



Dining for Women

## Program Fact Sheet

**PROGRAM:** The Equilibrium Fund

**WEBSITE:** <http://www.theequilibriumfund.org>

**MISSION:** The Equilibrium Fund works to alleviate poverty, malnutrition and deforestation by teaching rural and indigenous women about the nutrition, uses and processing of the Maya Nut.

*Their vision is that one day soon, children throughout Central America will eat Maya Nut at school for lunch every day, thereby improving their health and nutrition and providing a dignified source of income for their families from the rainforest.*

**ONE REASON WE LIKE THIS PROGRAM:** The Equilibrium Fund (EF) shares our belief that improving conditions for women results in improved conditions for the entire family. Women are the primary beneficiaries of their programs. Women who have received EF training have started Maya Nut based businesses producing finished products for local and international sales. EF offers opportunities for women to participate in designing, implementing and expanding programs. The changes to their health, self-esteem and independence are astounding. They are learning to open bank accounts, write checks, use ATM machines and use the Internet.

**THE EQUILIBRIUM FUND'S STORY:** The Equilibrium Fund was founded in 2001 by American and Guatemalan professionals with the goal of rescuing lost indigenous knowledge about the Maya Nut tree (*Brosimum alicastrum*) as an alternative to environmentally destructive traditional annual cropping systems. Founder and Executive Director, Erika Vohman discovered that the Mayan people of Guatemala were burning their rainforests in order to plant corn and other crops. They did not realize they could benefit from the Maya Nut growing all around them. The EF developed an educational strategy to impart the knowledge and uses of this local resource.

The EF began operations in Guatemala in 2001 and by 2005 had expanded into Nicaragua, Mexico, Honduras and El Salvador. Since 2003, over 10,000 rural and indigenous women and girls from 700 rural communities have been trained in the value of the Maya Nut. Thirteen independent women's cooperatives have formed to produce and sell Maya Nut, creating income opportunities for women. Approximately 500,000 new Maya Nut trees have been planted and thousands of acres of rainforest have been conserved as a result of the Maya Nut Program.



**WHAT IS MAYA NUT?** Fresh Maya Nut seeds are bright green and harvested from the ground. They are about the size of a macadamia nut. The nut was once abundant throughout Central America but is now highly threatened and even extinct in parts of its range due to its being cut for firewood and to plant corn. Maya Nut seeds are 100% organic, and grow naturally in fertile rainforest soils. It is much higher in many vital nutrients than foods grown on farmed soils.

Maya Nut is extremely nutritious; high in fiber, calcium, potassium, folate, iron, zinc, protein and vitamins A, E, C and B. It is also extremely versatile and can be used fresh, dried, roasted or raw. Dry Maya Nut seeds can be stored for up to 5 years, making it an excellent food for regions with frequent drought and food insecurities.

**WHERE THEY SERVE:** Rural communities in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Mexico.

DFW donations will be directed to EF's efforts in the Guatemalan Peten Region, in the southern buffer zone of the Maya Biosphere Reserve.

## COUNTRY AT A GLANCE: *GUATEMALA*

In 1996, Guatemala emerged from a 36-year civil war between leftists and indigenous (Mayan) insurgents and the Guatemalan army, backed by the United States. The revolt began as a response to the autocratic rule of General Ydigoras Fuentes in 1958. The war left more than 200,000 people dead and had created, by some estimates, 1 million refugees. Its indigenous population, the Maya, make up about half of the population. Many Guatemalans are of mixed Amerindian-Hispanic origin.



Guatemalans live in one of the most inequitable societies in the region. Poverty is particularly widespread among the rural indigenous communities. Illiteracy, infant mortality and malnutrition are among the highest in the region, life expectancy is among the lowest. In common with many of its neighbors, the country is plagued by organized crime and violent street gangs. It is a major corridor for smuggling drugs from South America to the United States.

- **Full name:** Republic of Guatemala
- **Population:** 13.7 million (UN, 2008) , Mayans make up 42% of the population
- **Major languages:** Spanish, more than 20 indigenous languages
- **Main exports:** Coffee, sugar, bananas, fruits and vegetables, meat, petroleum, cardamom<sup>i</sup>

## WHAT DINING FOR WOMEN WILL SUPPORT:

Contributions from DFW will support Guatemalan women's cooperatives producing a specific rural school lunch program entitled Healthy Kids, Healthy Forests. The immediate goal of this program is to serve Maya Nut lunches in the poorest Guatemalan schools as a replacement for the unhealthy<sup>ii</sup> corn and soy-based snacks currently provided in these schools. EF will also establish Maya Nut tree nurseries in each participating school with the goal of reforesting 3,000 trees for each school.

All Maya Nut School Lunch products will be produced by Guatemalan women's cooperatives, thereby providing dignified jobs and steady income for rural women, as well as opportunities to learn valuable skills such as accounting, planning, organization, and nutrition and business management.

The Healthy Kids, Healthy Forests lunch program ensures that all benefits (social, economic, and environmental) accrue directly to the participating communities. This will serve to revitalize rural economies, stimulate cultural pride and restore the rainforests which provide ecosystem services and habitat for biodiversity.

## HOW EF PLANS TO IMPACT THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE:

- Improve the self-esteem and status of women participating in Maya Nut snack preparation, sales and distribution
- Provide economic opportunities and income for rural women
- Revitalize rural economies in participating communities from Maya Nut snack preparation, sales and distribution
- Educate participating communities about the nutritive value of the Maya Nut
- Increase community-based conservation and reforestation of native Maya Nut forests
- Improve rural food security and nutrition
- Provide a replicable model for native plant-based school lunch programs suitable for other countries
- Increase economic benefits to communities by reducing dependence on foreign food products

**FINANCIAL PROFILE:** In 2008, The Equilibrium Fund spent \$171,031 on program expenses; 81% of their total expenses. They directed \$41,690, only 19% of their expenditures, to administration and fundraising.

**DFW GIVING HISTORY WITH PROGRAM:** New program

## SOURCES AND RESOURCES

<http://www.theequilibriumfund.org/>

Film about the work of The Equilibrium Fund <http://www.seedsofinspirationmovie.com/>

<sup>i</sup> *Country Profile: Guatemala*, BBC news [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/country\\_profiles/1215758.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/country_profiles/1215758.stm)

<sup>ii</sup> The corn and soy provided for the current school lunch programs are genetically modified and grown with chemical pesticides and fertilizers, while Maya Nut is 100% natural, organic and nutritious.