

*Simona Guerra Martin and her fellow AMIDI members terraced the hillside by hand to create space for the 15,000 coffee seedlings. In the meantime they are using the land to grow radishes.*

# Corn

Corn is sacred and central to the lives of Mayans and has been for millennia. Most experts think corn was domesticated between 6000 and 5000 B.C. through natural crossings in the Tehuacan Valley of southeastern Mexico. By 1,300 B.C. corn was the primary staple in Mesoamerica.

Corn holds great significance in the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Mayans. According to the text, the first attempts to create man using mud and then wood failed; the deities finally created humans by mixing water with yellow and white corn. For today's Mayan farmers and families, planting and growing corn is a spiritual activity.

In the photo, the women are combing through a pile of dried corn husks to determine which are sturdy enough to serve as wrappers for *chuchitos*, a dish containing a fist-sized amount of plain corn dough tied securely inside layers of corn husks, and then boiled. The small, thin husks not selected for cooking become kindling or mattress stuffing. All parts of the harvested corn plant are useful. Dried corn stocks, for example, are used for building fences and walls.

The Mayans have a wide variety of words, both in Spanish and in their native language, to describe corn in its various states: raw, dried, soaked, roasted, fermented, ground. There is even a term, *muñeca*, used to describe a stack of tortillas.



*Maria Cristina Castro Pumay is selecting corn husks to prepare a dish for the annual celebration honoring donors and scholarship recipients.*

## Accounting

Fundraising in 2016 has been successful thanks to the generosity of the donors. So far we have \$11,035.12 in donations. The AMIDI women and their families send their heartfelt gratitude.

The Matiox newsletter is written and produced by Marilee Wingert, Barbara Bowman, Bill Bowman, and Anya Glenn. No donations to AMIDI are used to fund this newsletter.

Visit Facebook under AMIDI: Mayan Women Who Farm and Weave.

## To Make a Donation

If you would like to make a tax-deductible donation to the AMIDI scholarship fund, please make your check payable to Slow Food Sonoma County, a local 501(c)3 non-profit that manages the funds at no cost. Please send the check to:

Slow Food Sonoma County North  
P.O. Box 1494  
Healdsburg, CA 95448

Or visit [www.amidiguatemala.org](http://www.amidiguatemala.org)  
to donate via Paypal.