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Honduran Garifuna Women Revive Culture Through Cassava Sales

Lina Martinez is a woman that has broken the mold.

She is Garifuna, from a Honduran ethnic group that descends from African slaves. She is also a single mother of three, a community leader, and a risk-taking entrepreneur with a keen sense of business. She successfully sold traditional cassava to places like the U.S. and Japan, and has helped other Garifuna women in the process.

Martinez, as part of the Garifuna community, has struggled to keep her roots amid a dwindling population. Many of the Garifuna migrated to the United States and have forgotten their traditions. Youngsters show little interest in social reunions with the rest of their community—elders and women are usually the ones who attend these reunions.

But Martinez was determined to use her roots and her tenacity as a single mother to make a very profitable living.

In 1985, she was the first Garifuna woman to receive a full-time scholarship from the USAID-funded Central American Peace Scholarship (CAPS) program. Three years later, she graduated from Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas with a BA in business administration.

Martinez returned to Honduras with the vision of generating employment and income for the Garifuna women. But her dream had to be put on hold, since she had three kids to raise. Many times she had to take on several jobs just to make ends meet.

In 2004, when her kids were teenagers, she moved to the northern city of La Ceiba and started recruiting women with knowledge of Garifuna traditions. She knew that one of the Garifuna's problems was the loss of their roots. She decided that it was important to maintain and strengthen these roots. She founded the Honduran Women Association of Cassava Producers, made up of 20 families. It quickly got involved in cassava production and began working on the traditions and ways of their culture.

Martinez showed the women how non-Garifuna groups were doing big business with cassava, and encouraged them to make a profit by re-launching cassava as a Garifuna product.

By 2007, she influenced almost all the cassava producing communities in northern Honduras. She has counseled more than 300 women in the Cassava Commercialization Group. Today, she practices what she preaches through her own cassava brand, "O' Big Mama", which



Photo by: Lina Martinez

These Garifuna women are now able to generate income for their homes thanks to the guidance provided by Lina Martinez.



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employs eight families. With a small operation run from home, she has been able to sell cassava in U.S. and Japanese markets.

Today, Martinez continues to promote development among Garifuna women. She encourages them to participate in projects that promote self growth as well as raising income. She has traveled all over the world telling her story and of course, selling her delicious cassava