

# General Cigar Gives Back

The No. 1 maker of handmade cigars also leads the industry in social responsibility programs. >BY CRAIG WILLIAMSON

For more than 50 years, General Cigar Company has been making some of the most iconic brands, including Macanudo, Punch, Cohiba, Partagas, La Gloria Cubana, and CAO. General Cigar's dedication to excellence has earned it a place at the top of the U.S. market for handmade cigars—and it also holds a top spot in another, less known area as well.

It's safe to say that in the cigar industry, General Cigar's corporate social responsibility programs are second to none. I've worked closely with the company over the years, so I'm well aware of their high standards in every aspect of the business. But even I was surprised to learn about the scope of these programs.

Over the past 30 years, the company has completely financed education, health, and environmental initiatives that have enriched the lives of thousands of its employees as well as citizens who live in areas surrounding the company's farms and factories—all without taking donations of any kind.

These initiatives are extremely crucial, especially considering the company's manufacturing facilities are located in three of the most impoverished countries in the Caribbean and Central America: the Dominican Republic, Honduras, and Nicaragua. According to the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), poverty affects more than a third of the people in the Dominican, more than 60 percent of the population in Honduras, and nearly 70 percent of rural Nicaraguans.

General Cigar invests hundreds of thousands of dollars of its own money into the community every single year.

General Cigar believes education is the key to a better future, which is why it places education as a top priority for its employees—an area desperately lacking in these widely under-educated nations. Through its literacy and education pro-

grams, General Cigar is making a positive impact one person at a time.

Forty-three-year-old Ysabel de La Rosa, of Santiago, Dominican Republic, learned to read and write through General Cigar's "Literacy Initiative." This program provides employees and local citizens with reading and writing



classes based on government curriculum standards.

Ysabel, who has worked as a janitor in the box factory for six years, said that one of the greatest benefits of the literacy program was that it gave her the confidence to go to school and continue her studies.

"Now that I have learned to read and write, I no longer feel ashamed or fearful about enrolling in school," said Ysabel. "Having the ability to read and write makes me feel like everyone else, entitled to the same rights as others."

After finishing her literacy program at General Cigar Dominicana, Ysabel enrolled in school and to date, has completed her education to the sixth grade, with plans to continue her studies.

"Stories like Ysabel's are inspiring," said Dan Carr, president of General Cigar. "But what's even more exciting is that there are hundreds of stories just like hers. We are making a real difference one person at a time."

Ysabel is just one of more than 600 people whose lives have been changed by the literacy program over the past 10 years. In addition, more than 4,000



employees have benefited from professional development courses, and approximately 30 employees are able to attend college every year because of General Cigar's financial assistance. In addition, through its "School Sponsorship" endeavor, General Cigar provides financial support to four economically-challenged Dominican schools, reaching more than 2,500 students.

The company also employs a number of health and well-being initiatives that have dramatically improved the quality of life for its employees and their families. General Cigar provides health insurance, dental exams and medical screenings, conducts intramural sports leagues, and maintains a natural disaster relief fund to immediately assist employees with clean drinking water, medical supplies, and shelter, while also providing assistance for home repairs.

General Cigar also supports the environment by replenishing the cedar and mahogany trees used to make its cigar boxes; to date, the company has replanted more than 35,000 trees.

From education to home repairs to health insurance, it's clear that General Cigar is actively involved in bettering the lives of its 3,500-plus employees. "We are proud to stand behind the quality of our product," said Carr, "but we're even more proud of the impact we've had on the community." **S**

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