

# Nationwide sales force of 20,000 sings the praise of spirulina plankton

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BOULDER CREEK — Call it the Fraternity of the Green Grin.

People who regularly consume spirulina plankton swear by it the way other health food aficionados swear by bee pollen, amino acids and ginseng. And in the case of Light Force Spirulina distributors, it's a short step from eating the stuff to selling it.

Take Paulette Fernandez. She says she's never felt better since she started drinking green smoothies every day.

"I heard of spirulina three years ago. I started taking it and within days I felt a difference," she says of the protein-rich algae. "I've been hypoglycemic for 10 years ... people started asking me where I got all this energy."

The Santa Cruz resident and her husband, Rob, are two of Light Force Spirulina's 20,000 distributors nationwide. Light Force is the direct-sales distribution network of Microalgae International, started three years ago by University of the Trees founder Christopher Hills.

Spirulina plankton is a blue-green algae which grows through photosynthesis in warm, highly alkaline lakes. Light Force packages spirulina in tablets, vitamins and a smoothie mix in a kind of Cambridge-cum-spirulina program called The Lightening Diet.

Those who frequent spas or health food stores may have noticed Light Force spirulina marketed under the names Stress Pak, Fire-Up or High Performance, products aimed at athletes.

The company also distributes spirulina to retail stores through its Aquaculture Nutrition Products' Smiling Whale label, but its major emphasis is on its direct-sales representatives. A 100-tablet bottle of spirulina costs \$9.99, although the powder is less. Recommended daily dosage is six tablets.

Promoters say it is a source of complete vegetable protein with all eight essential amino acids, as well as large amounts of beta carotene, B-vitamins, minerals and calcium.

Fernandez says she earns between \$300 and \$600 a month selling Light Force products. "I could make more, but I give a lot of discounts," says Fernandez.

Arn Simonton, another distributor, says she makes about \$1,200 a month. "It's nice, because I can support myself through a part-time job," said Simonton.

Light Force has a pyramid-type sales network set up along the lines of Shaklee and Amway. Light Force General Manager Gary Stephen came from Shaklee.

Each month distributors get a newsletter — "The Enlightener" — which lists new products, names of distributors who have reached a certain level on the sales hierarchy and personal testimonials.

The company is currently promoting the Lightening Diet. This month's newsletter includes the testimonial of a man who said he needed only 30 hours of sleep in the first nine days of his spirulina diet; another woman claims to have lost 15 pounds in two and a half weeks.

There's also some of the philosophy of Hills, whose end goal, says Light Force literature, is "to end world hunger."

Hills told The Sentinel he is "only in business to provide money to help feed the world...I haven't taken a penny for myself."

As it happens, the Light Force business of which he is president, has blossomed into the flagship of the for-profit branches of the University of the Trees ... the "golden egg" which helps support the group's other activities and Hills himself.

Although spirulina has been around for



Light Force Spirulina

years, it remained relegated to the back of health store shelves until an article in the June 1981 issue of National Enquirer touted it as a weight-loss remedy. Almost overnight, spirulina was off and running, proving to be, in more ways than one, the "green gold" Light Force literature calls it.

Microalgae International was one of the first companies to market in powder and tablet form. Company literature proclaims that \$20 million worth of "Dr. Hills' Spirulina" was sold in eight months of 1981, and that 300,000 people consume spirulina daily.

Microalgae International officials decline to give sales information on the privately owned company.

In 1982, a company official told newspapers that Microalgae International sold almost \$4 million worth of plankton during the month after the article came out, but subsequent sales dropped to between \$500,000 and \$1 million monthly as other companies began selling it.

Lately, it has gained popularity among Olympic athletes eager to find a substance which will give them a competitive edge yet still be accepted by the International Olympic Committee.

Lee Evans, a 1968 gold medal winner in the Mexico City Games, is a prime spokesman (and distributor) for Spirulina.

Light Force claims that U.S. track and field superstar Carl Lewis uses spirulina, as do members of the U.S. Olympic judo, bobsled and water polo teams. San Francisco 49er wide receiver Renaldo Nehemiah uses it, says Light Force.

Celebrities have also jumped on the spirulina bandwagon. Ella Fitzgerald and Sammy Davis Jr. have endorsed the product.

In their zeal to promote the product, however, Microalgae International officials have run askance of the law. In 1982 the company agreed to pay a \$225,000 fine to settle a fraudulent-advertising lawsuit filed by the county Department of Consumer Affairs and the food and drug branch of the state Department of Health Services.

At the time, the company claimed that spirulina was so nutritious a person could live on it alone for years, that it could suppress appetite, prevent hangovers and aid in the treatment of diabetes.

Then there were Light Force's claims that its spirulina is "potentized," a mysterious process for increasing its effectiveness by supposedly "breaking the substance down to its vibration level," then fine-tuning this vibration. This was done by placing a copper sheet encased in cardboard connected to a control panel powered by a nine-volt battery over a

pallet of spirulina for 30 minutes.

"Potentizing" is a concept familiar to practitioners of homeopathic medicine but it did not go over well inside the confines of the Department of Consumer Affairs and the state Department of Health Services.

"That was an intense time for us," says Deborah Rozman, executive vice-president of Microalgae International. "Our whole focus is on serving humanity ... as young business people we didn't know all the legal codes. But businesses grow and people grow."

Microalgae International paid the quarter-million-dollar fine quickly and in one lump sum. It was the largest-ever fine in a California food and drug case.

Today, Microalgae International claims to be the largest spirulina distributor in the United States, although other persons in the health-food industry say it is not the contender it once was.

Few would argue with Microalgae International's sincerity. Sources in the health-food industry praise Hills' product as being very "high-quality" spirulina. And two years ago, when insect infestation in Mexican spirulina caused the federal Food and Drug Administration to levy an import ban, Microalgae voluntarily took its products off the shelves rather than use the substandard plankton.

The company has also given spirulina to charity, such as the \$1.59-million donation to the Emergency Relief Fund International in 1982 and \$250,000 to Sammy Davis Jr. and his wife, Altovise, who is chairwoman of SHARE, a non-profit company which helps the handicapped.

State food and drug investigators remain wary, however, of the company's advertising claims, particularly those regarding weight loss.

Jeff Lineberry, supervising food and drug investigator for the state Department of Health Services, said he believes the company's recent literature shows "they are following the letter, but not the spirit of their agreement. I think they're overstating the value of some of their products."

"I don't think spirulina has any therapeutic value on weight control," he added. "They say it has vitamins and minerals, but so does nonfat milk."

Don Gartner, assistant district attorney who deals with consumer affairs cases, said his office has sent a letter to Microalgae International "expressing some concerns" about their sales literature, but no additional lawsuits are contemplated. "We're waiting to see what their response is," Gartner said.

Microalgae International's biggest problem now is how to keep up the domestic sales network.

Hills, contacted briefly while he was attending a public function in Boulder Creek a few months ago, expressed concern that sales were lagging and lamented government interference.

"We can say it's a food, but we're not allowed to tell all the wonderful results people have had without being accused of false advertising," said Hills.

He added that bureaucracies are "typical in not understanding how a business is run. They're only concerned with dipping their hands in the till."

To Fernandez, the proof of the pudding (albeit green pudding) is in the eating. And Microalgae's lofty spiritual goals of feeding the world only sweeten the pot.

"I've always been interested in helping people, especially feeding the world," Fernandez says. "To me, selling spirulina is a minor role. My main focus is helping people. And if you do your job that way, the products sell themselves."