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# VBR

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# THE RIGHT TEAM FOR YOUR BUSINESS

By Rebecca Reyes

Do you have a winning team to help you grow your business? When growth planning, you may need to hire for the first time or employ additional personnel to help you operate the business as it expands.

One of the most important aspects of growing a business is having a solid team that is qualified to support and accomplish the vision created for its future. It is also important to remember that the first interactions that customers have with the business are with its employees; hence, it is essential to hire and keep the right people. Good employees play a crucial part in the profitability and success of any business.

Before you begin the process of recruiting new staff, it is important that you first identify the tasks that need to be completed and the necessary qualifications to accomplish those duties -- essentially the job descriptions for positions within the company. For assistance in developing these descriptions, the Texas Workforce Commission ([texasworkforce.org](http://texasworkforce.org)) and the Bureau of Labor Statistics at ([www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov)) have online resources and tools for employers.

When you are ready to create a job posting, narrow the post to a few key words that are

essential to the job and that emphasize challenge and expertise. Focus on delivering information that will highlight the main aspects of the business and the job opening and refrain from using generic catchphrases, such as "enthusiastic front clerk." These timeworn expressions tend to disinterest potential candidates. To prepare for recruitment, review employment laws such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Act and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to be in compliance, making sure not to use discriminatory language or contract applications throughout the recruitment and hiring process. Some basic information to consider when posting a position is the salary, expectations, opportunities and contact information for the company or its HR department.

Some common ways to market your job opening are to post the opening in your local newspaper and share it through word-of-mouth with your network. You can also attend job fairs or seek assistance from an employment agency and other placement programs. Through a variety of online employment sites, you can also post the opening and include an application for greater convenience. If your company has a social media presence, you can similarly let your followers know. Not only is it free, it opens doors for future employees and informs customers of your expansion!

When preparing for interviews with your prospects, it is a good idea to review each candidate profile for qualifications and "fit," keeping in mind your company's culture as you assess your expectations. Some sample questions include: In what work setting are you the most productive and happy? Do you excel at teamwork or feel more productive working alone? These types of questions can help you determine whether your interviewee will thrive in your work environment.

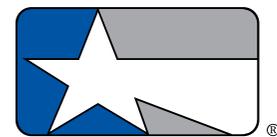
If recruitment has gone well, you may have 20-100 applications to review! To narrow down your employee search, ask for a cover letter and résumé as well as references in your job posting and accept only those that are complete. These tips will help you to identify the most prospective employees. Looking for the right employee may take time and patience, but if done correctly, will help you grow your business!

*Rebecca Reyes is a research assistant at the UTRGV SBDC where she assists business advisors with market research. The UTRGV Small Business Development Center provides business advisement and training to existing and startup businesses. Call 665-7535 for more information.*

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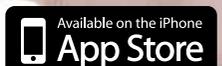


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# EATING GREEN IS GOOD FOR YOU

By Lori Vermaas

It's no secret that the Valley regularly scores the nation's highest obesity rates (the McAllen-Edinburg-Mission area, 38.5% in 2013). But the emergence of healthy food businesses in the past few years is an encouraging response. Indeed, the Valley seems more ready to catch on to the nationwide healthy eating trend, a category that some industry analysts say "appears to have serious stamina." Local res-

taurants, grocery stores and more specialized vendors are opening and thriving, offering wholesome options based on organic practices and/or plant-based food.

"I want a healthier Valley," said Raquelin de Alba of **Green Owl Deli**, a vegan-friendly deli in McAllen. By offering freshly made soups, salads and sandwiches, and by adapting regional dishes, like tamales and tacos, her menu not only cleverly caters to Valley tastes, it also aims to introduce Valleyites to

more nutritious ways to prepare their own food.

De Alba opened the restaurant in 2014 after having revamped her and her family's diet over 20 years to help address a variety of health issues. "I'm a great believer that preservatives in food create most of our health problems." Popular dishes, like the Whatanowl (a lentil burger) and pasta-less lasagna, often initially invite skepticism. "But when people try it, they love it." She also offers antibiotic-free meat dishes, including a pork-filled Havana Panini, desserts (all gluten-free) and cold-pressed juices (in bottles). Her work has gained notice outside of the Valley. Austin visitors tell her that none of their vegan restaurants compare to hers. Nevertheless, she knows that the Valley is "not as evolved yet. We're still in the process. That doesn't mean we're not going to get there."

Renea Perez, co-owner with her sister of **Juiceology**, also sees the Valley's green-eating potential. After visiting raw juice stores in Houston and Austin two years ago, Perez, an experienced fitness trainer, recognized an opportunity. "We need this," she said, referring to her one-year-old business, which provides numerous organic and locally grown vegetable and fruit juice combinations, along with smoothies and protein shakes. "There are places that sell flavored waters here, but the beverages aren't very good for you -- they're full of sugar or Splenda."

When the bar opened in July 2015, they were "slammed," and it hasn't slowed down much since. To her delight, their customer base includes all age ranges. Most customers request

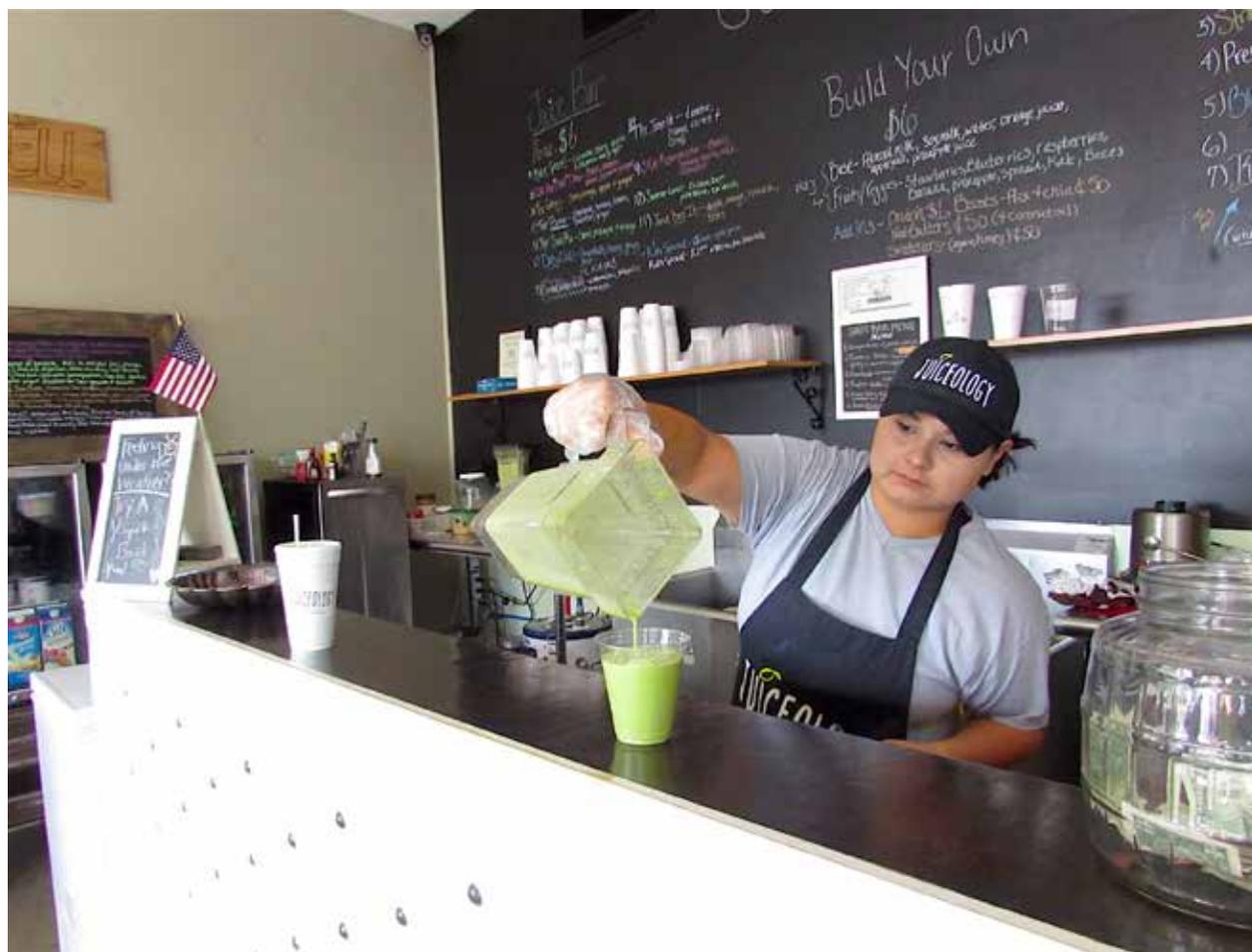


The vegan burger at Green Owl Deli attracts repeat customers. (VBR)



Green Owl Deli offers vegan snacks and meals. (VBR)

*Juiceology's menu offers a wide range of vegetables, fruits and seeds. (VBR)*



*Major Health Foods offers aisles of health supplements and healthy foods. (VBR)*

the Mean Green, a frothy juice mixture of ginger, lemon, cucumber, celery, green apple and kale, or The Hulk, a chunky green smoothie concoction made with almond milk, kale, spinach, natural almond butter and banana.

**Major Health Foods** has been addressing customers' health needs since its matriarch, Lily Majors, opened it in McAllen in 1983. Back then, the health supplement store filled only 1,000 square feet. But business has since tripled. "There's so many aspects to this store," said JoLynn Hasler, Major's daughter, who took control of the family business in 1995. "You can take a supplement, you can take a tea, you can take drops of essential oils or extracts." The most requested products include Flora essence, a detox treatment; collagen, which helps address inflammation; and vitamin D3.

What's kept them in business for so long is the team's personalized approach. "My mom's intent was to help people." Although Majors has retired, "long-time customers still remember how welcome she made them feel." Keeping up with all the latest health research is the most challenging part of Hasler's job. "I'm not money-driven. If me telling you how to mix a home remedy together helps, I'm not going to sell you a supplement for it. My thing is, your health is first."

Ever since Dea Cowgill, founder of **D'Licious Sweets**, began adding healthier baked goods to sell at McAllen's Grow'n Growers Farmers Market, business increased. "All of my healthy food items get sold way before my traditional ones." Attending classes offered by the Home Bakers Market, an educational consortium that teaches bakers how to prepare desserts for those with specific dietary conditions, made all the difference.

Today, Cowgill uses only organic flour and sugar, even in her traditional recipes. Her flourless brownies (one with gluten-free cornstarch, the other with black bean and avocado substituted for flour and butter) are her biggest sellers. Business has been so good that a green restaurant invited her to create protein-powder-based desserts for their menu. "It took me three months, but I got it down. I was determined." The resultant blonde banana vanilla brownie is so delicious the restaurant owner has been heard to

call it “freakin’ awesome.”

**Where’s the beef?**

One green food market niche undergoing quick growth is antibiotic-free protein. Chicken tops national sales, but grass-fed beef sales are rising rapidly. About 15 years ago, around 50 grass-fed operations existed nationwide, but today there are thousands. **Eagle Catcher Farm & Ranch**, open since 2012, is a notable Valley entry. “We are certified grass-fed (likely the only such business south of San Antonio),” said Nancy Klein, a retired cardiologist. “From birth until harvest (slaughter), our cows only eat grass,” specifically Bermuda grass and a non-GMO alfalfa sourced locally.

The grass-feeding regimen produces healthier beef, meat “that has a better cardiovascular risk profile, lower in saturated fats and cholesterol.” The farm harvests about one two-year-old cow per month. They sell various cuts, ground beef and sausage out of their house to customers as far away as Midland, Kingsville and Laredo; they also vend at McAllen’s Growin’ Growers Farmers Market. “Our customers know they’re getting what they paid for,” said Nancy Klein, who conceived of the business after reacting badly to eating grain-fed beef. “It brings us such joy.”

After being frustrated with Brownsville’s lack of healthy dining options, which are “mostly tacos and pizza,” Lucia Baqueiros

opened **Kaero’s** in 2012. Her menu relies on locally sourced, organic proteins and vegetables that her seven-person staff assembles into freshly made wraps, baguettes, pasta dishes and salads. Baqueiros regards her restaurant as a congenial and tasty introduction to more wholesome eating habits. Patrons choose from a variety of savory dipping sauces (cilantro, chipotle and cream cheese), which only confirms the restaurant’s claim that “eating healthy has never been so delicious.”

The Valley is ideal for this kind of reeducation. “Most adults don’t seem to want to get their nutrition from food. This attitude -- that food is medicine -- should start early in life, at home with our kids.” Baqueiros also advertises her restaurant on school buses. “We’ve got to start the conversation somewhere.”

*For more information, find Green Owl Deli, Juiceology Juice Bar and D’Licious Sweets on Facebook. See majorhealth-foodsmcallen.com, eaglecatcherfarm.com and kaeosrestaurant.com.*

*Nancy Klein and her husband Garner run Eagle Catcher Farm & Ranch, raising grassfed beef and selling cuts such as porterhouse steaks. (VBR)*



*Tucked inside Major Health Foods, Naturalissimo provides vegan meals like this Mexican sampler. (VBR)*

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# TURNING THE PAST INTO A POP-UP

By Eileen Mattei

Odette MacDonald may have been born in the wrong era, but she's created a little time capsule that transports her clients back 50, 100 and even 150 years ago. The owner of Odette's Secret Closet shares her delight in the costume jewelry, clothing and décor of bygone times as a pre-estate sales consultant, vintage stylist and antique broker. Her vintage pop-up shop, which, of course, has no permanent address, opened five years ago. The Round Top antique market atmosphere is her goal as it was for the shops she was previously associated with, Vintage on Main and Vintage Gypsies.

As a pre-estate consultant, MacDonald assists people who want to downsize as well as those whose heirs have little interest in family heirlooms. "They will bring me a box of trinkets or random jewelry. I always tell people there is something in your attic that is a hidden gem. I help people evaluate antiques and make good decisions about them based on value and other factors. I give my clients peace of mind because I make sure every item is well-researched, priced at the going rate and goes to a good home," she said. "I'm always looking for unique pieces with history. My favorite part is speaking with someone who owns a cherished antique and hearing their story," about their great-aunt or grandmother who owned the piece.

Some families request that MacDonald

*Inside the Bryan House in Mission, Odette MacDonald shows a late-1800s Murphy bed, one of the vintage items she sources and sells through Odette's Secret Closet. (VBR)*



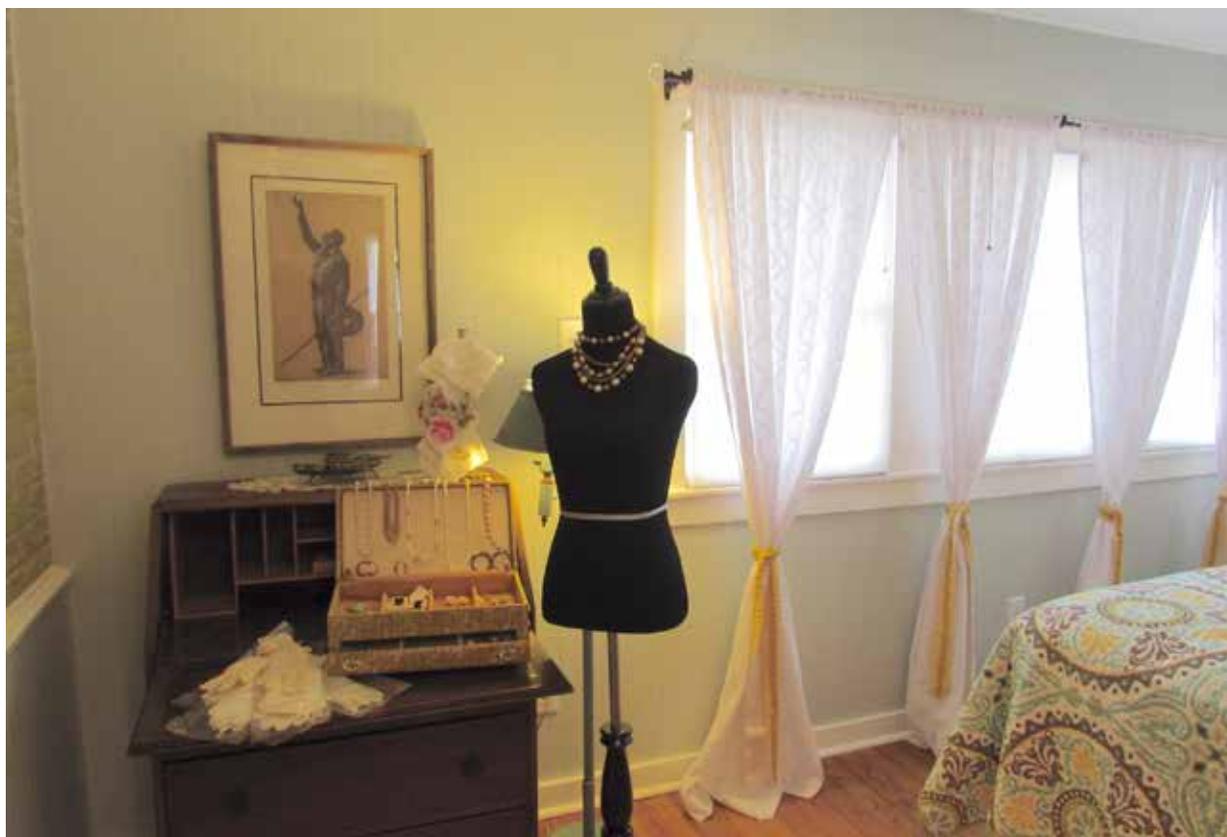
keep the sale private while others agree she can include their pieces in Odette's Secret Closet. Among current treasures are Victorian-era Flow Blue china from a family in Alamo, 1930s Juliana costume jew-

elry from a home in Zapata and a cameo from a family in Edinburg. Estate sales businesses often ask her help to estimate prices on vintage pieces.

MacDonald arranges pop-up shows in boutiques, antique markets, beauty salons and private homes.

"Boutiques benefit by having me bring in new traffic and marketing the event on a constant basis. Whenever I do my pop-ups, I make them informational and different, almost like a historical exhibition. I explain each piece, such as why broaches were worn in a certain way. I work with the store and don't compete with them." Oh Kay's customers, for example, appreciate high-end jewelry pieces as beautiful, wearable art.

"In business, it's all about keeping people's curiosity and attention," MacDonald said. "For the stores, it's a marketing tool. They pay me to stir up the fun. The pop-up creates a new atmosphere. I bring wine and treats. I talk about the antiques with love and admiration and curate the show like a mini-museum. It's a more personal approach to marketing, building relationships. An Instagram picture speaks a thousand words." She typically posts about the showcased business three times a day. The pop-up attracts customers who like to go down memory lane, both consumers and



*Vintage jewelry from Odette's Secret Closet seems at home in a guest room at the new B&B known as The Bryan House. (VBR)*

decorators shopping for their clients.

Vintage jewelry is MacDonald's special niche. She will stay up until 4 a.m. researching to find an exact match. "It's the high of knowing what it's worth. Lots of designers did not stamp or sign their jewelry. This is a great business. You run into a lot of treasures."

MacDonald, who started in the busi-

ness for her own pleasure and to make money, encourages clients to use the vintage linens and dishes they inherited or purchased and enjoy the ambiance and links to earlier times.

Some customers have stipulated that MacDonald should handle their heirlooms when they pass away. "People know I have their best interest at heart," she said. "Once they have given me a family

heirloom, I won't sell it until I find the perfect person to sell the item to," one who is willing to pay a fair price.

At the B&B located at the William Jennings Bryan House in Mission, MacDonald pointed out a late-1800s Murphy bed, which hides inside a shoulder-high cabinet, and other furniture and vintage linens with discreet price tags. "This is the ideal place for me to host a show-and-tell gathering. It will work perfectly for what I plan to do: tea parties, estate sale dinners." The Bryan House, which has been restored by Ariel King, was the setting for a recent luncheon that MacDonald hosted for interior decorators and estate sale owners.

A creative person is a jack of all trades, MacDonald said. She caters to younger clients who like to mix modern and vintage and look to her to help stage theme-oriented events. She participates in the Houston Vintage Festival in September as well as art gallery pop-ups there.

In the future, MacDonald plans to become a true vintage gypsy with a van to take her show on the road. "I do what I love while preserving history one story at a time."

*For more information, see Odette's Secret Closet on Facebook or call 467-9379.*



*The parlor of the William Jennings Bryan House provides an appropriate setting for Victorian-era Flow Blue china from Odette's Secret Closet. (VBR)*

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# CASA LOS EBANOS HOSTS WEDDINGS

By Lori Vermaas

“This is the perfect place for custom weddings,” agreed Taylor and Martha Blanton of Casa Los Ebanos, a grand, 82-acre estate located just outside San Benito. The property has served as the site for hundreds of events over the past 15 years. “Here we let you pick your own caterer, band, everything, and fit it to your budget,” said Taylor.

Developing a cost-friendly yet elegant locale was the Blantons’ intention from 2001 when they began to superintend Martha’s birth family’s early 20th-century residence. “I grew up here,” she said of the stately yet cozy 1937 property. “We started out developing a small nature preserve and then morphed the house into something more.” Nestled within a forest-covered estate that includes spacious lawns, a resaca, a dance pavilion and a butterfly garden, the refurbished two-story residence with high ceilings and large multi-use rooms not only makes for an impressive landmark, it has also become a lucrative events-center enterprise.

“There’s room for a lot of hosting businesses like ours,” said Martha. “It’s a popular industry down here, because the Valley is a very celebratory area. Family-oriented events are big deals because people have big families. They love to throw parties, including weddings and other

*The stately Casa Los Ebanos (VBR)*



festivities. I’m still amazed that every 15 minutes it seems some new venue pops up that I haven’t heard of.” The market has been strong enough that the Valley has had its own wedding-themed magazine, The

Valley Wedding Pages, since the early 2000s.

Casa Los Ebanos’s annual average hovers around 50 weddings, some with the actual ceremony and reception and others for the receptions alone. Wedding events are so popular that the Blantons offer a basic wedding package: use of the grounds, rooms in which to dress, golf-cart transportation for guests from the parking lot to the grounds, and tables and chairs for 100. The couple also provides consultations. “We don’t tell people ‘bye, you’re on your own,’” Martha said. “We’ve been at it for a long time, so we’ve gained a lot of knowledge about who does what well in the Valley.” They also will schedule up to three photo shoots per client for brides.

Flexibility is central in their approach to each consultation. For example, they have a vendors list, but clients aren’t required to use them. “Some places demand that you use specific vendors, but we don’t,” said Martha. “We want people to do whatever their budget affords,” said Taylor. “We go out of our way to make it a good experience, and we often receive wonderful letters and emails of thank you’s afterwards.”

Given their estate’s elegance, the Blantons have witnessed many formal wedding events, complete with ladies in long, stunning dresses and men in suits and ties. The setting accentuates that kind of dramatic effect, particularly at night, when decorative lights strung throughout branches on the trees softly illuminate the grounds. But they also attract less formal gatherings. More recently, Martha has



*Ebony trees proliferate throughout the property of the aptly named Casa Los Ebanos. (VBR)*

*Casa Los Ebanos offers space that easily converts from an auditorium-styled meeting room to one that provides more intimate nooks and corners. (VBR)*



noticed a trend toward rustic themes, “a more western style, with boot scooting and hay bales. We see that as coming, but we see everything, all styles.” Sometimes people bring their dogs to the wedding. “They’ve walked down the aisle with them,” said Taylor. “Whatever they want. We don’t put restrictions on them.”

Although the vast majority of the events they host are weddings, they frequently host other event types, including showers, christening lunches, even bachelorette parties. Clients also rent the grounds to celebrate birthday parties, which Martha said “can get very elaborate, with the installation of rides and rock-climbing walls.”

Although business has been “growing, growing, growing,” particularly after the couple redesigned their website, they’re hoping to attract more business, especially on weekdays. “This is a perfect day retreat place,” Martha said. Corporate events are a target. “We would love to do mediations,” noted Martha, “where lawyers break off into different rooms, within closed doors. The house’s intimate spaces really suit a board of directors meeting,” while “outside, we can offer them space for something larger,” like a casual mixer to toast the day’s achievements.

Other than wanting to do more special events and meetings, the Blantons aren’t aiming to change too much about their hosting work. “We have a routine and we’re going to stick to it,” said Taylor. Plus, they absolutely enjoy playing the host. “We’ve met the nicest people,” he said. “Very respectful,” added Martha. “We’ve been so fortunate. We haven’t had any fights or damage.” “It’s been a wonderful experience,”

said Taylor. “That sounds awfully Pol-lyannaish but it’s true.”

*For more info, see [casalosebanos.com](http://casalosebanos.com).*

*Taylor and Martha Blanton enjoy hosting both casual and formal events at Casa Los Ebanos. (VBR)*





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# BUSINESS PERSON OF THE YEAR

By Lori Vermaas

“Everywhere I worked, I felt I could create something better, a new management or training approach, a new concept, a new model,” said Elias Sandoval, founder of Easy Solutions of Brownsville. “I’m from the Valley, so I knew that South Texas has the worst credit in the nation. A lot of our families here are second- or third-generation Americans; they’re less educated about finances and need guidance. I started dissecting the industry here: what’s going on, what are people complaining about, what does the industry lack? I realized, wow, my team could do it 10 times better and faster, so let’s be innovators. Let’s create Easy Solutions.”

Six years later, Easy Solutions has grown so steadily that it not only provides credit and insurance assistance in the Valley but also worldwide via online access, and operates its own construction and technology divisions. The company’s scope of services has become so wide ranging that Sandoval developed a 10-second elevator pitch to better encapsulate it. “The best way to put it is that we’re not defined by an

industry. We’re an innovative entrepreneur company offering easy solutions to consumer businesses in several industries.”

The company’s development has been so impressive that in April, the SBA’s Lower Rio Grande Valley District named Sandoval its Small Business Person of the Year. “I’m so honored,” he said. “We have an amazing team of 35 here, with others in Mexico, Costa Rica and the Philippines, creating state-of-the-art software and Web-based applications and new business models and concepts.” At the May 3 award ceremony, the St. Edward’s graduate “got a little choked up. It was a

*Elias Sandoval, CEO of Easy Solutions, is this year’s SBA Lower Rio Grande Valley District Small Business Person of the Year. “This is a company award,” he proudly said. “At the ceremony I was able to reminisce and appreciate for a second how far we’ve come in six years. Otherwise, we’re so focused on our mission.” (VBR)*



*Sandoval’s Brownsville headquarters houses a busy call center, which manages thousands of clients in the Valley and across 41 other states. (VBR)*



day to remember. I took a selfie. It’s not every day you win something like this, so I took one.”

Although most of the demand back in 2010 came from businesses seeking credit assistance, Sandoval always envisioned more for his fledgling company. In fact, his business plan targeted the fi-

ancial, construction and technology industries, with the express intent of improving them, as well as further strengthening his company. Indeed, each division’s products are always reinvested back into the company first. “I like to be very efficient in every aspect of our daily operations. Our tech division has helped with that, for example producing an AI creative financial software. There was a time when I was offering it to the public, but I realized there was more value in having my team focus on us first. That’s what’s helped us to grow.”

He has adopted the same approach in developing his construction division. With a team of 10, including a project manager and

three foremen, the division not only provides construction services (currently renovating a historic Brownsville property), but also construction management consults, including management training, and software.

One of the division's recent e-products is a project database, a portal that allows users to upload reports, photographs and other crucial information, thus conveniently consolidating each project's data into one place. "I know that a lot of construction companies would love to have something like this." The division's latest brick-and-mortar investment is a 7,000-square-foot warehouse, which houses different shops, including carpentry, paint and tools, plus a 2,200-square-foot store that will display their products when it opens early next year.

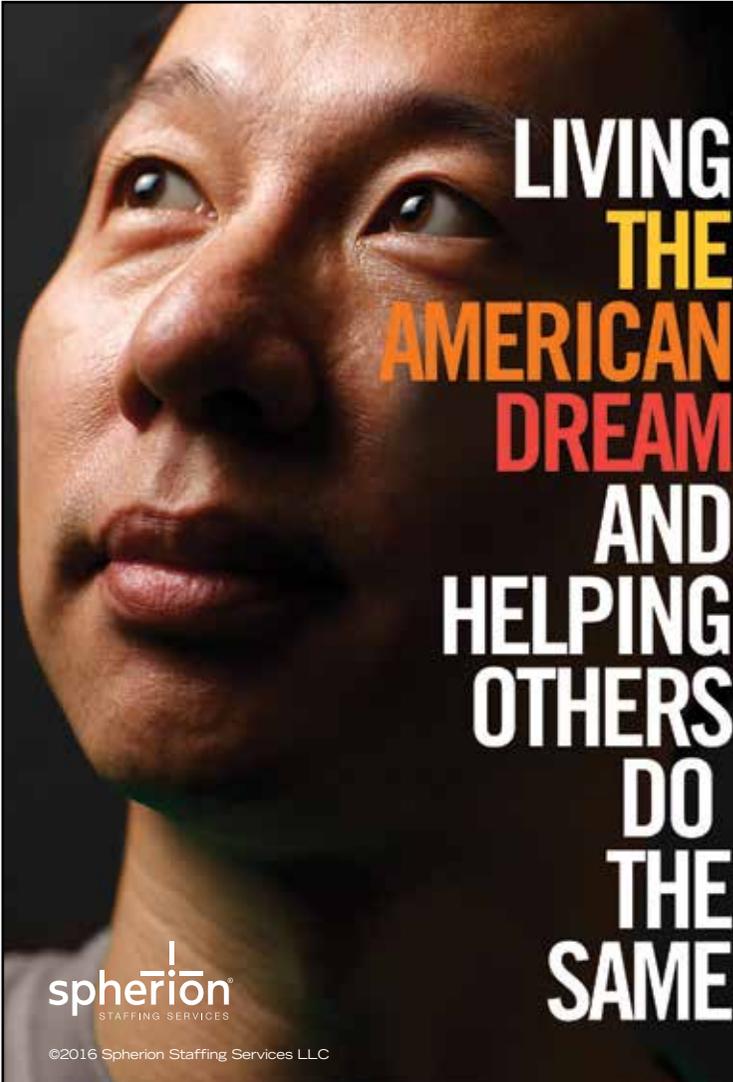
Sandoval's ultimate goal is a type of vertical integration, creating "a one-stop shop where we assist clients with reaching all their business goals, from start to finish." For example, clients who want to buy a property to open a business can start off by receiving a credit analysis from Sandoval's team. "Then you may need additional services, so we'll analyze your debt-to-income ratio and get you prequalified for a construction loan, perhaps. Guess what? We can also build your facility -- we have a construction team here. Also, you'll need insurance, which we offer," plus any management training or software needs.

Despite the company's name, Sandoval admits "it wasn't easy" building up Easy Solutions, but the never-complacent entrepreneur is ready to take on more challenges, feeling that the company hasn't peaked yet. "This is only the beginning. To be honest, on a 1-5 scale, I give us only a 0.25 because we're still developing our internal operations." With three Valley branches (two in Brownsville, one in McAllen), a construction warehouse shop and a call center that serves clients in more than 427 cities across 42 states, Sandoval plans to develop and open more branches around the country and the world, using his construction division to build them. "We have a very streamlined, turnkey business model. Once we start selling and growing this, it'll duplicate easily."

*Offering multiple services, Easy Solutions is building towards becoming "a one-stop shop" where clients can achieve all of their business goals, from start to finish. (VBR)*



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# PLAGAR: OUT-OF-SIGHT ENGINEERING

By Lori Vermaas

“All of our work is underground,” said Placido “P.J.” Garcia, founder of PlaGar Engineering, a civil engineering consultant, “so you don’t see much of our projects.” However, what Valley residents don’t see has vastly improved their cities’ water, sewage and road development.

Garcia incorporated in 2005, after serving 27 years as a civil engineer in the Valley, 17 of them with the city of Brownsville, his hometown. Business volume has been strong, particularly after the firm’s first five years. Today, the firm attracts 20–30 projects annually, with values ranging from \$50,000 to \$2 million. Word of mouth about the quality of Garcia’s work has had an impact, but his municipal connections have also been crucial, especially since “I developed a good reputation working for the city.”

Garcia’s firm designs and consults on various infrastructural projects throughout the Valley. It also takes on projects involving land site development and urban planning, particularly in Brownsville. As part of a redesign of the water and sewer system that runs in Los Ebanos, from Paredes Line Road to Boca Chica Boulevard, PlaGar streamlined the section.

“It was a challenge,” Garcia recalled of the \$1.5 million, 2012 project. “There were three lines in the existing sewer line (which

*Placido Garcia, founder of PlaGar Engineering, has over 37 years of field experience. The Texas A&I (1973) graduate designs and consults on road and water line projects as well as retail shopping centers, commercial warehouses, subdivisions and urban planning, finding satisfaction in creating low-impact, green designs whenever possible, particularly for storm sewers. (VBR)*



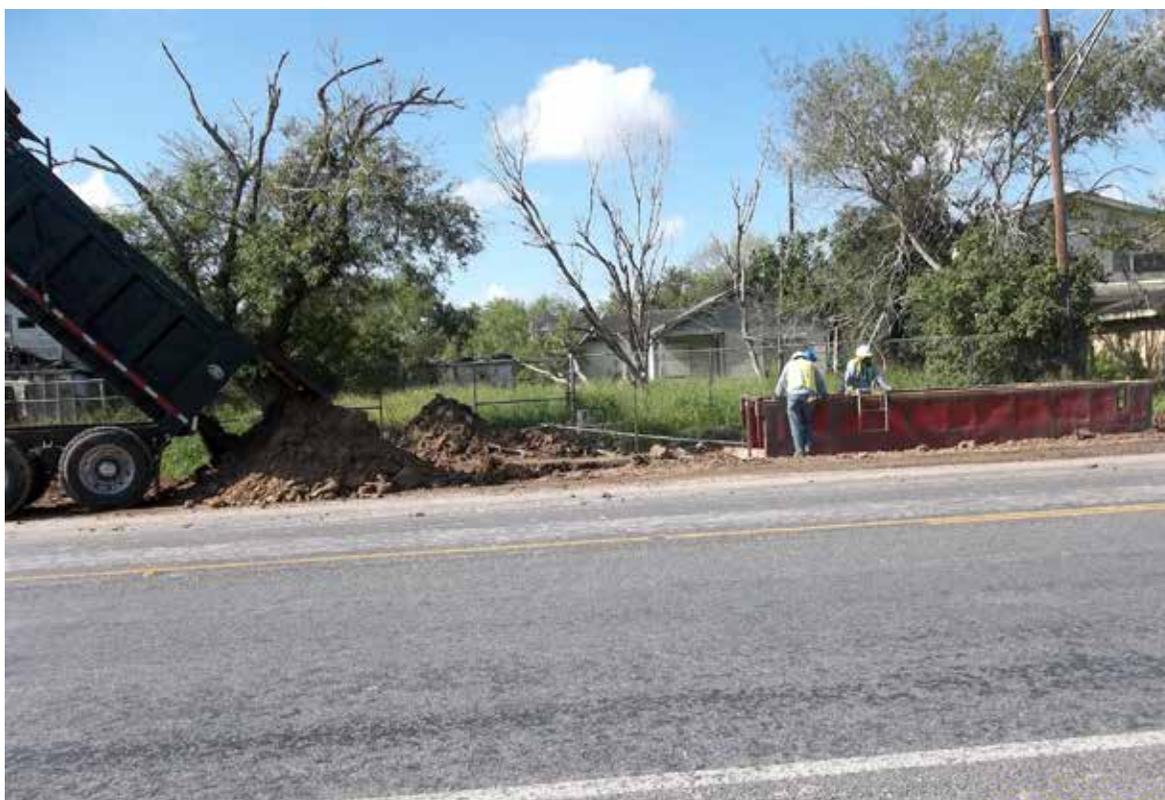
dated to the 1940s) and their size was substandard,” which had degraded the line’s efficiency. “In our redesign, we got rid of the three lines and put in a master, a bigger pipe, as a replacement. That was kind of

unique, taking out the old and putting in one new master line, especially when we had to deal with the water table constraints.”

The result not only improved the line area’s performance, it has required less maintenance for the utility company. Another important project has been the construction, engineering and administration of the first sewer for the Villa Nueva Colonia in Brownsville (ca. 2013). The three-year, \$1.4 million project was one of his biggest, involving not only installing the main lines, but the yard lines that connect to each of the colonia’s 68 houses.

One of Garcia’s design interests is sustainability. He endorses low-impact designs, particularly bioretention areas for storm sewers because they minimize environmental impacts. The installation of these kinds of green strategies, which often involve gravel beddings, guide water to trickle down into the soil, rather than running off into the street, where it eventually ends up in a resaca and thus back into a city’s water supply. “So the water is all pre-filtered, even if it goes back into the (water/sewer) system. It refines your nonpoint pollution, improving the quality of water, making it cleaner water. It’s something that we all need for the environment.”

Despite its benefits, the installation of green elements like these is a hard sell. “There’s a lot of resistance to change in the Valley,” Gar-



*PlaGar’s crew at work installing the sewer mains, services and yard lines for the Villanueva Colonia EDAP project in August 2013. The firm’s \$1.5 million design, which provided colonia residents first-time access to the public utility sewer system, has a capacity of 401 people and/or 108 connections. (VBR)*

cia said, noting that many current subdivision ordinances make it impossible to implement sustainable designs. Elsewhere in the United States, for example, curb-and-gutter designs aren't the standard. "You can do roadside swales, where the water filters through grass and then goes into a bioretention area before going back into the system."

One exception involves a re-

*Wood Hollow Drive in Brownsville after completion of PlaGar's water and sewer improvements. The \$980,000 project required street reconstruction and drainage before the installation of new water and sewer mains. (VBR)*



cently completed redesign of Ringgold Street, in the section that fronts Gladys Porter Zoo in Brownsville. The city wanted beautification amenities, including pedestrian and bike lanes, to connect to Southern Pacific Linear Park. After the city solicited the public for input, PlaGar produced a road reconstruction plan that includes the installation of a combination sidewalk and bike lane, as well as permeable sidewalks, green design elements that "are a first for Brownsville." A contractor has yet to be assigned, but if the project stays on schedule, it should be completed early next year.

Along with incorporating sustainable design in his work, Garcia has found satisfaction in reliably delivering lucid plans to contractors. "We take special pride in what we do, whether it's a \$20,000 versus an \$8 million job. We make sure that the designs that go out of our office are sustainable, and that everybody knows what needs to be done when they read those plans." He also doesn't want to grow his firm too much. "I want to stay like this. Maybe we could add one more engineer, but that's it. I don't aspire to have 20 employees. I want to keep us small but efficient," or, perhaps, as he might put it, sustainable.

For more information, see [plagar.com](http://plagar.com).



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# MENTORING VIA SCORE

By Lori Vermaas

“I like helping people out,” said Alejandro Ordaz, who as a SCORE mentor for the past year has spent many hours advising Valleyites on how to navigate the challenges of running a new business. “When I started my own business, I wished that I could have had someone to help me with the process. Working with SCORE is my way of paying it forward.”

With the SBA’s Lower Rio Grande Valley District recording the nation’s largest growth in 2015 in the value of guaranteed loans to the area’s small businesses, organizations like SCORE (formerly the Service Corps of Retired Executives), a national nonprofit association that provides educational opportunities and free mentoring services for small business owners, is a timely professional resource for any prospective Valley business looking for advice or startup help.

Currently, the Valley chapter offers five active mentors. Even though the organization’s original acronym emphasized “retired executives,” many in the membership, like Ordaz, who runs Kazam Finishing, a McAllen-based powder-coat paint business, are not retired, even though “that was the initial idea. Right now, in the RGV chapter, 50% still run their business.” Ordaz, who serves as vice chairman of RGV chapter 220, is actively recruiting mentors for new and existing businesses.

Ordaz has six SCORE clients. The mentoring can last from three to 12 months depending on a client’s needs. “Some want to learn the entire thing, to get advice from developing the whole idea to starting the business. Others come with specific requests, like looking for a CPA firm.”

The work can be time consuming, but “it isn’t unreasonable. The transactions are negotiable. We work out a schedule with clients, but the sessions are not always face to face. Some mentors advise only by email or phone or Skype. I normally do after hours or time on the weekend. Sometimes I do a lunch. I used to meet every other Sunday for an hour with one Brownsville client.”

The main draw for Ordaz is helping clients anticipate all the traps that new business owners confront, like running out of cash. “What if sales are not there for the first four to nine months, which is normal with a start-up? Where are you going to get the money? People don’t realize the big difference between working for a business and running one. They are two hugely different things. Some think they can read a book or learn on the job, but it’s one thing to think about it as an idea; putting it into practice is another thing. That’s what I emphasize.”

Often clients don’t think through the logistics of basic issues, like human resources. He recalled two prospective owners who didn’t expect to hire any staff. “They assumed they would work all the hours. I told them, ‘you know what that means? You’re going to be there five days, probably seven days a week. That might be possible for the first couple months, but afterwards you’re going to get tired. I don’t see how you’re going to keep up with that. I mean, how can you keep up with that for a whole year?’”

Because many of his clients don’t have much experience running a business, the most common assistance he provides is helping them write a business plan. “It is a long process, but it’s necessary because it lets a client know whether their idea is right for them or not.”

An engineer, Ordaz knows some markets but not others, so encouraging his clients to work on a business plan,

Alejandro Ordaz (VBR)



rather than solicit market analysis from him, lets them find out if their business idea is good or not. “The template we use at SCORE is very easy to follow,” but it is also very methodical, prompting clients to think about all the aspects involved, including marketing, finance, location, etc. “Without management experience, it’s often difficult for my clients to understand what they’re actually planning to do. The plan helps them get closer to grasping it as a real thing.”

Ordaz is so satisfied with his service work that he intends to continue mentoring for another two years. “I’d like to see a business that I mentored up and running.” In the meantime, he plans to keep learning and building SCORE’s mentoring services. “Just because I mentor doesn’t mean I know everything. Finance is not my expertise, so if I don’t know something, I get other people to help me out.” Although the networking enhances referrals to SCORE, it becomes a “double score” when clients provide them. “When a client refers us to somebody else,” it’s an even stronger endorsement, a big payback that makes it all the more worth it for Ordaz.

*For more information about mentoring or finding a mentor via SCORE, see [riograndevalley.score.org/chapters](http://riograndevalley.score.org/chapters).*



# ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

By Arnoldo Mata

Organizational culture is hard to define, but you know it when you've been there for a while. Like individuals, each organization has its own unique culture. While we often don't think about it, your company's culture has a tremendous impact on your personal and organizational success.

It doesn't matter what industry you work in, the size of your company, what part of the world you work in or how profitable your company is, you have a culture. If it's a large company, you likely also have several subcultures, which sometimes tend to conflict because they each have their own rules of behavior.

According to [businessdictionary.com](http://businessdictionary.com), organizational culture includes "the values and behaviors that contribute to the unique social and psychological environment of an organization. Organizational culture includes an organization's expectations, experiences, philosophy and values that hold it together, and is expressed in its self-image, inner workings, interactions with the outside world and future expectations."

In short, it comes down to knowing that "this is how we do things at our company." Many of these rules are unwritten and even unspoken. If you're new to an organization, you will come up against these rules quickly. If you're lucky, someone may quietly clue you in when you misstep. In some cases, you might be subject to a lecture from your boss when you commit an infraction you didn't know existed. After a while, you learn the culture and conform or leave.

In his book, "The Power of Habit," Charles Duhigg provides several examples of how culture can have a corrosive effect or push a company to greater profitability. For example, the culture at one hospital had allowed a toxic environment to exist between its doctors and nurses. It resulted in patient deaths and threats of closure of the hospital. At Alcoa, the aluminum products company, a culture focused on safety drove the company to its highest levels of productivity.

What these and other case studies point to, however, is that recognizing just what your own culture is and how that is impacting your success is often hard for the people on the inside. You become so used to it that you don't notice just how deep an impact it has on your work. It is even harder for you to see it if you're the one who is promoting that culture. It is easier for an outsider to see it.

Assessing your organizational culture is a time-consuming and challenging effort, but it is more than worthwhile. If you want to im-

prove your company's or your own performance, you should take the time to assess your culture. It starts out with asking some honest questions: what are the written and unwritten rules everyone follows? Why do we do it that way? What are the root causes for this? What is the impact? What are the key behaviors we need to change?

Most organizations depend on unwritten rules and beliefs. Not the U. S. Marines. You may think the Marines only want to teach you to shoot, charge and conquer, but they really want you to know many of the whys and hows of the Corps. The "Commandant's Professional Reading List" is a list of professional books that Marines are recommended and sometimes required to read. The books are sorted based by rank, from basic recruits on up. As noted on their website, "At minimum, three books per year are required to fulfill annual reading criteria for all active duty and reserve Marines, officer and enlisted." This is part of how the Marines transmit their culture.

Once you assess your culture, it's time to start imitating the Marines and provide your company with some concrete guides about your culture. It doesn't have to be books, but it should be written down somewhere and shared with everyone. It



doesn't have to be detailed. It can just be three to five fundamental behaviors everyone needs to follow. Focus on a few targeted changes. Once those take hold, you can start to expand.

What you will see is that positive changes in one area will ultimately lead to positive changes in other areas. In the process, you will see your success start to grow.

*Arnoldo Mata heads Leadership Resource Group. He has more than 25 years of experience working with non-profit organizations, community organizations, local governments and private businesses. Contact him at [arnoldo.mata@hotmail.com](mailto:arnoldo.mata@hotmail.com).*

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# ANGIE'S TRAINS CAKE ARTISTS

By Eileen Mattei

After working for the Weslaco school district for 10 years, Angie Rodriguez took a year off and ended up starting a business. A baker since her early teens, Rodriguez returned to the pastime during her sabbatical. Soon, she and her husband Diego leased a 10x10 space at an indoor flea market to sell Angie's Bakery Supplies.

"There was nothing like it in Mid-Valley. In less than a month, we had a list of more than 100 people signed up to take cake decorating classes," Rodriguez said. When her husband was hesitant about opening a full-time, stand-alone store, she pointed out, "We won't know if we don't try."

That was six years ago. Hundreds have taken classes at Angie's Bakery Supplies since then. A steady stream of customers visit the store to purchase everything from cake pans, cake carriers and cupcake stands to cake flours, silver buttons, icing colors and the many different tips (basket weave, star, ruffle, petal) used to create attractive and delectable designs in icing. "The classes are really hands-on learning," said Rodriguez, who starts a new four-week class every month. She brings the basic cakes for the first class meetings, but after that the students bring in their own cakes. Rodriguez's store does

Angie Rodriguez invites a customer to smell the warm sugar of an edible cake topper she printed on request in a few minutes. (VBR)



not sell cakes, decorated or plain, but a number of her students have gone on to establish their own cake and cupcakes shops or operate home-based cake decorating businesses. She is happy to refer customers seeking a specially decorated cake to them.

"We go to conventions every year and find new things coming in style and bring them back," Rodriguez explained. She has seasonally themed classes, for graduation and Halloween, for example. For Mother's Day, Angie's offered two sessions of mother-daughter cookie classes. "It's a chance for them to spend time together."

The shop's classes in chocolate making, where students learn how to sculpt roses from chocolate, are popular. Angie's newest classes instruct attendees in working with isomalt crystals to make candy-like, edible cake decorative items such as stiletto heels or champagne bottles. Customers come from across the Valley and up to San Marcos. "We even have one who comes from Puerto Rico every year and stocks up, after finding us on Facebook."

A customer walked in early one April afternoon with a request to make an edible image of a photograph of her sister for a cake topping. In a matter of minutes, Rodriguez had downloaded the

image from the customer's phone, placed a large sheet of edible paper into a printer and inscribed a celebratory sentiment across the image. The customer soon held the finished product made with edible ink. "Smell it," Rodriguez said. Sure enough, the sheet was fragrant with the scent of warmed sugar. "If you bring me a picture, we'll create edible images to put on your cakes."

Angie's motivates customers to use their creative skills on their next cake frosted with fondant or buttercream icing. Sensory overload is common amid the racks filled with cake toppers ranging from 'Gone Fishing' signs to edible flowers. Dummy cakes made of Styrofoam shapes and frosted with fondant and decorative accessories tempt others to sign up for a class.

Angie's sponsors young culinary arts students at the Elsa-Edcouch High School, who recently won second place in a Skills USA competition.

Rodriguez has lucked into a special benefit of being in the bakery supply business. You may know of florists, for example, who never receive flowers. Rodriguez does not have that type of problem. Her husband, now a truck driver, decorates cakes for stress relief and creates masterpieces for family and friends. Every year, he makes his wife an over-the-top birthday cake, along with other cakes during the year.



Angie's Bakery Supplies displays several fake cakes that motivate students to create their own masterpieces. (VBR)

For more information, see Angie's Bakery Supplies on Facebook or call 968-2253.

# VISUAL MERCHANDISING CREATES VIBES

By Rosemary Couture

While window displays are of utmost importance to retail operations, the field of visual merchandising also encompasses exterior signage, customer movement inside the store, the use of mirrors and the grouping of products. Window dressing and coordinated signage are effective in attracting potential customers as well as upping the overall appeal of a street, according to Sarah Blankenship of the Texas Historical Commission's Texas Main Street Program. She talked to Harlingen Downtown merchants on what works and what doesn't to bring customers into a store.

First of all, customers must be able to see into the store to the merchandising displays to know what you sell. Start with sparkling clean windows and don't allow sight lines to be blocked by posters, flyers or window tints that are dark or reflective. "People are wary of entering spaces they cannot see into or where they feel uncomfortable." Too many signs and negative signs ("No public restrooms" instead of "Restrooms for customers only") can give the impression the shopping experience will be unpleasant.

Your own sign, painted perhaps on the front glass, the upper façade or the awning, combined with your window display help establish your store's personality and an inviting

shopping vibe. "A quality sign is one of the best investments a business can make," Blankenship said. Signage should be in harmony with the building's architectural features.

Window displays should have a theme: not just Christmas but Christmas songs. Color coordinate the displays, feel free to use whimsy or humor, and change displays out at least monthly. "The idea of movement – hands reaching up, birds flying – is attractive to passersby." Pinterest provides good, adoptable ideas.

She recommended using the whole window, not just the bottom part, by incorporating props to raise the sight line. Props can be repurposed items such as ladders, chairs, tables and suitcases. The most successful mannequins are those without heads. To avoid the appearance of being cluttered, you should group similar items to create a focus. Keep in mind that asymmetry and an odd numbers of items create their own energy. Place smaller items in the foreground.

Blankenship suggested that more expensive furniture and other items less likely to be sold quickly go into to window display. Remember the color wheel: opposites, such as red and green, are vibrant while adjacent colors, like blue and green, are cooling. And, if the window is big enough, feel free to create several vignettes if you want to spotlight different products.

Exterior lights can be used at night to emphasize architectural features, while window spotlights create a welcome even when the store is closed.

Non-retail businesses, such as realtor, insurance agencies, and medical and finance firms, can benefit from appealing window displays, whether of local history or vintage medical instruments or homes for sales.

Visual merchandising continues once the customer enters the store. Cleanliness remains next to godliness. Go beyond the visual to make sure that surfaces visitors will touch are not sticky or dusty. A light scent and appropriate music in the air can relax some people, creating a buffer and inducing them to linger. Pay attention to the walls and ceilings. If they are stained or aged, use fabric drapes to cover imperfections.

"Customers instinctively move to their right," Blankenship said. "Therefore place important displays on that

*This window display at Roberts Jewelry in Harlingen evokes ideals of eternal love and romance. (VBR)*



*A Tea Room invites passersby inside for cozy comforts. (VBR)*

side and on islands that guide them to the back of the store." Islands function a little like old-fashioned pinball games, moving the customers through the store, ricocheting from side to side. They have time to see more of what you offer and increase the chances that something will catch their eyes. Make sure there is room to move between displays.

Some experts suggest the cash register be one-third of the way back. But it's important to consider your sight lines, in relation to the register and for customer movement. Avoid high barriers.

People slow down when they see reflective surfaces. Yes, mirrors catch humans. "Watch how customers use the store and interact with fixtures, displays and your hot items," she said. Blankenship gave an example that when men's shirts were folded in half rather than tidied into smaller displays, they were touched 85% more which resulted in a 40% increase in sales.

It helps to realize non-shoppers will come in the store with your buyers. Provide child-friendly distractions, perhaps a cubby with blocks. Provide at least one seat for non-shoppers so the shopper won't be rushed out of the store.

Make your window displays simple, yet enticing and see if more customers step inside your store.

# RL ABATEMENT TACKLES ASBESTOS

By Lori Vermaas

Twenty years ago, Roberto Valladares was at a crossroads. He had been removing asbestos as a laborer for various businesses in Texas and nearby states for about 10 years, but hadn't been able to establish any traction financially. After receiving help and encouragement from family and friends, and some creative financing, he opened a modest bank account with \$800, and started his own removal business.

It was an ideal time, even with so little capital. Asbestos removal enterprises were growing by leaps and bounds, an instant industry created the moment Pres. Ronald Reagan signed the Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act in 1986, which mandated protection of the nation's schoolchildren and staff from exposure to the environmental hazard. By early 1997, Valladares had garnered his first project. But it wasn't until "we became an 8(a) set-aside contractor for minorities from 2000 to 2009" that R.L. Abatement began to flourish. The SBA program targets small businesses, run by socially and economically disadvantaged entrepreneurs, by helping them to compete for and win federal contracts. The designation allowed him to add large-dollar construction work to his company's services, starting with a \$1.3 million greenhouse project for the USDA in 2000 and later a \$3 million port of entry project in Pharr. Today, the Weslaco-based company, primarily a specialist in asbestos removal and licensed in mold remediation and lead abatement, earns annual revenues of \$3 million.

Asbestos removal is big business in Texas, given the state's 20th-century investment in the petrochemical industry. The sec-

tor's oil refineries, steel mills and foundries are among the most prevalently contaminated sites. Ships and shipyards, which often contain asbestos-laden fire retardants and insulation, are also notorious state cleanup sites. In fact, one of Valladares's largest abatement projects involved the General Patch, a troop carrier ship. The eight-month, \$900,000 job "was a major one. We did it for Esco Marine in 1999."

The company has worked on several removals in ships over the years, but school buildings continue to make up the lion's share, despite AHERA's vigilant 30-year enforcement. The Valley has many facilities and structures that were constructed between the 1950s and 1970s, when health experts hadn't yet determined that asbestos is a carcinogen. When one of these buildings undergoes a remodel or complete rebuild, building owners call companies like R.L. Abatement.

Last year, Valladares and his crews demolished another Valley school, Austin Middle School in San Juan, after extracting asbestos in the school's floor tiles, walls and bathrooms. Because much of their asbestos work involves school buildings, the work tends to be seasonal, hectically stacking up during those time periods when school is not in session, like over the Christmas holidays or during the summer.

Roberto and Lucy Valladares opened R.L. Abatement Inc. in 1997. (VBR)



Asbestos removals demand adherence to strict protocols. During the containment phase, R.L. Abatement crews use plastic to ensure the safety of workers and the public. (VBR)

While about a third of their asbestos removal projects are sited in the Valley, they have traveled elsewhere in Texas and to Maryland, Arizona, New Mexico and Louisiana to complete others. They receive fewer calls for mold remediations (about 6% of their workload) and lead abatement (1%), even though mold is a big Valley problem. According to Meli Palomares, of-

vice manager since 1999, "We do get mold work, but usually after there have been some floods."

Valladares loves what he does, even though it's challenging to deal with all the regulations. "You have to follow protocols. And there's lots of paperwork. Your employees have to be physically fit. Every year we have to screen them, have their chests X-rayed to make sure their lungs are good, that they can wear safety equipment, like respirators." New employees need to be licensed, which requires 32 hours of training, plus annual eight-hour renewals. Other procedures that ensure a safe removal include double bagging and labeling the removed asbestos, storing it in special trucks with sealed doors, and depositing the waste in special landfills licensed by the EPA. The Valley has a few of these, including Republic Services La Gloria in Edinburg.

"We're always looking for opportunities," said Valladares. "We've done work in Mexico, clean ups and everything," including a five-week mold remediation for Tabasco Gov. Granier in Villahermosa, after the October 2007 Tabasco flood. "It was a mess." The owners had just held the ribbon cutting for a 32,000-square-foot building. "All their equipment and everything -- ceiling, crates and cardboards -- went under 14 feet of water. A lot of the boxes hadn't even been opened."

As the Valley's commercial sector continues to grow, undoubtedly R.L. Abatement will attract even more opportunities, thus safeguarding the area's schoolchildren and citizens.

For more information, call 968-2265.

# BUSINESS ETHICS AWARD BESTOWED

By Eileen Mattei

Charisma Construction Co. Inc., founded in 1985 by James Kooiman and his wife Debra, is the 2016 recipient of the Better Business Bureau of South Texas Mary G. Moad Ethics Award. Specializing in remodeling, including kitchen, bath, room additions and whole house remodels, the company is based in Mission.

Thirty years ago, Mary Moad founded the South Texas BBB and initially operated it from her home. "Because of her enthusiasm and hard work, we have the BBB in this area. She has always personified ethics and promoted the bureau," said Dolores Salinas, who heads the south Texas regional office. Currently 550 Valley companies are accredited BBB members.

Five years ago, the Weslaco-based BBB decided to promote accredited businesses and requested they self-nominate for the ethics award named for the retired founder. The companies must describe how they promote and personify ethics in their everyday process.

This year the UTRGV School of Business' marketing faculty judged the eight nominees.

"Ethics is about doing the right thing," said 2015 Mary Moad winner Sandra Yarrison of Joe's Comfort Air LLC. "The nominated companies all go out of their way to do the right thing. All have consistently taken a stakeholder perspective, attempting to do the right things not only for their clients and employees, but also for the community."

"Charisma Construction has demonstrated how it acts in the best interest of its employees and customers and how it contributes to the community and the world they inhabit," she said. "In particular by working hard and smart to effectively reconcile customers' complaints, this company's operations hinges upon customers' subjective feelings of satisfaction. This is an extension of Charisma's motto, 'we will do all things with a spirit of excellence. Do it right the first time!'"

"Charisma is successful in establishing long-term relationships with customers," Yarrison continued. "It is evident that they work with the client and strive to educate clients about the importance of maintaining their property. Academic research consistently indicated that ethical companies with high levels of corporate social responsibility are more profitable in the long run. This company follows up with their customers to ensure that the remodeled property is on par with client's expectations and to address any concerns and questions properly."

Charisma Construction has been an

accredited BBB member since 1988, according to Debra Kooiman. "We joined almost immediately because we knew the reputation of BBB and wanted to be a part of that. The first thing we tell our customers when we deal with them is that we are BBB members."

"We have always tried to do the best we know how to take care of our customers.

You can never go wrong doing the right thing," James Kooiman said. "We have a lot of word-of-mouth referrals. Some customers have had us do four, five and even more projects for them. That speaks for it-

James and Debra Kooiman of Charisma Construction are the recipients of the 2016 Mary G. Moad Ethics Award presented by BBB of South Texas. (VBR)



self. I tell customers that our main goal is when we leave, you're happy. It's good for us and good for them."

For more information, see [bbbsouthtexas.org](http://bbbsouthtexas.org).

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