



# Maya Educational Foundation

Providing educational opportunities

2017-2018 Report

## *25th Anniversary Edition*

The Maya Educational Foundation (MEF) supports the educational and professional advancement of the Maya people in Guatemala, southern Mexico, and Belize, with special consideration given to women and girls and to students from remote areas.



MEF scholarship students and visitors at Sna Jtz'ibajom in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas, Mexico

## Contents

President's Letter	2
Celebrating 25 Years	3
Taking the Time	4
Our Students	5-7
Our Partners	8-9
The Parents	10
ELP Volunteers	10
Reflections	11



Danilo graduates as an architect



Grupo Cajolá student Edelina

For information on our work,  
partners, and projects,  
please visit  
[www.mayaedufound.org](http://www.mayaedufound.org)  
and follow us on Facebook

Dear Friends,

We are excited to share with you some events that have occurred as part of commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Maya Educational Foundation (MEF). In keeping with the spirit of celebrating this milestone, the annual board meeting took place in Antigua, Guatemala. During a visit to our biggest project partner FEPMaya (Fundación para Estudios y Profesionalización Maya) in Mixco, our board members participated in a spiritual Maya ceremony as well as a series of activities that the students and board members of FEPMaya had prepared. A highlight of this wonderful gathering was to be able to observe the students' vibrant personalities and to hear them express in their own voices their short and long-term goals and their strong commitment to helping their families and communities.



While in Antigua, we connected with the Guatemala Scholars Network (GSN) and exchanged ideas pertaining to the educational support for Maya students and the promotion of Maya cultural heritage and practices. We also visited our non-profit partner CIRMA (Centro de Investigaciones Regionales de Mesoamérica). On a tour through its library and archives the staff shared updates on the projects that are currently underway at this impressive institution. We thank our partners and project leaders for the kindness and hospitality they showed us during our visits.

Finally, our deep gratitude goes to you, our donors and volunteers, for making our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary possible. Throughout these years, with your support for MEF scholarships, hundreds of motivated young Maya men and women from underprivileged areas of Guatemala, Chiapas (Mexico), and Belize have successfully achieved their educational goals and have become productive professionals. Their achievements, made possible by your generosity and their hard work, have contributed to improving the lives of their families and communities and the larger society.

We hope that you will support MEF's mission by making a tax-deductible contribution. Thank you, on behalf of the Maya students, their parents, and all of us at MEF.

Sincerely,

Pablo Chavajay, MEF President



## Celebrating *25 Years* of Work with the People We Serve

As touched on in Pablo Chavajay's letter, this momentous year for MEF was marked by joyous and important reunions with the people we serve. Earlier in the year, we went for site visits with all our project partners in Chiapas and most of our partners in Guatemala, and a friend of MEF went to see our projects in Belize. Then, invited by our friends at the Guatemala Scholars Network (GSN), we traveled to Guatemala again in July to represent MEF at the GSN conference in Antigua. We

enjoyed meeting up with new and familiar faces there and we thank all GSNers for welcoming us so warmly and for their annual support of MEF. A very proud moment for us at the conference was to be able to sit in on the well-attended panel that included presentations by several MEF scholarship students and graduates, organized by former English Language Program student Manuel Laynez who is doing groundbreaking work to benefit children in his community.



MEF students and graduates presenting at GSN panel



Manuel Laynez and friend visiting our table at GSN



MEF board members meet at CIRMA

As three of our board members are also GSN members it made sense to hold the annual MEF board meeting in Antigua. We'd like to thank the board members and friends who donated miles, meeting spaces, food, and accommodations to make this possible at a very modest cost to MEF.



## Being Present and Taking the Time

We traveled long distances and allowed for enough time with the students, parents, and project leaders to sit and talk together and to truly hear each other. We listened to speeches by parents, supervisors, and students, and enjoyed students performing traditional Mayan music, theater, singing and dancing, and we also shared meals. These visits are essential as they give us important insights and fortify all of us and the work we do together. We are able to reaffirm our connections, shared spirit, and mutual respect and we leave even more determined to help the students in their quest for more education and success in life. We are grateful for the warm welcome we received at all the projects we visited.

¡Muchas gracias a todos!



Visit with FOMMA students and ELP teacher Steve Homer in Chiapas



Colegio Paxil students perform a traditional Mayan dance for parents and visitors, among them Armando Alfonso (at table center) from the Daniele Agostino Derossi Foundation which has given us substantial support for this school.



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## The Students

In each visit we witnessed the students' enthusiasm and their ambition to do well. We heard from teachers and parents and also had in-depth talks with the students and supervisors about the daily challenges that they face. Discussion topics included scholarship rates and expected work obligations of the students (in most cases set by our partners), their studies and progress, and family situations. Freshmen students told us about feeling overwhelmed and isolated living in a larger city for the first time, away from their families. Some said they would feel lost without support from the more advanced students in their groups. A good solution our scholarship partner in Petén implemented was to rent a house to accommodate students in Sayaxché for the past several

years now. This was made possible by a grant we received from the Daniele Agostino Derossi Foundation.

A very positive and recent development we can report to you is that our largest program partner, FEP Maya, which supervises 65 MEF students, has secured three houses --in Xela, in Cobán, and now also in the capital-- where groups of students are able to live together more safely and more economically. They abide by house rules and share expenses, and they monitor and mentor each other. Cooking together and organizing transportation thus becomes more affordable for all. We spent the better part of a day at the Xela house where 14 students live and they agreed that the benefits far outweigh the somewhat crowded conditions.



Visiting with Students at the Quetzaltenango/Xela house

## The Students

The students are surprised to hear how modest our infrastructure is in the USA and how MEF was started in 1992 by a small group of Mayas in Guatemala and U.S. citizens who wanted to make it more possible for Maya youth to achieve higher education in their own countries. They are impressed to learn that our board members and volunteers contribute countless hours to the cause, and they are especially touched to know that individuals living far away from them care enough to donate to MEF for their education and future, even people of modest means. The students would thank you personally if they could! You can

hear some of their comments and words of thanks on the videos we have on our website [www.mayaedufound.org](http://www.mayaedufound.org).

We convey to the students what we believe strongly, i.e., that we are making a conscious investment in them and their education and that we expect them to do great things. All of our scholarship students are bright, have financial need, and many of them have only one parent and know great hardships. Nevertheless, they are proud to tell us about their lives and studies and how they plan to improve their and their families' lives once they graduate in their chosen professions.

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Since its inception, the Maya Educational Foundation has put special emphasis on providing educational opportunities for Maya girls and women and for students from remote areas.

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Shalini graduates from Toledo Community College

The MEF scholarships in southern Belize are supervised by members of the Julian Cho Society who describe the current conditions for families and their children in the Toledo District:

“The laws of Belize mandate that children up to the age of 13 attend primary school. However, Maya children only go beyond primary education if and when their parents can afford it. Many of them struggle to meet the costs of tuition and fees, textbooks, food, and uniforms for school. Many are subsistence farmers with little to no income generation and therefore find it difficult to send their children for higher education. In instances when families find resources to send a child to school, often it’s the male child that is sent and not the young women. Therefore, the focus of the program is two-fold: It concentrates on children from families who could otherwise not afford to send their children to high school, and it remains committed to including girls and young women.”



## Meet Some of Our Students at FEPMaya



Irma Yolanda (Achí) is studying physiotherapy in her eighth semester and says: “At FEPMaya I get motivated to overcome personal and academic challenges. My family is happy about my progress and my self-esteem has improved by learning about my

Mayan culture and language.”



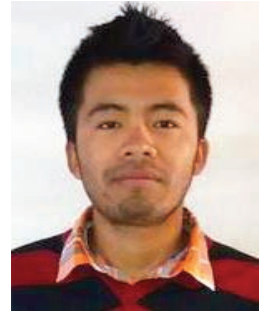
Enrique (Q'eqchi') studies civil engineering and is in his fourth semester. He encourages his brothers to find academic opportunities and wants to promote progress and innovation in his community.



Ana María (K'iche') is in her second semester of studying business administration. She says: “I have sisters, and just for being women we have suffered from machismo and the belief that a woman should not study. I want to become

a source of inspiration for young women in my community who, despite having brilliant minds, are afraid to study a career.”

Felipe (Q'eqchi') studies nursing and is in the eighth semester. He says the scholarship benefits him not only economically but also spiritually and intellectually by making him more aware of his Mayan identity.



Dilsia Martha Lilian (Q'eqchi') is in her sixth semester of studying diplomacy and international relations. She envisions working to help with the development of her Maya Q'eqchi' people. She wants to be an example for many women and for new generations to open up to the world.



Sandra Yaneth (K'iche') is in her fourth year of medical studies. She is currently doing an internship in a hospital in Huehuetenango and will be the first medical doctor in her community of Santa Clara La Laguna, Sololá.



### Your Donations at Work

This year your contributions are supporting scholarships for 179 Maya students in university, 240 at middle and high school level, and 41 in elementary school. In addition, you are helping many more Maya students and adults who benefit from language classes, workshops, and job skills training.

Thank you!

## Our Partners

We rely on our non-profit partners in the countries we serve to help us administer the scholarship programs as well as a few other projects. In Mexico our partners include FOMMA, Sna Jtz'ibajom, the San Pedro Chenalhó group, the Chuj Maya group, and Amigos de San Cristóbal. In Belize we thank the Julian Cho Society for supervising the scholarship students there. In Guatemala we are grateful to FEPMaya, Esperanza Juvenil, Maya Traditions, the Entre Ríos group, Colegio Paxil, the Livingston supervisors, Grupo Cajolá, and Amigos de Santa Cruz. They all share our mission of working for the educational advancement of the Maya people and cultural preservation of the Maya heritage, the latter being a focus of our partner CIRMA in Antigua.

This non-profit social science center is now in its 39th year and going strong. It is a hub of activity where people young and old, including many of our students, come to peruse and study the collections of this amazing research center that houses a library, a historical archive, and a large photo archive.

Currently a major digitization project is underway in collaboration with the Swiss Embassy. Celebrated authors regularly give book presentations and photo exhibitions are staged throughout the year not only at CIRMA's facilities but also in art galleries and museums in the capital. CIRMA's librarians also do outreach and visit schools to teach students how to do research. Interns and experts come to support CIRMA's cultural preservation work.

We thank the Director and staff for welcoming us for part of our board meeting.



"Papa, I want to see a real library," was this little boy's wish. So the father took one day off work and brought him to CIRMA.





## More about Our Partners

We carefully seek out the non-profit partners we team up with. Many of them volunteer their time or charge very little for administering the scholarships for us. We are grateful to them for taking on the work and responsibility. The majority of our partner organizations are now run by Mayas and the leaders do it to help their communities. They share our belief that education is a key element for people to be able to overcome poverty and to change the status quo. Supervisors help the students succeed by visiting, mentoring, and encouraging them, with a special focus on the girls in the programs.



Supervisors with students in San Pedro Chenalhó, Chiapas

## What Our Partners Are Saying

### **Amigos de Santa Cruz, Guatemala, MEF partner since 2014:**

“Thanks to support from MEF, we are seeing the first university students and graduates ever in our community of Santa Cruz. MEF’s dedication to promoting higher education among disadvantaged Mayan communities such as Santa Cruz La Laguna is truly changing the future for this next generation. A more educated population increases economic opportunities, improves health, and promotes a more equal and just world for this indigenous population.”



MEF university students at Amigos de Santa Cruz

### **Julian Cho Society, Toledo District, Belize, our partner since 2006:**

“Thank you for your support to our people in Toledo. We continue to volunteer our time, effort and capacity to this program because we feel deeply connected to the communities we serve. As advocates for the rights of indigenous peoples, we ultimately seek the self-determination of our communities and our youth are our greatest asset.

Investing in their education is ultimately investing in the wellbeing of our people collectively. This program has benefitted many and we hope that it continues to advance the lives of many more to come.”



Dustin graduates from the Julian Cho Technical High School

## What Parents Are Saying

The parents tell us that even though the scholarships do not cover all expenses, the students would not be able to attend school without this help. It makes the difference between their children's education stalling or progressing. – Now meet a special parent who came to a large gathering at MEF partner Colegio Paxil in Nebaj, Guatemala during our visit there earlier this year:



This man, a hard working subsistence farmer, had wanted to meet us and walked from an outlying village. Though his shyness was obvious, the father of three girls stood up and spoke with great emotion in his Ixil Maya language. One of the teachers translated his words into Spanish for us. He said that his greatest wish for his three children, all daughters, is to get an education, something he never had himself, and something, he knows, many other fathers in his town still do not support for their daughters. He thanked us for making his girls' school attendance at Colegio Paxil possible as he would be too poor to pay their tuition otherwise. He also said that he is glad that this school not only teaches the required curriculum but also the Ixil language and traditions.

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*This dad may signal a changing attitude of Maya fathers wanting their girls to continue their education beyond just a few years.*

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## Saluting the English Language Program Volunteers

We are very grateful to the ELP volunteers who are preparing to teach English again for two weeks in Guatemala. We commend and thank all of them, including former and current leaders Jane and Bob Greenberg, Lianne Moccia, Karen Nielsen, Carol Hendrickson, and Laurie Levinger. This will be the 13th ELP. Each year FEPMaya students are eager to participate and their skills increase greatly from being able to converse with these native speakers.

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In Chiapas, MEF students benefit each year from Steve Homer's English classes (see p. 4). He volunteers his time and expertise to our students in San Cristóbal. Thank you, Steve.





## Reflections on MEF's Past, Present, and Future

by Elisabeth Nicholson, Executive Director

Our mission of working for the advancement of the Maya people—for 25 years now—remains valid, urgent, and worth fighting for today. The need is painfully obvious when visiting with local group leaders and seeing the overwhelming number of scholarship applications they receive. Poverty and limited access to schools for higher education is the common thread that leaves smart and eager students marginalized. Travel and housing costs are prohibitive for poor, often single-parent families. MEF scholarships bridge that gap. They make it possible for high school and university students to pay for rent, travel, books, and tuition.

We celebrate the students and their hard work and know that MEF graduates already are making their mark in the world. They work as teachers, nurses, historians, scientists, and physicians. They come and speak to current students to motivate them and show them that they, too, can succeed.

We hope that we will be able to help more bright young Mayas in the future with university scholarships. We thank our donors for believing in this goal and in these young people.

We also thank our founders, current and former board members, volunteers, and staff. We are grateful to the individuals, groups, families, and foundations who support us, some even with poignant legacy gifts. Your contributions to MEF matter, their impact is felt in each student's life and success.

Going forward, we hope you will continue your support and will help us spread the word so others will join the cause.

*Thank you!*

### The Gift of Education

For a fraction of what it would cost here  
you can support a student  
in Guatemala, Mexico, or Belize  
and change a life forever.



FEPMaya students thank you for supporting their education. ¡Muchas gracias!

## How You Can Help

There are several ways you can help the Maya Educational Foundation:

- ✓ by making a financial contribution
- ✓ by considering a bequest to MEF
- ✓ by asking family and friends to make a donation to MEF in your honor (birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, special occasions)
- ✓ by volunteering your time and expertise
- ✓ by making an in-kind contribution
- ✓ by exploring and utilizing employer matches to multiply your donations
- ✓ by liking us on Facebook and spreading the word about our work and mission

MEF is a 501(c)(3) public charity. All donations are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law.

## Your Donations at Work

- \$ 200 supports the education of a university student for one month.
- \$ 100 supports a student in high school for one month.
- \$ 50 supports a student in middle school for one month.
- \$ 30 helps parents send a child to elementary school for one month.
- \$ 50 covers the cost of weekend workshops teaching individuals how to read and write their native language.

Any amount helps Maya students with their education and provides workshops and vocational training to women and whole communities.

Your donation to MEF will help change lives.

## Maya Educational Foundation

P.O. Box 1483, Wellfleet, MA 02667, USA  
mayaedufound@aol.com • www.mayaedufound.org  
Tel: (508) 349-1330 • Fax: (508) 349-0252



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