

April 2020

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Down But Not Out

by: Todd Breland

To say we are all in limbo, nervous and confused about the coming weeks, months and years is an understatement. Most of the world and especially our world, the RGV, is operating in survival mode as we await possible spreading or containment of COVID-19. It has created an abundance of uncertainty for every man, woman and yes, even most children.

Normalcy was put on hiatus mid March and the future economic effects of this global outbreak is definitely in question. Our Q2-Q4 strategies of running our businesses and organizations have changed like at no other point in history. But to date, I have not heard of or communicated with one company that is ready to throw in the towel.

And why is that? We all know we have mouths to feed and bills to pay. The American dream is still within us, and our pride, dignity and spirit are still intact. Our fire is burning. This unfathomable and brutal setback will not destroy us. We have jobs to do, and for many, that means doing whatever is necessary to keep our businesses afloat during this unthinkable pause of our routine, and for that matter, existence.

Prior to mid March, the Rio Grande Valley, Texas and our beloved United States had plenty going in the right direction. On March 13 at the 14th Annual Real Estate Forum hosted by Edwards Abstract & Title Co., Dr. Ted Jones presented priceless information about where



we (local, regional and national) are with employment, job growth and economic strength. “Yes, the elephant in the room is COVID-19. Since where it’s going is an unknown, I don’t want to speculate,” stated Dr. Jones.

Even a very knowledgeable, respected and reputable economist like Dr. Jones could not predict the coming weeks’ and beyond turmoil inflicted upon our nation and world.

But we are nowhere near closing the door, giving up hope or saying we are finished. On the

contrary, the RGV is even more united, pulling together, exercising out-of-the-box thinking and supporting local businesses. Desperate times call for supreme creativity, and that’s exactly what our united counties are doing to help one another.

We must press forward, support local businesses and appreciate our neighbors. While we may not be able to give them a hug while respecting the safe distance practice, we can make purchases electronically, pick up orders at drive-thrus and curbside, and do what is feasible and helpful to feed our families and live for a stronger day.

Friends, that day is coming. We are Valleyites. We are Texans. We are Americans!



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Harlingen Farm Grows Green Sensibilities

by: Ricardo D. Cavazos

Diana Padilla describes it as seeing a piece of land and knowing it's where she wanted to be.

The Chicago native and retired federal government employee chanced upon the farmland near the corner of Rangerville and Morris roads in Harlingen and had a good feel for it. She and her husband Saul purchased a 15-acre plot, including the old farmhouse where they live, and then began farming.

It was 2004 when they began to get into the

practices and techniques of organic farming. It was the ground-up start to what would eventually become Yahweh's All Natural Farm and Garden. Their farm operations would then progress as their commitment to organic farming grew. They became believers of the community-supported agriculture concept.

It's a partnership between the farm and customers where they plan what vegetables will be grown and delivered. The farm is paid

up front to provide the capital needed to plant and grow vegetables that are USDA-certified organic.

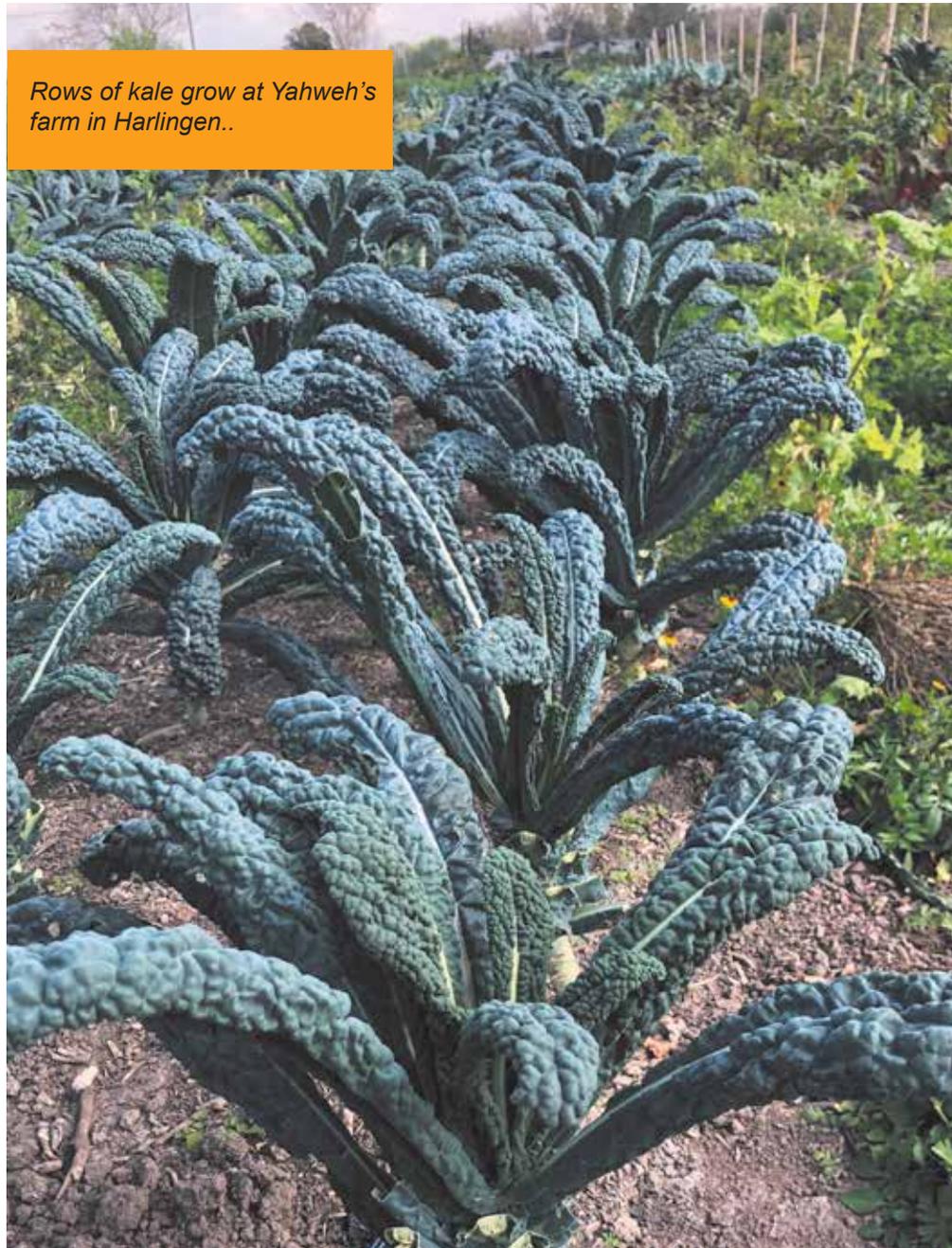
"We build relationships and we know each other," Padilla said. "We invite them to the farm once a year to see what's happening here and what is being planned."

Scaling up

Padilla said Yahweh's is going through growing pains. It is gradually scaling up its operations and seeks the capital to make that happen. The Padillas now own 75 acres of land along Morris and the adjoining Louisiana Street in Harlingen. They are planning to grow additional crops in the years ahead. This will add to their base of organically grown vegetables that includes carrots, beets, kale, tomatoes, squashes and onions.

Those vegetables and other varieties are delivered every Wednesday and Thursday during growing seasons in the Rio Grande Valley. Yahweh's has customers from Edinburg to Brownsville who enter into 15- or 30-week contracts with the farm for the home deliveries. Pork, beef, chicken and eggs from free-range and organically-fed animals are also available, thanks to products Yahweh's buys from area farmers.

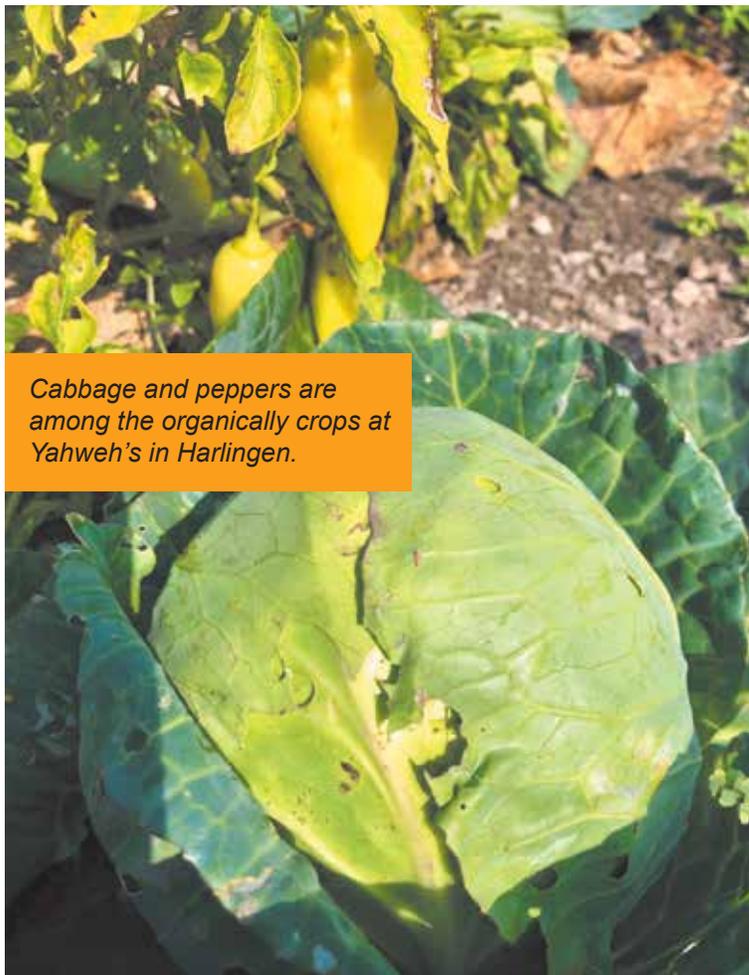
"We love what we do," Padilla said. "It's changed our lives."



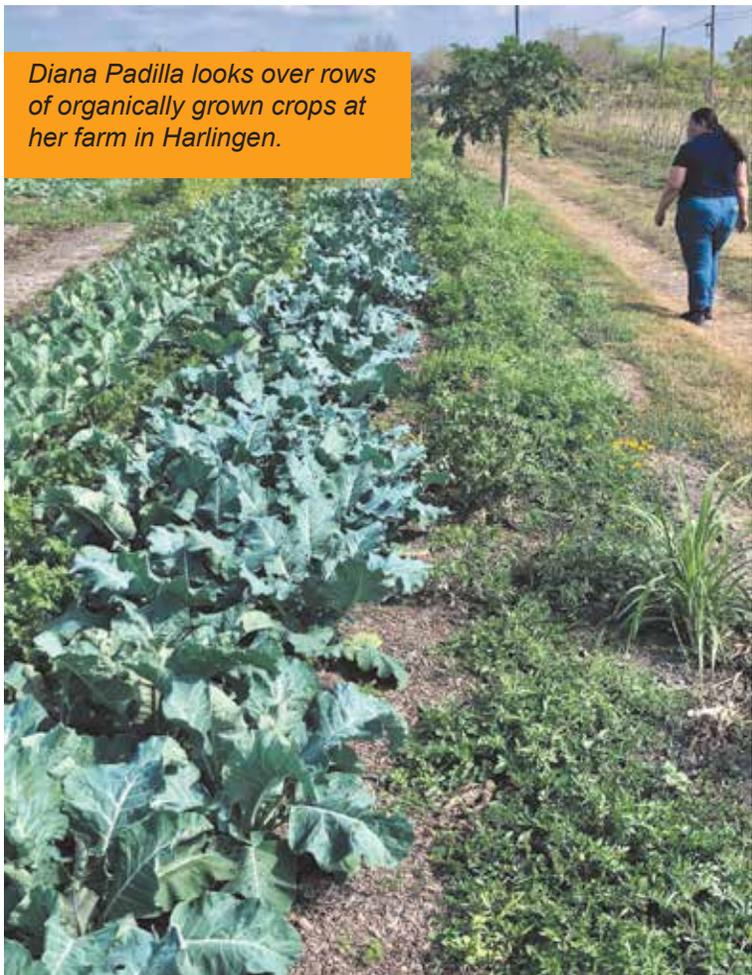
Rows of kale grow at Yahweh's farm in Harlingen..



Diana Padilla stands on farmland at her Yahweh's All Natural Farm and Garden in Harlingen.



Cabbage and peppers are among the organically grown crops at Yahweh's in Harlingen.



Diana Padilla looks over rows of organically grown crops at her farm in Harlingen.

Creating a community

The farm has also helped to improve the lives of others. The Padillas aren't just into growing vegetables. They've set up HOPE, a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization that provides both training and education to small-scale farmers and individuals in the Valley who are interested in growing, preparing and selling their own organic food for self-sustainability. They try to reach youth with their Junior Sprouts Chef Club that includes topics like healthier eating and preparing fruits and vegetables in fun way.

"You can live off the land, but you have to love the land," Padilla said.

That sentiment is exemplified in the community farming Yahweh's provides. Local residents can pay \$15 a month to grow vegetables and plants in small plots of land on the Padilla farm. They are then given sunrise-to-sundown access to their plots and can also seek advice from the Padillas in growing their plants.

"It's the best job I've ever had," she said, walking between rows of kale, broccoli and tomatoes, on a farm with even bigger ambitions.



Tomatoes are among the many vegetables at Yahweh's in Harlingen.

Pointing a Business Skyward

by: Ricardo D. Cavazos

Esteban Mejia Jr. has the restless energy of an Air Force veteran who once worked long shifts as a nuclear cruise technician. Returning home, the Mercedes native built an information technology business from scratch. He's now working to extend his brand.

"My dad would tell me, growing up, 'Never back down from work,'" he said. "So I'm always thinking, 'what else, what else can I do?'"

Mejia is the founder and chief executive officer of Sky I.T. Solutions of Weslaco. He recently channeled his energy and ambitions into the Emerging Leaders Initiative of the Small Business Administration. His nomination to participate in the SBA program came from Marie McDermott, the executive director of the Weslaco EDC.

The SBA initiative provides intensive entrepreneurship education and training to small business owners and executives who want to elevate their business to higher levels. The course includes nearly 100 hours of classroom lectures and experience. It also includes opportunities to work with experienced coaches and mentors.

Rethinking his business

For Mejia, the Emerging Leaders Initiative is just what his company needed. He began his company in 2003 with a single employee – himself – and went door-to-door to drum up business. He is now seeking to build from a customer base of more than 100 commercial accounts with contract work for federal agencies and local governmental entities. Mejia is excited about his company's latest offering – wireless internet services.

"You get trapped into the day-

to-day grind," said Mejia. "Then a program like this one comes along and it motivates you, makes you think and challenges you to improve."

Mejia describes the SBA program as being "a condensed MBA program" which compelled him to detail three-year goals in three core areas he wants to grow Sky I.T. Currently the company's services include computer system design, network equipment programming and surveillance security systems. A focal point of where he wants to grow is being a wireless internet service provider.

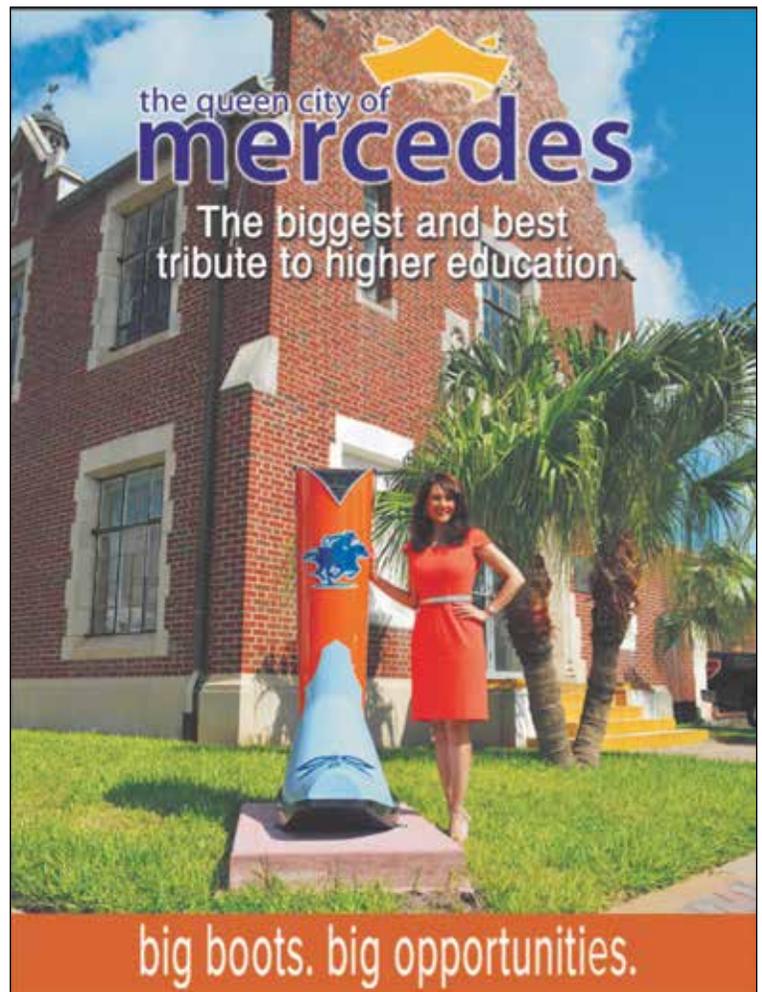
Looking to "what's next"

On a drive to an area south of Weslaco and going into Progreso, he points to two 100-foot towers. They represent his first steps into wireless with a focus on rural areas in the central portions of the Valley.

"I've spent the last 16 years building my business, reputation and resources, but you've got to keep working, thinking, 'what's next?'" he said. "I don't want to go into my 60s being just an IT guy, laying down cable."

There are no indications the 42-year-old Mejia will be anything of the sort in reading through his strategic growth goals in the business plan he shared with the SBA. He wants to grow his employee staff from nine to more than 20. Mejia forecasts steady growth in commercial and government accounts. He wants to eventually put up seven towers and have more than 1,000 wireless customers with a dedicated staff for those services.

"I have a great thing going," Mejia said of Sky I.T., "but the (SBA) program shook me up in reaffirming that you have to continue to push."



McAllen ISD Students Create Modern Chaos

by: Chris Ardis



Gisselle Costa and Denisse Damken in the hallway of McAllen ISD's Lamar Academy, showing recyclable fashions in their Modern Chaos line.

Dressing “on trend” is vitally important to many teens, but Gisselle Costa and Denisse Damken are designing their own recyclable fashions, creating Modern Chaos in the process.

Costa and Damken are seniors in McAllen ISD’s International Baccalaureate Programme at Lamar Academy. They named their fashion line Modern Chaos, as we learned in January when their classmate, Alexis Alvarado, wrote about their designs.

We decided to follow up with Costa and

Damken to learn what has transpired since then.

Costa and Damken were featured in Valley Business Report, Socialife, Telemundo and CBS 4. They have created additional pieces for their fashion line in recent months. The two students are “thrifters” extraordinaire.

The thrill of the hunt

“I’m a very specific shopper. I know what I like and what I want,” Damken said. “It’s not necessarily the design. It might be the fabric, it

has to call my attention at the beginning.”

Her favorite local thrift shop is Texas Thrift on the corner of Business 83 and 2nd Street in McAllen. She also finds key pieces at Thrift City, a little further west on Business 83. Costa finds her inspiration pieces at thrift shops and at antique fairs.

“I look for staples,” she said, like blazers, dresses and even not-so-easy-to-find vests. Costa also searches for clothing with details like small buttons that she can repurpose.

“I really like cutting things up,” she said, adding that this is one of the reasons thrifting “feels safe.”

One recent piece started as a hand-me-down black dress.

“I wanted it to look like it had texture,” Costa said.

After shortening it and making the hem billowy, the two students cut plastic bags to make pom poms like they made with tissue paper as children. They gathered the plastic-bag pom poms in the middle with string tags used to bind IB exams.

“They just accumulate,” said Andrea Gutierrez, an IB coordinator.

By using these tags made of string and plastic, Costa and Damken prevented them from ending up in a landfill. Once assembled, they glued the pom poms onto the dress.

“Fabric glue has been our best friend,” Costa said.

Keeping momentum

The fashionistas showcased their designs at IB Poetry Night in February. They also submitted Damken’s photographs of their clothes being modeled to Indelible Ink, the IB literary magazine.

Costa and Damken have big plans for the future, such as exploring mixing biology and fashion. Bacteria expands, they explained, so it is being tested on athletic wear.

“I think that’s the future of a lot of industries,” Damken said. “Biology incorporated with fashion is going to be big.”

In the fall, Costa will head to Parsons School of Design in New York City. Damken had planned to study psychology but will now major in design management, the business side of the fashion industry.

Costa and Damken always have their

impressive design books handy, never knowing when inspiration will hit. They are currently working on a “Starry Night”-inspired jacket and a trend-breaking fashion show.

As Costa and Damken head off to college, they will, undoubtedly, create much more Modern Chaos.



A purse McAllen ISD International Baccalaureate students Gisselle Costa and Denisse Damken fashioned out of a recycled milk bottle and metallic wire.



These string tabs, used to bind IB exams, normally accumulate and likely end up in landfills. Recycled-fashion designers Denisse Damken and Gisselle Costa save them from landfills by incorporating them into a dress

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Same Vibe, New Move for Hardknox

by: Ricardo D. Cavazos

The new place still feels like the old place.

That's the vibe Rodney McClanahan was going for when he transplanted his Hardknox Strength & Performance Club across town in Brownsville. It looks like he succeeded.

The new 10,000-square-foot facility just off Pablo Kisel Blvd.

near Sunrise Mall is over twice the size of the old club on the Military Highway in the west Brownsville neighborhoods where McClanahan grew up.

The original Hardknox had a reputation for being gritty and sweaty. It had no air conditioning and a large entrance open to the elements.

The 500-plus members of the club didn't want to lose that feel in moving to a new facility. McClanahan obliged them with the new building having a warehouse feel. The large bay doors offer a clear view into what's "the strongest gym in Brownsville."

McClanahan and his wife Cassandra searched high and low

all over Brownsville for years to find the right spot to make the move they knew was inevitable with the club's growth. They would go with a new building built to their specifications near the corner of Pablo Kisel and Galeno Crossing in one of Brownsville's premier growth corridors.

"It looks new but still feels like the old place," McClanahan said. "We still have that outside/inside effect. We didn't want to change the vibe."

Community connections

The move-in date was Feb. 3. It was four hectic days of moving from his beloved west side of Brownsville near his alma mater, Pace High School, to the much more upscale part of town with new retailing and restaurants – and now a gym dedicated to strength and power.

McClanahan has undergraduate and master's degrees in exercise science. He started dreaming of having his own gym when he was 10 years old, accompanying his father to weightlifting sessions at Tito's Gym off Boca Chica Boulevard in Brownsville. Hardknox's layout design of equipment and weights highlight McClanahan's vision of energy-system training. It features dead-lifting, pressing and squatting.

The new facility includes more cardio equipment and what McClanahan calls a "strong room" for trained athletes and more experienced weightlifters. The terminology may sound intimidating, but he stressed the gym is open to all seeking to gain strength and fitness. His membership also reflects that aspect. McClanahan has crafted a gym of cohesion and togetherness where he and his seven coaches run hour-long classes from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m.



Kassandra and Rodney McClanahan

The connection to the community is something McClanahan stressed throughout a recent tour of his new facility.

“Moving here doesn’t change who we are or what we do,” he said. “We’re not a corporate

gym, we’re from here. We’re about the community and the families here.”

On a walk-around of his new gym, McClanahan greeted all club members by their first name with an accompanying

fist bump and words of encouragement. An afternoon class was starting nearby on the gym floor. Music from the 1990s was cranking up. It’s the Hardknox vibe.

“It’s such an amazing feeling

to be here and to accomplish this goal,” Kassandra McClanahan said. “What makes even more special is reaching for that goal of always helping our community.”

Hardknox features a warehouse look where outdoor elements are part of the facility.



A row of barbells at the new Hardknox facility in Brownsville



The Hardknox facility at night.



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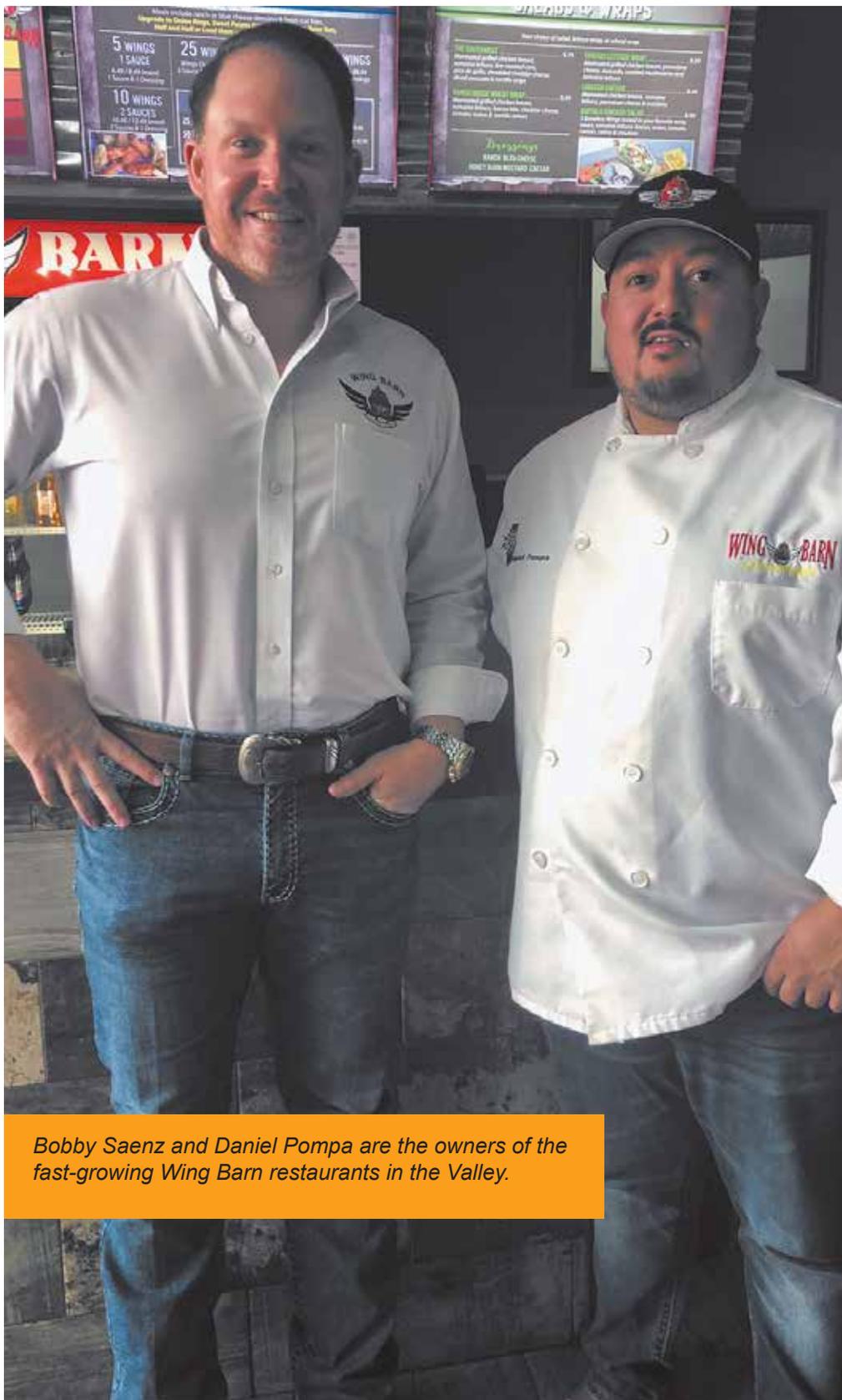
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Wing Barn Gains Recognition Amid Growth

by: Ricardo D. Cavazos



Bobby Saenz and Daniel Pompa are the owners of the fast-growing Wing Barn restaurants in the Valley.

Down-home Rio Grande Valley cooking is gaining statewide accolades for the Brownsville-based Wing Barn.

The growing regional restaurant chain was recently named one of the “Top 25 Best Places for Chicken Wings in Texas” by Big 7 Travel. The widely-read and well-sourced social media site offers recommendations on the best destinations, hotels and restaurants around the country and world for travelers to visit and enjoy.

The accolade comes at a time when Wing Barn and its owners Bobby Saenz and Daniel Pompa are making plans to expand. The two new restaurants in Weslaco and San Juan will open later this year. This will make for nine Wing Barns across the Valley.

“We’re super excited about the recognition,” said Saenz, the Wing Barn chief executive officer. “What we’re doing is right here in the RGV. It’s important to us that people realize we’re from here and not a big franchise that opened up here.”

Building a brand

Wing Barn had a modest start in 2010 with a single restaurant in Brownsville. It was a struggle to get the business established. Saenz had years of retail management experience and Pompa had a background in restaurants and is a culinary school graduate. From the first batch of wings Pompa cooked up to where they are today, the two partners have steadily moved across the Valley. They will soon be in every significant part of the regional market.

“We look to go into up-and-coming markets and locations,” said Saenz in reference to the Weslaco location in front of Lowe’s and the upcoming San Juan restaurant adjacent to the H-E-B Plus.

Pompa recently took a visitor through a tour of the Wing Barn location on Stuart Place Road/Expressway 77/83 in Harlingen. He spoke of the 21 dipping sauces he has created. The chef said he wants “a punch of flavor in every bite.” The sauces are made at a single location in Olmito. They are then transported across the Valley to Wing Barn locations.

In touch with the community

It's attention to detail and knowing the Valley market that is central to what Wing Barn does, Saenz said. He referred to a new grilled corn appetizer that includes cheese and cilantro as fitting the tastes of the region.

"You're not going to find that in any other wing joint in the Valley," Saenz said. "We know what the culture likes here."

The menu goes beyond its signature variety of wings. It also include salads, wraps, burgers, hot dogs and sandwiches. The

diverse menu allows Wing Barn to appeal to a range of customers. It is especially well suited for sit-down family meals. The company looks to roll out a new online app as a nod to more mobile customers and a steady rise in takeout orders.

All of the successes have allowed Wing Barn to give back to the community. Saenz said his company of 180 employees donated over \$200,000 to Valley nonprofits and charities in 2019.

"Giving back is a huge part of what we do," he said.



The Wing Barn menu is diverse and includes a lettuce wrap.

A cook prepares an order at the Wing Barn in Harlingen.



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Magnet Schools Adapt to Changing Times

by: Ricardo D. Cavazos

Engineering students are at work inside a new innovation lab building on the Mercedes campus of the South Texas Independent School District campus.

They peer over laptops and move from table to table, conferring over projects and looking over numerical formulas that offer solutions.

“These kids know they’re not on an island,” said Gabe Valdez, an instructor at the school. “They collaborate. They look for opportunities to teach each other.”

The Mercedes campus with its Med High and Science Academy houses a sizable portion of the students attending the school district, but there are other campuses in the regional network of magnet schools.

A high school focusing on medical professions opened in Olmito in 2015. There is a Rising Scholars school in San Benito for middle school-aged students. A school in Edinburg features international studies and language programs.

STISD began in 1984 with the opening of the South Texas High School for Health Professions (Med High). The source of its beginnings came in 1964 as a rehabilitation school district before becoming the South Texas Independent School District in 1974. The change to vocational magnet schools would come in the 1980s.



Simulation Lab Facilitator Linda Valdez shows the variety of equipment in her lab at Med High.

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More choices

The district serves students from Hidalgo, Cameron and Willacy counties and is in its fifth decade of existence. It now includes four high schools, two middle schools and a large library on its Mercedes campus. STISD has been busy in recent years rebranding itself. It is putting the South Texas name in all of its campuses to add connection between the schools.

The school district is also making plans to move its administrative offices to a new location along Expressway 77/83 near the Rio Grande Valley Premium Outlets. The new district hub will have workshops and training sessions in addition to an increase in administrative space for the regional district. It is making these changes during an era when the opening of charter schools has changed the landscape of public education in the Rio Grande Valley. It underscores the continuing academic excellence offered by STISD.

“There’s a lot of choices for students today,” said Amanda Odom, the administrator for public relations and marketing for STISD. “It’s a good thing that parents and students have choices.”

There are plenty of choices within the schools of STISD. A walk around at the Mercedes campus features students studying and working in nursing and EMT labs. There is a huge floor space in the innovation lab facility where students work over large tables, assembling products using sophisticated equipment. In Edinburg, South Texas ISD World Scholars engage in international baccalaureate programs. It also has dual enrollment opportunities with South Texas College and the University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley.

“We’ve been able to see how the school has changed over the years, and how it’s grown,” said Valdez, the instructor, who is an alumnus of STISD, as is Odom. “What’s offered now is a lot more than what we had back then.”

Eating Plant-Based for the Planet

by: Josie Maureen Barrera

The first official Earth Day dates back to April 22, 1970, starting as a way to educate the general public about environmental issues.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Earth Day and now, more than ever, we have the power to contribute to the planet's well-being. One of the changes we can implement in our everyday lives is transitioning to a plant-based diet. There are many benefits that accompany this lifestyle, one of them being that it positively impacts the environment.

The switch

The Healing Factory Juice Co. is a vegan restaurant in McAllen. It opened as a result of Ingrid Monserrat's personal health journey.

"I started this place because at the time, there was no other whole foods/vegan/juice bar restaurants in McAllen," she said. "Through my own personal health journey, I realized that plant-based was my ideal diet."

Upon transitioning to a plant-based diet, she began to research its benefits and found they outweighed everything else.

"The main reason that I switched, after my health, was because of the animals. I didn't want to participate in the whole factory farming/animal cruelty, etc.," she said. "That was why I chose to go vegan/plant-based, and why I opened the Healing. Then I also learned it was good for the environment."

Meatless Mondays is an international campaign whose sole purpose is for people to unite and join the movement by not consuming meat on Mondays. This is to put in perspective the drastic change we each have, as individuals, on the planet as a whole.



The Healing Factory of McAllen features a colorful interior in addition to healthy foods, juices and smoothies.

"Over the years, the number of participants in this movement has increased," she said.

By switching to a plant-based diet, you save lives, alleviate hunger, reduce the impacts of climate change, save water and minimize agricultural land use. In addition to these benefits, eating plant-based also allows us to save 1,100 gallons of water, 30 square feet of forested land, 45 pounds of grain, one live animal and 20 pounds of CO2 a day.

"To me this is the most eco-friendly way to go. Nowadays you can't just think about yourself anymore. You have to do something that is good for other beings as well, including Earth," she said.

Learning the how impacts the why

Monserrat loves using social media as a platform to educate others on the benefits of transitioning to a plant-based diet.

"A lot of people's first thoughts when they hear about going plant-based are, 'Where will my source

of protein come from?' But there are about 80,000 choices of plants out there as opposed to a limited number of meats," she said.

"We've been programmed to eat the way we do with the mix of cultures in the Valley," she said. "It's nobody's fault, a lot of our parents didn't know any better.

We grew up eating tacos, gorditas, guisados, carnes asadas, etc.

"But now we have the internet and tons of information/resources available to learn – we need to brainwash ourselves into knowing what's good for us and what's not," she said.



The "Love" sandwich at The Healing Factory is vegan grilled cheese with avocado and hummus and is served with a side salad. A healthy cold-pressed juice always goes well with it.

McAllen Goes Green With Unique Facility

by: Ricardo D. Cavazos

Robert Treviño winds his city-issued truck through 20-foot-plus high piles of brush – grinded and raw – at the McAllen Composting Facility.

The city’s renewable resource manager oversees a facility that annually sells 25,000 bags of compost and mulch, and also hauls and delivers products all over South Texas. It’s a valuable commodity among growers and gardeners for the nutrients and microbial activity it provides to soils for plant use and development.

The piles ready for processing are everywhere on the 60-acre city site. McAllen collects 250,000 cubic yards of brush every year from its residents and commercial users. It will all make its way here to the composting facility where it will go through a process from being raw brush to being grinded. Disposed citrus are also added to put nutrients into the product.

The revenues generated by the sale of 40-pound bags of compost and mulch pay for the operation of the city facility. Of even greater value is the immense amount of waste tonnage the facility recycles does not end up at a city landfill. The compost facility reduces the carbon footprint while also saving the city \$500,000 in landfill costs.

“It’s a way of giving back to the environment,” Treviño said. “It completes the cycle in a very productive way. We’re going green.”

McAllen leads the way

McAllen is perhaps the most progressive city in the Rio Grande Valley when it comes to being environmentally friendly. It is unique among area cities in providing weekly and comprehensive pickup of recyclable items from its residences and neighborhoods. It also has the compost facility on the far side of North 29th Street (Rooth Road) just south of Monte Cristo Road. It’s the only one of its kind south of San Antonio.

It’s a busy place. City trucks rumble in and out all day, bringing brush from throughout McAllen. Large pieces of equipment grind and refine the brush to break down the roughage into finer particles. Donations of disposed citrus from Wal-Mart and H-E-B stores in McAllen come to the site. It is dumped on the refined piles to add nitrogen, potassium and other valuable minerals to the mix.

The McAllen facility processes more than 15,000 yards of compost yearly. The product sells in 40-pound bags for prices ranging from \$1.75 to \$2.15 in addition to the deliveries



A pile of composite sits at north McAllen facility.

made throughout the region.

“We saw the potential to offer an excellent product at an affordable price,” said Elvira Alonzo, the city’s public works director. “We’re a one-stop shop.”

Treviño is enthusiastic when describing the process. He explains the details of the steps taken over a nine-to-12 month period to produce the compost and mulch products. The addition of water to the product as it matures speeds up the biological decomposing process. Heat must be monitored and kept within good levels thus ensuring the best quality.

“Our residents make all of this possible,” said of the taxpayer-funded site. “As long as they do, we’re willing to put our heart and soul into it.”

Robert Treviño, McAllen’s renewable resources manager.



Bags of premium composite are among the products for sale at the McAllen Composting Facility.



New RV Park Draws in Winter Texans

by: Tony Vindell

Nearly 260 recreational parks are listed in a directory of a Rio Grande Mobile Home & RV publication. The vast majority of these facilities are located in Hidalgo County, followed by Cameron, Zapata and Starr counties. Some parks have been there for decades, catering to the Winter Texans industry, which appears to be booming this year.

In Brownsville, one of the newest and largest such facilities opened its doors recently and has been getting its share of seasonal tourists even though many had already booked spots at their favorite places.

The new park, Tropical Trails RV Resort, sits along FM 511 on a 185-acre property on the east side of the city. It has 240 RV sites, full hookups, spacious concrete pads and high-speed fiber optic internet. It also has 23 park model cottages available for rent on a long- or

Residents enjoy the shuffleboard courts at Tropical Trails.



short-term basis.

Tropical Trails owners and management recently held a ribbon cutting to unveil the upscale RV resort. The park features an exercise room, a large meeting room and one of the more attractive swimming pools in the Valley, several tenants said.

Park owners Hill and Donelle Dishman welcomed a group of guests at the grand opening event.

"We have been watching the

many Winter Texans that have been coming down to the Valley for many years," Donelle Dishman said. "My husband said that after he retired he was going to build an RV park."

The Dishmans, who are Beaumont natives, began developing the park three years ago.

"I believe Brownsville is the perfect location for this park," Hill Dishman said. "We are extremely excited and look to be here for many, many years."

"Quite a place"

The park has built up its tenant count as work continues on the development. On a recent day, Dennis and Brenda Kanops of Ohio stopped to visit Tropical Trails RV Resort.

"This is quite a place," Brenda Kanops said. "We spent a week at

another park which we did not like at all."

Maine residents Dean and Janette Stiebelings said they enjoy being at the park.

"We love it here," Janette Stiebeling said as she and her husband and two other couples played a game of shuffleboard. "This is our first time down here."

Leah and Clifford Hughes are from Beaumont as well and said they are enjoying the new park.

"We are full-time RVers," Leah Hughes said. "We go from one place to another in our RV all year round, and we are now here."

Stiebeling said one of the things they like about the new park are the large spaces between sites and the swimming pool.

"We hear the train going by, 'choo, choo, choo, choo,'" she said, "but it doesn't bother us."

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Some Of The Freshest Seafood in the U.S.

By Tony Vindell



Shoppers look over the selection at Joe's Oyster Bar in Port Isabel.

Seafood consumption has been on the rise locally and nationally and even more so this time of year during Lent.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reports that the average American consumes 16 pounds of seafood a year. Consumers in the Rio Grande Valley have excellent options when buying fish and shrimp. Many local businesses sell seafood caught in the Gulf of Mexico and take pride in having fresh products.

Much of the shrimp sold in this country is either farm-raised or imported from overseas. Going local is a point many of the businesses at the Brownsville Shrimp Basin make in greeting

their customers with stickers saying, "Friends don't let friends eat foreign shrimp."

Some retailers in the Port Isabel/South Padre Island area and at the basin have been selling shrimp for decades. Many of them also own the trawlers that they send to Texas and Louisiana waters in search of the highly sought product of the sea.

Zimco Marine at the BSB has been in business for nearly four decades. They just began selling five-pound bags of shrimp five years ago. Greg Londrie, the business manager, said the shrimp they sell to the public is at a price point between what is sold to wholesalers and retailers. A list of prices show \$6.50 for

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Amber Thomas shows two bags of the product available at the Shrimp Outlet at the Brownsville Shrimp Basin.

one pound to \$87.50 for a five-pound bag.

The Shrimp Outlet, a company owned and run by Charles Burnell, has also been selling shrimp and fish for many years. He said it's increasingly harder to find people to work on shrimp boats. A large number of these workers come from Mexico and from as far south as Nicaragua. It is becoming harder for these foreign workers to gain permits to work in the United States. Another shrimp boat owner said American workers often don't like working on shrimp boats as it requires weeks out at sea during the season.

In Port Isabel, a number of seafood restaurants have their own in-house seafood shops. Here customers can buy either fresh or frozen shrimp. Joe's Oyster Bar and Los Tortugos are among them. Prices range from \$45-60 for a five-pound of frozen shrimp and \$10.99-13.99 for a pound of fresh shrimp.

In this part of the country, consumption of seafood increases during the Lent

season. Demand from Ash Wednesday and ends on Good Friday usually means consumers pay a little more for seafood. Seafood is available at most supermarkets but nothing beats a product from area business owners who continue catching and offering an affordable product.



A variety of seafood is available at the Quik Stop in Port Isabel.

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We're now drawing plans to build the kind of neighborhood you said you wanted.

Stay tuned for updates on this exciting development and thank you for helping us to imagine how the Rio Grande Valley will **Live, Work and Play.**



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