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VBR

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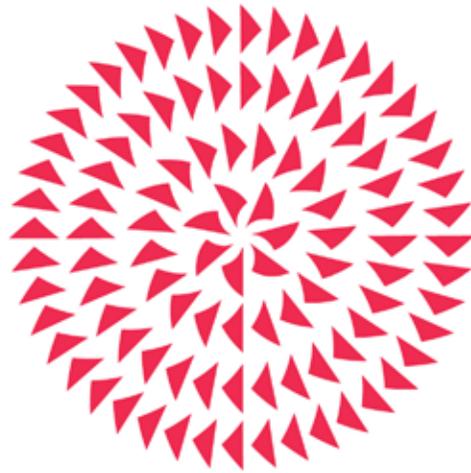
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GOOD NEWS TRAVELS FAST

2015: so far, for me, definitely the fastest year yet. I know it's a cliché, but the years are blazing by faster and faster.

Yes, traditions are traditions. As we're all getting ready for Thanksgiving with family and friends, the holidays are in full swing. Here at Valley Business Report, we have our own traditions as well. Each month's cover story profiles a progressive industry within our four counties and highlights several businesses belonging to that industry. We also introduce you to small, local companies and the entrepreneurs who are making it happen.

Our philosophy since September of 2009 has been to promote regional economic development and serve as a catalyst for more progress in Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr and Willacy Counties. With this being said, we would like to add a new tradition to our scope. What do you want to read? What is it you would like to see in the pages of Valley Business Report and on our mobile friendly



of stories showcasing and promoting deep South Texas businesses of all industries you would be inclined to read and share amongst your associates, employees, vendors and others. What captures your interest –manufacturing, technology, retail, hospitality, medical, service?

We will listen to you. Our goal is to bring positive business news to your eyeballs in print and online. The great thing about positive business news is it encourages future development and prosperity for the region we serve. Uncovering the

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Without readers and advertisers, we have nothing. Our goal is to satisfy both groups, although in many cases, they are one in the same. So as we strive to please the business community of the Rio Grande Valley, your input about editorial material that matters to you would help us as we begin 2016 editorial planning. Please share with us through email the type

gems throughout the Rio Grande Valley and sharing these stories through true, journalistic content with the hopes of continuing economic growth is behind everything we do at Valley Business Report.

For over six years, the business community has supported our efforts through avid readership and multimedia advertising, forwarding links of stories to others who need to know and more. Your attentiveness as loyal readers is an invaluable asset to us. We greatly appreciate you as print and online followers of our publication and website. Please continue to send newsworthy suggestions to us. The tradition of promoting entrepreneurship, commercial success, and improved quality of life for all Valley businesses is worth celebrating every season.

Todd Breland - General Manager
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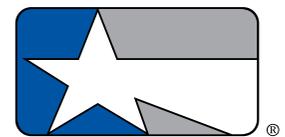
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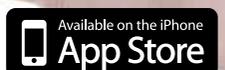


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Cover photo courtesy of Boultinghouse Simpson Gates

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STYLE, DESIGN AND A SENSE OF PLACE

By Eileen Mattei

Paul Hajjar swung open the ornate gate of the Kowalski-Dennett House, built in Brownsville in 1893, to admit a busload of architects and associates onto the brick-paved patio and into his home/attorney's office. The historic house, shaded by palms, kumquats, bougainvillea and bananas, was designed to catch the southeast breeze. The house's long windows reach from the floor to near the 12-foot ceiling, Rice University architectural historian Stephen Fox pointed out. He led the tour of outstanding examples of 150 years of border architecture during the annual AIA-LRGV chapter conference.

Before 1990, the Valley's small cadre of architects could fit around one large table. Currently, about 80 architects belong to the AIA-LRGV chapter, comprising the majority

of Valley architects. "There's a lot more work for them now," said Carmen Perez Garcia, long-time executive director of the organization. "A number of them who worked for bigger firms in other places to start off have come back to the Valley."

Some established their own firms, like Brownville architect **Roberto Ruiz**, who focuses on condos and historic preservation, while others went into partnerships. Overall, a growing group of respected and productive architects now call the Valley home. Each one is ardent about their profession and the projects they design to enhance the spaces where we work, play and live.

Design & Style

Danny Boultinghouse, of **Boltinghouse Simpson Gates Architects**, remembers when McAllen had only three architectural firms back in 1972. "We're coming out of a slow period now, and new,

young firms are popping up. I get calls for residential work, but I don't know who to refer them to." He believes some of the new firms will take on residential commissions to establish their credentials.

"It's hard for any firm in this market to specialize. Our niche is one-of-a-kind buildings. When everything is different, it's more fun and more challenging," he said. His firm handles commercial and public work, from Temple Emanuel and McAllen Public Library to MOST History and South Texas College and UTPA buildings.

"Most of the architects down here, we don't think we are competing. We're more of a big family, maybe because we are small and isolated," he said. Yet his firm is getting to ready to add to its staff, "if we can find them." Architects are not plentiful, in part, because the



TSC's architecture students construct project and community models in their design classes. (Courtesy John Faulk/Frontera Media)

profession now requires a degree from a four- or five-year program, followed by a three-year internship and then passing a rigorous national exam.

“This may be a hands-on profession, but most often the hands are on computers,” said Boultinghouse, who continues to sketch his initial designs.

In fact, automation has gone so far that some young interns are weak on drawing skills after their semesters of working with computer design programs, according to Manuel Hinojosa, an architect with **ROFA** in McAllen. He earned an art degree before he studied architecture. “I always have to teach them to get loose and to visualize, to go back to basics,” and sketch ideas.

Hinojosa, who is one of three AIA Fellows in the Valley, said senior architects continue to learn. “The younger generation is the leading edge, telling us this is how to do it. The older guys sort of manage and mentor, I think. I don’t see myself being phased out, because there is a need for wisdom and experience in design and running a business.”

“People don’t know how important design is for the quality of life,” said Gilbert Gallegos, architect and senior vice president at **Broadus Associates**, a facilities program management company. The firm has managed, among other projects, the design and construc-

Architects John Percy of Megamorphosis and Murad Abulsalim of TSC’s Architecture Associate of Science program, discuss a student proposal for a cathedral plaza. (VBR)



Architects discovered historically significant homes hidden behind whitewashed walls and exuberant landscaping. (VBR)

tion of the Arts Center at Texas Southmost College and four Edinburg elementary schools.

Gallegos joked that architects sometimes function as counselors, mediating major opinion differences of a board or committee, because “Everybody’s a frustrated architect. But in reality, if you really listen to the client, you end up with something unique. That’s what I enjoy.”

The site is the most important decision you make, including the orientation of the building, Gallegos said. In the Valley, with few dominant terrain elements, the focal points of buildings often are introspective, such as courtyards and atriums.

Architects communicate verbally and graphically, ultimately turning

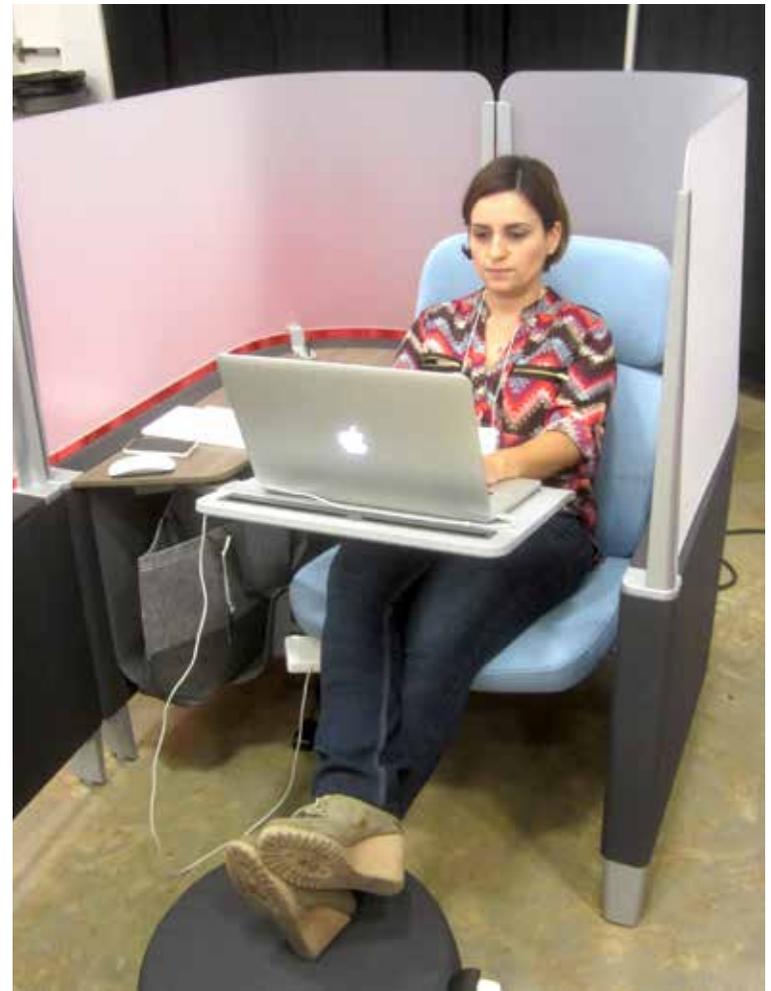
clients’ needs into a written contract, said Juan Mujica, **Gignac’s** office manager who has an architectural degree. The south Texas firm created the Cameron County Courthouse Annex, Harlingen’s Aquatic Center and Boggus Stadium, fire stations and numerous schools.

“Our bread and butter is K-12 architecture. The key is understanding the market and your clients,” said Mujica. “Sometimes you have to guide them through the process, assessing their needs and helping them stay within budget. Ultimately, you have to be able to communicate.”

Gignac provides construction administration, making sure that what is being constructed is the same as what is in the construction documents and delivered on time. It prepared the master plan for the McAllen Convention Center and had to negotiate exact locations, building heights and use of construction cranes, because the site is on the flight path for McAllen-Miller International Airport.

Murad Abusalim, who heads the Associate of Science degree in architecture program at Texas Southmost College, said almost all the graduates have gone on to one of the seven schools of architecture in Texas

Student models of community projects reminded this Corpus Christi architect of her early training. (VBR) New retreat-style cubicles offer quiet space in large offices. (VBR)



and beyond. Established in 2009, the program currently has 39 students, who, as part of each semester's design studio, work on community service projects.

Mark Cuda of **Steelcase** looks at architecture from the interiors and real estate perspective. Would you be surprised to learn that the top two complaints of office workers relate to the lighting and temperature? And that different generations want different things in their workspaces? Boomers want private offices, he said, while millennials prefer clustering and close proximity to others for the crosspollination of ideas. Interior spaces need to be adaptable for their inhabitants to function effectively.

Cuda added that workplace surveys, which look at who is where at what times, can lead to the rearrangement and repurposing of workspace. One trend is toward smaller meeting spaces and more common work areas, a move that is reflected in new architectural designs.

Besides presenting building designs that suit the climate and the culture, architects show that the built environment can build cooperation and community identity.

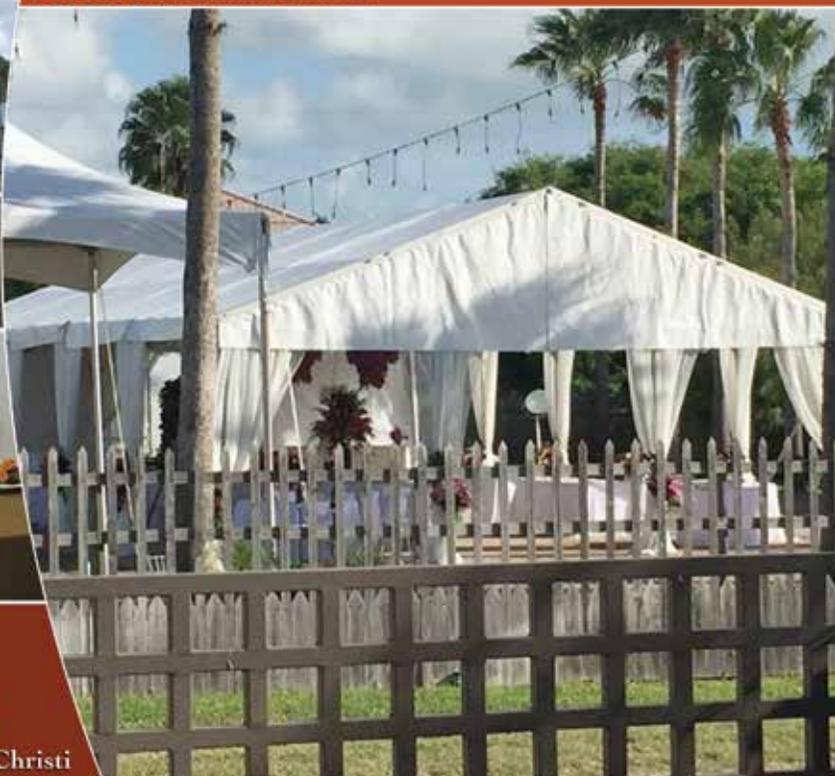
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SISTERS – SIDE BY SIDE

By Eileen Mattei

“You reinvent yourself over and over again to get where you want to be,” said Ann Hunsaker. She and her sister Linda Golden own Sisters Trading Co. on South Padre Island and are in the midst of another reinvention. Their home décor and interior design company, after 29 years in business, will be moving next spring into its own store at 2901 Padre Blvd.

Hunsaker directs interior design and project management, while Golden focuses on retail and assisting with interiors. Forget about the glamour attributed to interior decorating, Hunsaker said. “Our story is very simple -- a lot of hard work. I feel like our business has survived because we are here every day, always available. The bottom line is customer care. We give people what they are paying for, and we take care of them. When we get a client, we get them for life.” Some clients trust them with every detail, saying, “I can leave it all in your hands.”

Where do the contemporary decorating ideas come from? “It’s a visionary thing. You know what is going to need to be done,” said Hunsaker, about walking into a space that

needs design help. Her to-scale sketches are translated into architectural drawings. The sub-contractors who take on Sisters’ projects -- gutting condos, removing walls, painting, installing new kitchens, bathrooms and tile -- have typically worked with Sisters for at least 15 years. “They know what we expect, so they do it right.”

Back in 1986, Sisters opened, retailing antiques and art. During the slow winter seasons, the two women took a trunk show around the state. Their most popular item was their own design called an event tree, which came with five seasonal toppers.

Business has never slowed down since 2008 and Hurricane Dolly. Sisters has been occupied doing makeovers of the island’s 30-year old condos. “The phone keeps ringing. Every time owners

Ann Hunsaker and Linda Golden look forward to moving Sisters Trading Co. next spring into a building complete with product showrooms and more space for retail décor and accessories. (VBR)





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(and property managers) see what we have done, they want more done,” said Hunsaker. “We already have people shopping for condos that we can do redo for them.”

The updated features of renovated condos make them seem brand-new -- and boost their rental appeal. In September, Sisters signed a contract to makeover 30 condos.

“We try to put in each condo a little bit of whimsy, because it just makes people happy,” said Golden. “Fung shui is part of our success. It’s how you feel when you walk in a place; it makes the space feel right.” Hunsaker explained that, “What you do is listen to your customer, watch them and look at them, how they are dressed. Find the colors that are their comfort zone. Customers are happy with the outcome, because we give them a design that suits their lifestyle.” Not that Sisters intends the layouts to be immutable.

“Keeping a good reputation is so important to us,” said Golden. That means hiring the right people. “Because we’re sisters, we say we adopt sisters. That’s exactly how we treat them. They have been key since the day we opened.” In fact, most of the staff has been around long enough to qualify as family: retail manager Peggy Green, business manager Veronica O’Cana, Adela Jimenez and Diana Castillo, among others. Resident dog Monkey has her own fan club.

The sisters hope to hire more likeminded staff, but it has not been easy. “It has been discour-

Decorating an entire room is an easy task for the sisters. (Courtesy)

The Sisters Interiors store features an array of unique items for any home. (Courtesy)



aging trying to find more people who care about the product and what you do.”

The new, larger store represents their personal makeover. “My sister and I want to do our own designs in furniture. We’ve got some great ideas. The retail is going to expand to include select ladies’ accessories, original art and unusual things for homes,” said Golden. Her creative side blossoms with the fine art of gift wrapping, adding twigs and ribbons to produce one-of-a-kind packages.

Hunsaker and Golden admitted they are startled by their step into property ownership. They will have 5,000 square feet devoted to retail and design, and 2,000 square feet of climate controlled warehouse-storage, for new and existing furniture and fixtures of units being remodeled. Sample full kitchens and baths, suggesting condo remodels, will be displayed, courtesy of Sisters’ vendors who are aware of the business they can capture. “To see and touch beats talking,” said Hunsaker. The showroom is expected to boost sales on the retail side and vice versa.

Hunsaker and Golden still enjoy going to furniture, gift and accessory markets in High Point and Atlanta, but they are eager for their next reinvention. “We want to continue to work. We are blessed with good health. Our daughters will be coming down to join us in the future. “

For more information, see sistersinteriors.com.



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Q&A WITH DAVID CALVILLO

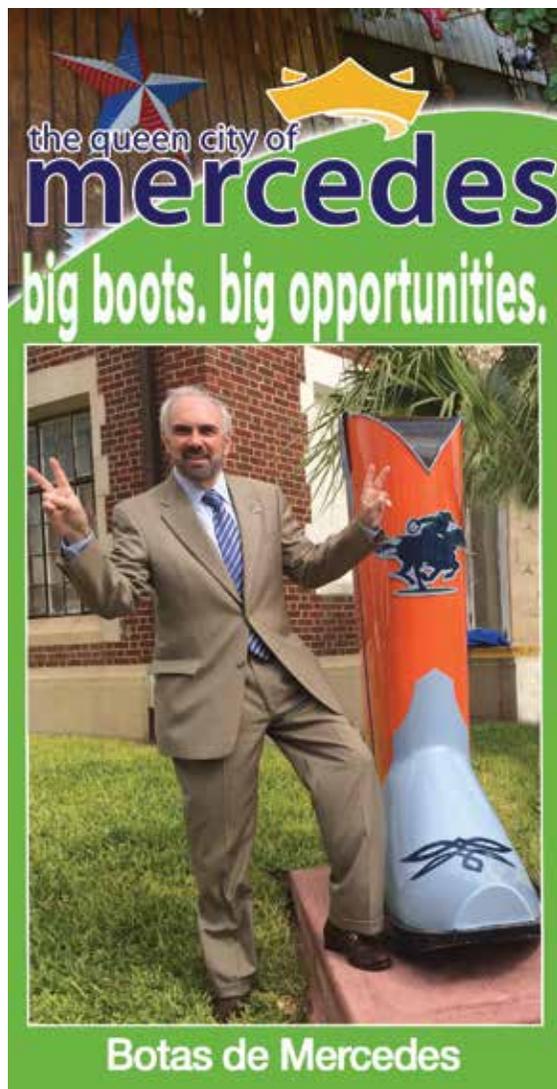
David Calvillo has been a certified mediator for 10 years, and he is also a CPA and trial lawyer. At times, mediation of disputes and service as a “pure neutral” in arbitration and receivership cases represents up to 60% of his practice at Calvillo Law Firm, PLLC. The calmness the attorney conveyed when talking to VBR’s editor suits a man committed to conflict resolution.

Q Where do you start with a mediation case?

A Mediation training teaches us to view things from another person’s perspective and identify their interests rather than the line they have drawn in the sand. Compromise is not a dirty word, but some folks have problems with that term. They equate it with weakness, either of character or the case. So we couch it differently, as adjusting positions or even negotiating. Identifying the objective, what a person really wants to get out of the legal process, is the key to good lawyering and mediating.

Q Does mediation work?

A Greater than 95% of my mediation cases are settled that day or a few days after.



Q Your website lists 10 tips for settling complex cases through mediation and reveals how much preparation is required prior to the parties meeting. What happens during the actual mediation?

A It can be face-to-face in a conference room or shuttle diplomacy with the mediator talking to the parties in different rooms. Most mediators prefer a full day, because there is sometimes a seduction process. Sometime the parties can’t hear each other -- money clouds their vision or they have been married for too long. Any number of issues impede their ability to proceed on their own. The mediator helps them bridge the gap.

Q Is it difficult to become a mediator?

A The recognition of the importance of mediation has led to more people holding themselves up as mediators. The 40-hour training is just the start. To be a credentialed mediator, you have to commit to continuing education in mediation specific training every year. I hold myself to that standard. The Rio Grande Valley has only four credentialed mediators. I try to nurture the education of mediators and tell colleagues who ask about sources of good professional development and training.

Q Why does it seem more cases are going to mediation?

A Local courts are in the trenches and see the value of mediation. It reduces court backlogs and court expenses. Judges refer cases to mediation before they go to trial and assign a mediator if they see fit. Mediation is typically required in federal and state litigation.

Q What is the outcome of a mediated case?

A If properly settled, a case of mediation will result in an enforceable written agreement that may be filed in the court.

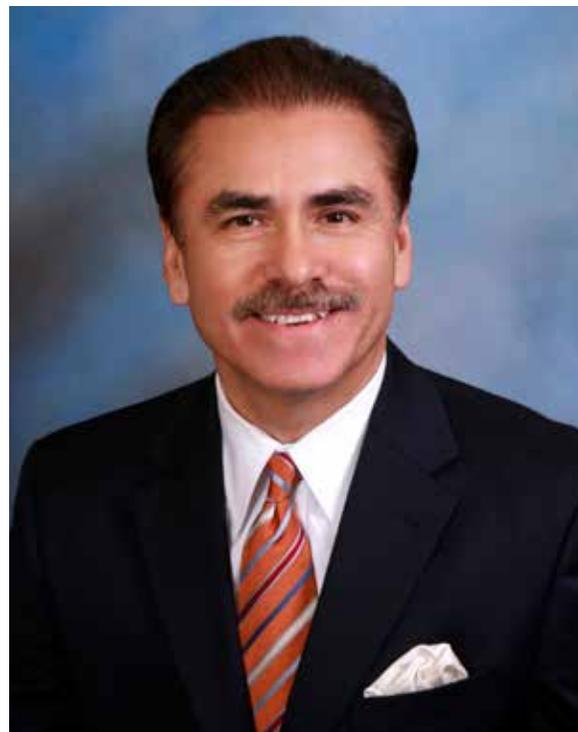
Q Judges encouraged you to become a mediator. Why?

A Maybe they knew my personality was amenable to the field, or they saw my experience would be particularly useful. I like to think when I get appointed as a receiver, mediator or arbitrator, it’s because I bring many skills to the task: as a CPA, a trial lawyer and a certified mediator.

Q You have joked that you can’t hold a steady job, so you switch between being a trial lawyer and a pure neutral handling arbitration, mediation and receiverships. How do you balance such different approaches to the law?

A I believe being a mediator has helped me be a bet-

David Calvillo (Courtesy)



ter lawyer, a better negotiator. I know it gives me more credibility as a mediator that I still talk to juries and know possible outcomes. I enjoy doing both and the change of pace between them.

Q Can people go directly to a mediator without a lawyer?

A They can direct their attorney to seek mediation before filing a lawsuit. Sometimes the parties just want somebody to listen to them and hear their side of the story. Instead of a day in court, a day in the conference room here may be all that’s needed.

Q Why is there resistance to mediation?

A Lawyers are advocates and trained in the adversarial system. Many like to do battle and enjoy the confrontational aspects of a trial. The counselor-at-law part of being an attorney is sometimes overlooked. We in the legal profession should pay greater attention to the counselor part and inject some reason into the process.

Q Is mediation a good path for business disputes?

A The prudent business owner sees mediation as a logical, reasonable way to try to resolve a dispute without investing the time, money and physic energy required of going to trial. In Spanish there’s a saying: es mejor un mal arreglo que un buen pleito. Better to have a bad settlement than a good fight.

KEEPING THE RIGHT EMPLOYEES

By Edmond Chapa

Much time and effort goes into recruiting, hiring, onboarding and training a new employee. New hire expenditures can raise direct and indirect costs upwards of \$20,000, according to a study conducted by the Society for HR Management.

When hiring, the first and foremost focus is on the alignment of knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA) to the tasks that are expected to be performed. The latter can even be substituted with “attitude” rather than ability, because, when it comes to work and performance, employers will find that there are two driving factors of motivation -- desperation and aspiration.

Attracting and retaining employees is both a major expenditure and challenge for small and medium enterprises. The costs associated with finding and keeping your human assets can boost or restrict company growth. Although business professionals understand this, is the business community exercising a proactive approach to align strategic compensation with business objectives? Retaining employees



requires an understanding of the needs of the workforce. Benefits, training/development and pay structures are all major players that contribute to retention.

So how can employers be proactive? Discretionary benefits in health insurance, retirement programs and paid time off are attractive bundles that give employers an upper hand with job seekers. Each of the benefits poses

a great significance in work performance because they meet the physiological and safety needs of the individual.

Conducting a survey among the workforce is the clearest way of finding out what benefits matter most to them and what they are willing to contribute to maintain those benefits. I like to identify ways of providing discretionary benefits to employees that will improve the work situation rather than non-discretionary benefits which are seen as entitlements. With that information, employers are in a better position to negotiate rates with insurance brokers.

In addition, evidence shows a correlation between investments in training and development with

profit in terms of increased sales and gross profits per employee. Training has to be devised, tailored and measured with a clear understanding that information will transfer to the job and performance. Adults are not resistant to learning, however they can be impervious to poorly designed training.

Lastly, pay structures should complement employee contributions, and salaries should be commensurate with experience that aligns with market competitiveness. Establishing pay ranges and pay grades illustrates and informs workers of where they are in their career. Proper performance metrics grades on objective output that identifies strengths and opportunities for improvement. That understanding should serve as a catalyst to not only boost performance, but contribute to the bottom line.

Edmond Chapa holds a Master's Degree in Organizational Management specializing in human resources and has worked in international business, human resources, logistics and the medical field. He is a Doctor of Business Administration student specializing in finance at Walden University.



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NOTHING STOPS ONE STOP

By Eileen Mattei

A breast cancer diagnosis early in 2014 compelled Gloria Gonzales to turn the entire operations of her company One Stop Realty over to her daughter, realtor Linda Villarreal. Tears greeted that announcement, prompting the mother to ask her daughter, "Are you crying for me or you?" The answer was both.

Villarreal had worked in her mother's office during high school and college summers, but she was reluctant to join the business despite a degree in business and a real estate license. Lured by the offer of a straight salary at One Stop instead of a commission, Villarreal began selling real estate in 1994. Within a month, she switched to straight commission income and soon became a top producer for the agency. In 2013, she was responsible for over 50% of One Stop's sales.

Gonzales had started her company in 1986, after hitting the glass ceiling at a title company where she was a senior escrow officer. As a real estate broker, she had to deal with the machismo of people who preferred male realtors and brokers. She handled that issue successfully, weathered peso devaluations, and the

ups and downs of the economy and went on to lead the Brownsville Board of Realtors. Besides selling real estate, Gonzalez managed all the agency's administration. The company thrived, she said, because of its integrity, honesty and good credit. One Stop was still recovering from the 2011 downturn, which forced several realtors to close their doors, when the stage II cancer showed up, re-

Linda Villarreal and her mother Gloria Gonzales confer almost daily on their business's health. (VBR)



quiring surgery, chemotherapy and radiation.

"I knew the business was coming back, but when she took it over, we still had debt," Gonzales recalled. "I said, 'Baby, you can do it.' And I left cold turkey. I wasn't going to be hands-on. I had been doing it all, and it was too much. She could call me at MD Anderson."

Gonzales, who had been sole owner, transferred 51% of the company to her daughter. Management was a shock for Villarreal. "It was hard at first. We were losing an income producer. My goals that first year were to pay off the debt and build a cushion so I wouldn't be afraid we'd have to close."

Villarreal discovered how much she enjoyed the accounting side of the business. Then she had lunch with a friend whose realty company had closed down. "I was lucky that Sandy De La Garza called right then," Villarreal said. "I'm the top producer. I needed to continue making money for the company. She's a broker and I needed a broker, someone to handle the agents, train and manage them. I couldn't train and sell both."

But Villarreal also had ideas for changing the company. She paid off the debt and renovated the Price Road offices and created a conference room. "Now we have a cushion and are almost ready to move into our own office," said Villarreal who will soon be lining up the financing for building or buying their own space. With 14 agents and three assistants, the current

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location is at capacity. Villarreal's husband is a contractor and is lending his expertise.

"Now we have three women working together to make the business successful. We are all at the top of our games," said Gonzales, who considers herself semi-retired and recently returned from a month-long road trip through France and Italy. "I'm here as much as I'm needed. I have been in business so long I can see what is coming and offer advice." She functions as a consultant and handles management of the corporation, advising on policies and producers.

Villarreal continues to sell and manage company operations and finances, while De La Garza handles agent training and supervision.

Mother and daughter lunch together most days. "We're always in communication," said Villarreal. "We've always worked together. Some can't work with parents, but that's never been a problem."

The next generation is already on board. "My son and niece are going to get their real estate licenses. They are our future," Villarreal explained. "I plan to be here for 20 more years. I tell them, 'And then you guys are going to be in charge and take over.' Both of them are amazing."

Gonzales, who finished treatments last February, said one of her grandmother's sayings keeps coming to mind: "Nothing bad ever happens that something good doesn't come out of it." That certainly applies today. "My daughter has found her calling. Before, she wasn't answering the call. She was depending so much on me all the time."

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One Stop Realty now has a financial cushion that will allow its owners to build or buy a larger location within the next 18 months. (VBR)



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IN THE SHADOW OF ROLE MODELS

By Eileen Mattei

Amethyst Zayas walked out of the kitchen of Marines Bakery trailed by the aroma of fresh-baked pan dulce. As part of the nCourage job shadowing program of the Weslaco Chamber of Commerce, the Weslaco East High School senior spent two and a half days getting a behind-the-scenes introduction to a baker's life, courtesy of Mike Marines.

"They say this is to show you if you really want to do this," said Zayas, who will attend TSTC's Culinary Arts program next year and hopes to own a bakery someday. "This is really what I want to do." Marines invited her to arrive early to watch the bakers and then observe the cake decorators tackling weekend orders. "I gave her some advice on how a bakery is run and showed her what we do here. I liked to see her enthusiasm," he said, commenting how difficult it is to find really good bakers.

Martha Noelle, CEO/president of the Weslaco Chamber, said the pilot program attracted more than 40 businesses and organizations eager to host approximately 80 students. After being conceived early in the summer, "It exploded on us ... in a good way!"

Luis Reyes, of Magic Valley Electric Coop, who chaired nCourage as a chamber board director, said the program brings students to businesses and lets them learn what makes a business run. "We want students to observe what you do and to be ex-

posed to the business environment and the business culture," Reyes told company representatives during an orientation. "It gives them a good feel for the job. Maybe they spend time shadowing and decide 'This is not for me.' And that's good to know, too." Or shadowing can confirm a career or college major decision.



"Tell them why a task is important," Reyes added. "Give them a task, give them an opportunity to help. You might be surprised at some of the skills they have. It's important that you tell them what skills you saw them use. You're going to help them make the decision on what they are going to do in the future."

At Rios of Mercedes, Ashley Alanis, who hopes to become a film director, spent one day organizing the boots representing multiple in-house brands in the wholesalers showroom and another day finding a catchy slogan for callers on hold. The student was shadowing Lacey Kilbourn, who is the special projects coordinator for the bootmaker and assigned the student projects she had not had time to get to. Kilbourn said, "She has shadowed me learning the ropes."

"I didn't know how much it takes in teamwork and time management" to run a business, Alanis said. She was impressed by the number of departments that have to coordinate on production, as Kilbourn showed her how everyone communicates about bookmaking.

At Neuhaus & Co., Pete Garcia, FFA president at Weslaco East and Hidalgo County, said it was strange being behind the John Deere dealership counter instead of in front of it. "It's been very

At a Cut Above, Blanca Maldonado and Carlos Villegas observed Dr. Kutugata having his hair cut. (VBR)



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different, because I'm usually on the consumer side. Now I have a better understanding of the business. I've learned a lot, and everyone's been really helpful." He spent one day unloading and organizing feedstock and another learning customer service and merchandise stocking, under the tutelage of Jorge Luna.

Kirk Bloomquist, corporate operations manager, said Neuhaus participated to introduce the teens to the many different aspects of agriculture, which has such a large economic impact on the RGV, because, "Even farm kids are going into other lines of work. In agriculture, you have a hard but satisfying day's work."

Jose Garcia, who plans to become a diesel mechanic, and Jason Feng, who intends to become an electrical engineer, welcomed the opportunity to work on giant John Deere tractors. Each agreed they know they had chosen the right career path. Michael Torres, aiming for welding school in McAllen, got a glimpse of his future as he concentrated on grinding a weld, under the supervision of a Neuhaus mechanic.

Bianca Maldonado job shadowed at A Cut Above, whose owner Maxine Guajardo offered her a job next spring. Maldonado, who will complete the Weslaco High School Cosmetology program in May, aims to study nurs-

Jose Garcia and Jason Feng learned a little about tractor repair at Neuhaus & Co. (VBR)



ing at TAMU Corpus Christi. "At first I wasn't into beauty," she said, but she now enjoys it and sees her cosmetology license as a backup and a good way to earn money while in college. She and fellow student Carlos Villegas commented on the atmosphere: "You

get to know everybody. It's like family." Guajardo added, "Everybody needs a haircut."

The satisfaction of both students and businesses means the pilot program will be followed by more job shadowing days.



Amethyst Zayas' intention of becoming a baker was reinforced during her job shadowing with Mike Marines at Marines Bakery. (VBR)

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IN THE MOOD

By Lori Vermaas

“We’ve come out of the elevator,” said Sharon Cavazos, president and owner of the Valley affiliate of MOOD (formerly Muzak), an international media company that helps businesses with their branding. “When I first came on board in 2001, we were offering commercial music for businesses and installing sound systems and messaging on hold. Now we do a variety of low-voltage sales and service,” which includes surveillance, drive-thru, access control, audio/visual, digital signage, Dish network and scent.

Cavazos’s company, whose service area covers the four Valley counties, has not only transformed its service menu, it also has experienced its own rebranding. Founded in 1984 as a Muzak affiliate by her uncle Pat McBride (who passed away in 2001), the parent company was rechristened MOOD in 2013, two years after a Canadian company had purchased the nearly 80-year-old iconic American brand.

“Muzak was too associated with background music. The stigma was too much. The new owners wanted to invigorate the brand,” she said. The word ‘mood’ embodied the kind of spark the corporation was looking for. “It

MOOD’s digital signage services include televisions with custom-designed promotional templates. “We always custom-design the programming for clients,” said Sharon Cavazos, president, “unless they want to do it themselves. We provide customers with how to do that online.” (VBR)



implies the senses, in that we provide services that involve sight, smell and sound” that influence the customer’s experience in positive ways.

The reorganization and repositioning are emblematic of shifts in the branding industry since the 1990s. Establishing a business’s identity has become more consumer-oriented, an approach that has led to the increased use of technology (like the Internet and other computerized tools) to enhance in-store experiences as part of defining a company’s character.

Indeed, one of MOOD’s newest and increasingly popular services is digital signage, which involves signage boards and televisions with custom-designed programming. Valleyites are likely familiar with the new marketing technology, for Cavazos’s company has been installing them for the past two years. “They’re popping up in a lot of places.” One of their clients, WellMed, uses the visual marketing tool to tailor its health and medical programming (like infomercials on vaccinations) to various audiences, including seniors. An entertainment package that addresses a captive audience, the visual marketing tool has become one of the business world’s most effective, primarily because video programming doesn’t irritate consumers.



MOOD is the only branding company who provides, installs, and services drive-thru communication equipment for businesses in the Valley. (VBR)

Another of MOOD’s newer sensory offerings involves scent. Possibly a final frontier in branding tools, diffusing specific scents is one more way to encourage a customer to remember a company. It’s also big business. According to an industry trade group spokes-

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person, scent marketing grossed \$200 million in 2013, with prospects of a 10% annual rise. Studies show that choosing the right scent can shorten the time customers think they are waiting (in bank lines) or even improve their sense of performance (the use of peppermint or lemon at a gym encourages positive perceptions).

Cavazos agreed that it's a growing market trend, something that enhances the emotion storeowners are trying to create. "We put scent diffusers in places you may not realize, like a hotel, which might prefer something clean and refreshing, like a linen scent, in their lobby to help market their business." The Isla Grand Beach Resort on South Padre Island uses a sea-breeze scent, along with digital signage and Caribbean-styled music, to emphasize tropical associations, while McAllister's, a deli that also sells cookies, prefers a chocolate chip cookie dough scent to exude a homey, familiar feeling.

Other services MOOD offers provide their clients with more practical support, particularly the drive-thru systems. In fact, the fast-food industry is one of their biggest customers Cavazos said. "Virtually every fast-food restaurant uses us in some capacity. Every time you go to a fast-food restaurant and you order from their menu board, they use our drive-thru communication equipment -- the headset and all that. We provide, install, and service those." The equipment is vital, because drive-thrus constitute 75% of a fast-food franchise's business.

Although installing sound systems and providing commercial-free music still remains their bread and butter (some of their customers, like H-E-B, also use voiceovers to announce in-store specials), some clients utilize other cutting-edge services. Recently, the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley contracted with them to install surveillance equipment and an access control system in the school's 110,000-square-foot, three-story academic medical building.

Having been around the industry for nearly 30 years, Cavazos has witnessed and navigated through a lot of changes. "We're always having to adjust. Once upon a time, we provided our music through radio waves and a tower in La Feria. Then we switched to satellite. Now we're relying on the Internet. As the technology evolves, we've kept up." Attracted by the upbeat spirit her uncle established, and staffed with many long-term employees, Cavazos anticipates providing clients with the same friendly service for many more years. "We're just a hop, skip and a jump away."

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THE KEYS TO SUCCESS

By Eileen Mattei

Here's an increasingly rare scenario: you lose your car keys and use a jimmy tool to reach past the driver's side window and pop the lock. Nowadays, you are more likely to pop the airbag and screw up the electronic key system.

And if you think car and house key systems are getting complicated, ask locksmith Donald Guthrie to show you pictures of safes that burglars used cutting torches, sledge hammers and drills to try to open, without success. The safes may have been destroyed, but the contents remained secure.

Guthrie grew up in the locksmith business. In the 1940s, his uncle Jimmy had started a bicycle and key shop in McAllen. Guthrie's father took it over, and by the age of 10, Donald was working for his dad, cutting keys. When old enough to drive, he went on service calls.

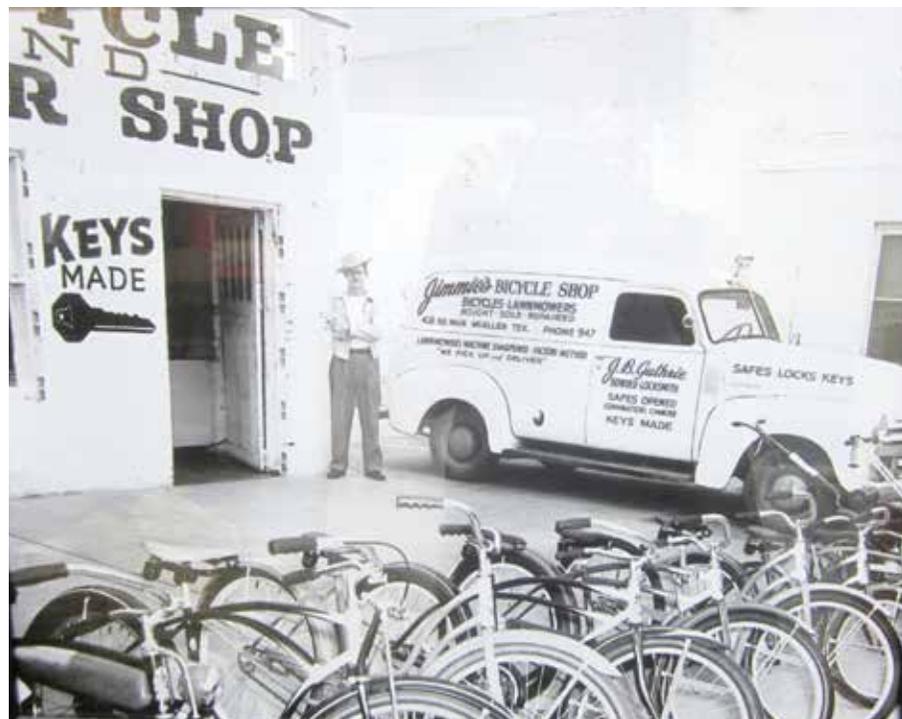
Around 1985, Guthrie took over the family business and halted bike sales to concentrate on locksmithing: Guthrie's Locksmith Shop. The business has weathered radical changes since then as electronic locks became widespread. For the past 10 years, Texas locksmiths have been licensed by the state with new applicants required to have five years of experience with a locksmith before getting their own license.

Vehicle manufacturers only sell their key programs to licensed locksmiths. "Every year we have to pay each carmaker \$800-\$1,200

for program updates. Electronic keys have helped the industry, but you have to invest," Guthrie said. "Some manufacturers limit the numbers of keys you can program in a year." He held up a device smaller than a laptop which had \$10,000 worth of vehicle keying software in it. It is locked in a safe at night, of course.

Add the cost of key hardware to the software, and you see why replacement keys run in the \$200-500 range. Local car dealers are among the locksmith's customers.

Abby and Donald Guthrie sell, install and service large safes and vaults. (VBR)



The roots of Guthrie's Locksmith Shop go back to the 1940s and an uncle's bike and key shop. (VBR)

with a single locksmith. If another locksmith wants to open it, they will have to drill the lock," Guthrie said. Owners of hunting leases and retail operations are now purchasing the pick-resistant, restricted keys and creating signature cards for those authorized to get a duplicate key made. "Some store managers come in to have extra keys made. We can't do it unless they are authorized." The business also does rekeying that can't be copied.

Guthrie and his wife Abby, who handles the financial side of the company, today run a business that has gone beyond locks and vaults to other aspects of access control. The company stocks mechanical push-button locks, panic bars and panic room controls

"Our specialty is next day service for locks, if not same day. We have a lot in stock," Guthrie said. Besides two in-store locksmiths, the company has seven other locksmiths making service calls handled by three dispatchers. Guthrie himself oversees locksmith training from scratch. "It takes a year to get them basically proficient." That apprenticeship also reveals the person's trustworthiness. Insurance companies usually specify

"We don't go making vehicle keys for strangers," Guthrie said. "We have to have proof of identity and ownership."

Locks for houses, property entry and commercial operations have become more complex, too. High security keys and restricted keys, with some brands noted for being unpickable, prevent unauthorized duplication. "The keyways are individualized chips associated

with a single locksmith. If another locksmith wants to open it, they will have to drill the lock," Guthrie said. Owners of hunting leases and retail operations are now purchasing the pick-resistant, restricted keys and creating signature cards for those authorized to get a duplicate key made. "Some store managers come in to have extra keys made. We can't do it unless they are authorized." The business also does rekeying that can't be copied.

Guthrie and his wife Abby, who handles the financial side of the company, today run a business that has gone beyond locks and vaults to other aspects of access control. The company stocks mechanical push-button locks, panic bars and panic room controls

Insurance companies usually specify

the type of safes certain customers -- such as jewelry stores, high ends shops and those handing lots of cash -- must have. "In the last five years, safes have become very popular, ranging from \$100 ones to \$20,000 ones that weigh 5,000 pounds and have five inch thick walls," he said.

Guthrie's sells, installs and services safes and vaults, but the customer sets the combination. Some customers sheepishly request their combination a year or two later, although Guthrie's purposefully knows none of the customers' combinations. Guthrie said he will trouble shoot if a problem arises. But often the only recourse is to drill the safe open with special diamond and carbide bits, an expensive process that can take more than a day.

The album of burglar-damaged and fire-blasted safes is certainly an eye-opener, as well as a good sales tool. Even with the dials melted off or the hinges cut off, these safes did their jobs in keeping the contents secure.

Another generation of Guthrie locksmiths is picking up some tricks of the trade. The couple's twin boys spend after-school hours surrounded by safes, electronic keypads and locksmiths setting tumblers in locks.

For more information, see guthrieslock.com.

Making keys is at the heart of Guthrie's Locksmith Shop. (VBR)



The interior of large safes can withstand burglars' cutting torches and sledge hammers. (VBR)



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BOOT CAMP DIARY - DAY ONE

By Eileen Mattei

I've owned two businesses. Why did I apply to the Women's Business Boot Camp put on by the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce? Because things change -- dramatically and drastically. I learned computer programming in the days of punch cards. Less than 20 years ago, I was sending my first business stories and photographs to the RGV Business editor in McAllen by bus.

I signed up for the five-day program, once a month for five months, for the chance to learn new tricks for running a company. Another inducement was the opportunity to listen to brand-new and established business owners talk about their goals, challenges and successes. Let's get one fact out in the open: I'm not bossy. I have leadership skills. Prior to the first class, I took the lengthy, online Gallup Strengths Finder which assesses entrepreneurial talents.

Checking into boot camp on a rainy morning, I found out this is the sixth year of the women-only program, and we are the biggest class to date, 20. Melinda Rodriguez, president/CEO of the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce, said our boot camp class marked the first time that the trademarked Gallup as-

essment tests had been used. Rodriguez, who is a certified trainer for the Gallup program, said the class should provide a springboard to learning, both about ourselves and about the practical tools that can help a business thrive.

"We start with talent because it pushes to the top and determines how you build your business. Talent, knowledge and skills work together to create strengths," Rodriguez said. Developed and directed, those strengths will help build a successful company. My classmates include one member of the first Boot Camp who has come back for a refresher, four Inter National Bank bankers who have enrolled to better understand their entrepreneurial clients, a handful of business owners, entrepreneurs with definite ideas and others testing the waters. Viviana Gomez, 20, aglow with idealism, wants to become a millionaire so she can change lives, because being an entrepreneur has changed her life.

Daisy Zamora, who has a PhD in nutrition epidemiology and designs and analyzes research studies, is at a different stage in her life with a toddler. "Success for me now means having full freedom and resources to do what I want to do. I need help with developing multiple income streams." One experienced administrator has been dutifully working in a family business, but recently decided she was ready to pursue her own business startup. Another leads a successful non-profit that is experiencing growing pains.

I sensed everyone in the room felt empowered already. What we are seeking are the tools, the connections and the coaching that can make us first-rate business owners.

Many campers expressed surprise at what were identified as our entrepreneurial strengths, things such as creative thinking, business focus, determination and delegation. "I didn't know I was risk-taker, but I do ask a lot of questions," said Sonia Cano, who decided she does, indeed, take calculated risks. My greatest strength was identified as relationship-builder. I certainly questioned that, because I don't think of it as a talent or anything

Women intent on running successful business go to work on day one of the Women's Boot Camp. (VBR)



like what I am best at. But on reflection, yes, it is at the heart of what I do -- engaging with people, listening to their stories and fostering their connections to others.

Rodriguez asked us, "Who would begin to build without an architectural plan? The same goes for building a business." Boot camp is an opportunity to educate ourselves, clearly identify our goals, and create a map for business development.

To apply that, we split into groups of four, decide on a business name and product and then decide on our roles according to our dominant and major strengths. Everyone in my group ranked very high on independence and low on delegation. Big on captains, short on crew. Moving between the groups, Rodriguez saw our chart of talents and asked how we were going to deal with the dearth of delegation skills.

Past mission statement writing sessions have struck me as exercises in unrestrained verbosity. But boot camp had us first determine the values we hold dearest and then our goal. The resulting mission statements were succinct and heartfelt.

Rather than being bored, I felt energized by my first day of boot camp: not just motivated but ready to follow up some ideas. And before we muster next month, we have reading and networking assignments to complete.

Isn't it strange that no formal K-12 program exists to encourage potential entrepreneurs in the way that athletes, performers and STEM students are encouraged? Small businesses drive the economy and create most new jobs, after all.



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DOING BUSINESS WITH BRAZIL

By Alberto V. Espinoza

Brazil - the land of carnaval, samba, and futbol - is a country rich in history and culture. With a population over 2.3 million, Brazil is also the largest country in South America with a massive economy. In 2014, the U.S. Census Bureau ranked Brazil as the third-largest trade partner for Texas -- importing \$11.8 million in goods, accounting for 4.1% of all Texas exports!

Texas, in fact, has several initiatives to support trade with Brazil. The Brazil-Texas Chamber of Commerce, for example, provides trade consulting-services, such as identifying business partners and understanding the Brazilian market. The chamber also offers members networking opportunities through various events and trade missions and participates in the Brazil/U.S. Business Council Export Green initiative, an effort to increase green technology exports to Brazil from small- and medium-sized U.S. businesses.

On the federal level, several initiatives have also been implemented to encourage further trade between the U.S. and Brazil. In 2011, President Barack Obama and President Dilma Rousseff signed the Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation, an accord designed to increase trade and investment between the U.S. and Brazil through increased cooperation on innovation, trade facilitation, and by decreasing regulatory barriers to trade.

According to the International Trade Administration, major exports to Brazil from Texas in 2014 were petroleum and coal products (35.4%); chemical products (26.3%); oil and gas (8.3%); and machinery products (7.3%). The remaining 22.7% of exports were from products in the transportation-equipment industry, computer and electronics industry, and agricultural products industry, among others.

So what do these facts mean for Rio Grande Valley small businesses interested in growth? To highlight the vast opportunities in this South American country, particularly within those industries just mentioned, the UTRGV Small Business Development Center is partnering with the Câmara Texana de Comércio no Brasil -- a chamber of commerce in Brazil that promotes trade with Texas -- to host a "Doing Business in Brazil" conference on Nov. 6 in Edinburg.

Expert presenters include represen-



tatives from the U. S. Commercial Service Export Assistance Center, the Brazilian company Santana Textiles and the Trade Bureau of the Brazilian Consulate in Houston, among others. Along with providing an overview of the Brazilian market and culture, the conference is set to cover areas and industries for U.S. exports, buying from Brazil, legal and tax considerations, and trade regulations and standards.

To register for this conference and learn

about doing business in Brazil or other countries, contact the UTRGV SBDC at 665-7535.

Alberto V. Espinoza is a business outreach specialist at the UTRGV Small Business Development Center, where he provides business advisement and training. For more information on UTRGV SBDC services for small businesses, call 665-7535.

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WINTER ENTREPRENEURS

By Rosemary Couture

Donna Wright is one Winter Texan who brings her business south when she returns to Harlingen each year. She is in her fifth year of selling the Tower Garden, a compact aeroponic system for growing vegetables and herbs just steps from your door in a sunny spot. It uses about 10% of the water needed for soil-based gardening, Wright said. Some studies indicate the air/water mix allows vegetables to grow much faster.

The Tower Garden was developed by a Walt Disney World's Epcot greenhouse manager for use by families, although Chicago's O'Hare Airport has used the system for its rooftop gardens. Wright, who had long been a Juice Plus distributor, researched the Tower Garden and admitted, "Not only did I fall in love with the product, but my husband did, too, because it was like a new appliance. He loved the mechanics of it. We thought this was good fit with Juice Plus," which now owns the growing system.

For Wright, another driving force was the healthy eating aspect, "getting people to understand the importance of fresh produce in their daily diet and making it easy for them to

Donna Wright harvests Swiss chard from a Tower Garden. (VBR)



get it."

Outside their RV at Lakewood RV Resort, Wright has two of the five-foot-tall towers, each holding 20 vigorously growing plants. Chard, leaf lettuce, pak choy, spinach, dill, basil, kale, eggplants and tomatoes stay alive and thrive through the Valley winter, she said. "It is so nice to have your own fresh produce and herbs right outside the door. We find that we are eating more vegetables because they are right here."

Customers buy the system, which includes the tough, food grade-plastic central pipe and the recirculating pump which cycles on and off, spraying nutrient-fortified water on the roots growing in the pipe. Wright primes her buyers for success by giving them starter plants. "I keep a bunch of seeds started for my new customers. They decide what ones they want. I want them to get comfortable growing and eating their own vegetables."

The couple eats vegetables from their towers every day, she said. "Swiss chard does particularly well here. I put it in the top (of the tower) because it is so attractive." Some people grow flowers in their towers.

"We have customers from here to McAllen. There's a lot of growth available in the market," Wright said. Twice a week, she works the marketplace, demonstrating the simplicity and compactness (four square feet) of the Tower Garden. She frequents places such as farmers markets, hospital health fairs and Quinta Mazatlán.

"Tower Gardens are good for people with small spaces. Retirement homes love them, be-

cause people in wheelchairs can run them," she said. "Maintenance takes about 15 minutes a week. You check the water level and pH level, and every other week put in nutrients. Because the roots are not in contact with soil in ground, we don't have many pest issues," and she sells beneficial ladybugs if you do encounter problems.

Gardens are transient, but particularly in a system of continuous nutrient baths that speeds up the maturation cycle. Every two months, the lettuce goes seed, for example. But Tower Garden owners learn to start seedlings for their next crop. "You should never have empty holes. That would be wasteful."

Wright gladly shares advice about the varieties that work well. She recommends bush type tomatoes like Sweet 100 and Celebrity, not the vining ones, for example. She suggests removing over-vigorous roots. Wright said the national organization recently started a program that grants a garden to Boys & Girls Clubs, including those in the Valley.

At the end of April, the Wrights harvest their crops and break down the Towers Gardens and move north and to start their summer garden. Valley tower users, she said, have success using shade cloth and some even suspend frozen bottles of water in the tower to cool down the sprayed water in summer.

For more information, see wright.towergarden.com or call 269-806-1428.



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SETTING STAFF COMPENSATION IN 2016

By Barbara Weltman

Now that we're in the fourth quarter of the year, it's time to plan ahead for 2016. Here are some factors to take into account when budgeting for payroll for next year.

Salary and Wage Increases

Pay increases for your staff depend on what you can afford. If want to keep up with pay hikes across the nation (and can afford it), expect to give raises for 2016 of about 3%. Executive pay is expected to increase nationwide by 3.1% on average. Average pay increases vary from these percentages by industry and location. Of course, if you can afford larger increases, your staff will be appreciative.

Be sure to budget for raises you must give as a result of increases in minimum wage rates. If you are a federal contractor, the \$10.10 per hour federal minimum wage may increase; it's up to the Department of Labor to set the rate for 2016.

Pay increases are accompanied by additional payroll tax costs for employers. The Social Security wage base, which caps the Social Security tax portion of FICA, is expected to remain at the 2015 level of \$118,000. It is not unusual for the wage base to remain unchanged; it was the same in 2009, 2010 and 2011. Expect that Social Security Administration will confirm this wage base limit of \$118,000 for 2016 in the third week of this month.

Health Coverage

If you are an applicable large employer because you have at least 50 full-time and/or full-time equivalent employees, you must provide affordable health coverage to your full-timers and their dependents in 2016 or pay a penalty. (Employers with 100+ employees became subject to this requirement at the start of 2015.) Now is the time to shop for coverage for 2016 or budget for your penalty cost.

If you are a smaller employer, you can choose to provide coverage to help your staff stay healthy and retain valued employees. The government's Small Business Health Options Program (SHOP) can be used for this purpose, or you can get coverage through a private insurer. If you use the SHOP option, you may be eligible for a tax credit of 50% of your premium costs, and the cap on average wages for determining eligibility will increase to \$25,900 (up from \$25,800). However, if you claimed the small employer

health care tax credit in 2014 and 2015, you won't be eligible for it in 2016 even if you otherwise meet all eligibility requirements.

If your company offers employees a flexible spending account (FSA), this won't impact your budget because contributions are made only by employees. However, it's up to you to inform them of their contribution limits so they can commit to their contributions for 2016. The 2015 limit of \$2,550 is not expected to rise in 2016.

Do you provide fringe benefits in addition to health coverage? Retirement plan contributions? Education assistance? In budgeting for 2016, factor in increases for any benefits you provide. Contribution limits for qualified retirement plans won't be announced until later this year; due to low inflation, the limits

may have little or no increase over those for 2015. If you provide free parking, the tax-free amount will increase to \$255 per month (up from \$250 per month in 2015).

Take time now to plan for 2016 compensation matters. It may be advisable to work with your CPA or other financial advisor to make sure you can afford any planned increases for the coming year and to make sure you stay in compliance with tax and labor laws.

Weltman is a SBA blogger. The SBA provides services and information for small business owners. For more information, call the Valley SBA office at 423-8573.



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IN THE SPOTLIGHT



Architects had to shed their shoes to tour one historic home. A fashion trend is alive, if rarely visible, in the RGV. (VBR)



Maurice Welton, owner of four Edible Arrangement franchises in the Valley, received the Governor's Small Business Award from Secretary of State Carlos Cascos and Larry Ruggiano of Governor Greg Abbott's economic development office. (VBR)

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First Community Bank's newest banking center is under construction at 8000 N. 10th Street in McAllen. The full service banking center will be a 4400-square-foot facility with five drive-thru lanes. This newest facility will be FCB's 9th banking center in Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy County. Construction is scheduled to be completed in January 2016. Pictured, right, are President and CEO Michael Scott, Senior Vice President Michael McCarthy, Vice President Marco Perez and Assistant Vice President Flora Fagan. (VBR)



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CHEVROLET NEW-VEHICLE DEDUCTION ELIGIBILITY

There are some limitations to the expense deduction, including vehicle eligibility.

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¹The tax incentives are available for depreciable tangible property that is acquired by purchase for use in the active conduct of a trade or business. Additional limitation based on purchases: For the 2015 tax year, the aggregate deduction of \$25,000 under Internal Revenue Code Section 179 is most beneficial to small businesses that place in service no more than \$200,000 of "Section 179 property" during the year. Certain vehicles, models, and restrictions apply. Each individual's tax situation is unique; therefore, please consult your tax professional to confirm vehicle depreciation, deduction, and tax benefits. For more details, visit irs.gov. ²For vehicles that qualify as passenger automobiles under the Internal Revenue Code, there is a \$3,160 per-vehicle depreciation deduction cap. ³For vehicles that qualify as sport utility vehicles under the Internal Revenue Code, there is a \$25,000 per-vehicle depreciation deduction cap. ©2015 General Motors. All rights reserved. The marks appearing in this ad are the trademarks or service marks of GM, its subsidiaries, affiliates, or licensors.