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RGV Development Dust

by: Todd Breland

The dust is flying. Commercial development is happening in the Rio Grande Valley. Dust blowing from east to west and north to south is much better than getting pounded by four hurricanes. Just ask my home state of Louisiana. I kindly ask for you to keep our neighbors in your prayers.

Fortunately here in the RGV, construction crews are developing new strip centers; contractors are building out suites for tenants; interstate lanes are expanding. These are signs of regional economic development. Current and future jobs are on the rise so we are thankful. We have an abundance of blessings including where we live and work. Even with this year's challenges, we have much to be thankful for as a region, as a state and as a nation.

No matter what is thrown at us, the tough survive because there is no other option. The resiliency of our region has an unde-

clared motto: When life punches us, the Valley punches back. Round 11 has begun and we will finish the 2020 fight strong.

Unfathomable conditions put pressure on all four counties, all 32 cities to pull together as a strengthened and unified region. We pulled up our boots together and started kicking ... dust. Neighboring businesses are assisting one another. Local organizations are helping feed struggling families. Churches and other groups are supporting many charitable causes. This is what makes the Rio Grande Valley so special.

Pushing forward, we have our 2021 work cut out for us which we will face with an unrelenting spirit. Our region takes pride in providing for our families, improving quality of life for Deep South Texas and pursuing the American dream.

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VBR Staff

General Manager
Todd Breland
todd@valleybusinessreport.com

Content Editor
Ricardo D. Cavazos
ricardo@valleybusinessreport.com

Online Editor, VBR e-Brief
Angey Murray
angey@valleybusinessreprt.com

Writers
Chris Ardis • Selene D. Garza
Josie Maureen Barerra • Lisa Seiser
Tony Vindell

Design Director
John M. Hazlett
john@valleybusinessreport.com

Production - Daniel's Printing Place



Dr. Armando Salazar, D.D.S., Port Isabel Dental Associates

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'Local Treasures' Keep Community Connections

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

A customer called Cissy Infante Guerrero to let her know they wouldn't be coming by that week – but no worries – a return to Tucker's Barbecue was guaranteed.

"It was so sweet of her to call," Infante Guerrero said of the customer. "She was worried about us and wanted to assure they would be back to see us."

The months of COVID-19 have consequently tested local businesses. They've adjusted operating hours and services, with business models also changed on the fly in some cases. Through it all, these small businesses have drawn upon a great resource. It's their history and connection to their communities.

Infante Guerrero calls it "a bond" where local residents look out for the well-being of small businesses in their communities. She described how county law enforcement officers in Raymondville rotate their lunch-hour business among Willacy County restaurants.

"Everybody cares about everybody here," she said at her Raymondville restaurant. "In these situations, you help your community as much as you can."

Going Local is Getting Bigger

Going local has been more than a phrase during these past months. A national Pulse Research consumer study taken over the summer showed that demand for local goods – and local brands – is growing. The study revealed that purchasing from local brands had increased by 25 percent. National brand increases were up 20 percent while global brand purchases were down eight percent.

It indicates that as U.S. consumers have nested close to home, they have turned to locally-owned small businesses to get them through the times. Pulse Research calls these businesses "local treasures" that are of value by their communities. Keeping these businesses above water is thus a concern many consumers share.

"Supporting local means you're helping out a friend, a fellow community member," said Hector Cardoza, a Brownsville realtor. "It's OK if it means paying a little more. You're helping to take care of your own."

Small Businesses Tie To Community Identity

Beyond consumer spending, locally-owned businesses are also interwoven into the identity of a community.

"Small businesses are very important

to Weslaco," said Marie McDermott, the executive director of the Weslaco Economic Development Corporation. "They reflect the personality of Weslaco."



Local businesses in the Rio Grande Valley are among those nationally that are "local treasures."

The Weslaco EDC is among many such organizations in the Rio Grande Valley that have created emergency funding programs to provide local businesses with grants and loans. The added resources help local businesses pay for basic expenses.

“COVID-19 is a challenge,” said Noel Bernal, the city manager of Brownsville, which recently announced an assistance program for local businesses. “We are committed to helping small businesses overcome and adapt.”

Lionel’s Western Wear in Weslaco and the Medicine Shoppe Pharmacy of San Benito adapted by revamping their business websites and becoming more active in e-commerce. The Rancho Viejo Farmers Market in a matter of days had to rework their business model from fixed location sales to delivery and curbside services. In McAllen, Southern Roots Flower Market fostered a sense of community with a series of events before COVID and has carried that spirit through in recent months.

These “local treasures” are confident they will survive the most recent challenge while also renewing their connections to communities. Their local brands keeps them both viable and relevant in a changing world.



Brownsville is the latest city to create a local emergency fund to help small businesses.



An arrangement of flowers at Southern Roots Flower Market, which has strong ties to McAllen.

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Young Realtor Sees New Opportunities

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The world of real estate today is one where anyone in the world can see a local property for sale.

It's a world of visuals, said one of Brownsville's young and aspiring realtors. Hector Cardoza believes he is in a good position to seize the opportunities of a growing market. The 29-year-old Cardoza grew up locally, a graduate of Los Fresnos High School and the University of Texas-Brownsville. He started out working at the university in the business office before realizing he had other ambitions.

"Sometimes Millennials just really want to fly," he said.

He found a professional outlet for his energies and love of community in real estate. For nearly the last five years, he learned from local longtime realtor Bruno Zavaleta, acquiring knowledge and certifications and learning the market. He also became active in the community through the United Way, participating in a program to help local residents do their taxes. Cardoza earned a volunteer of the year award in 2016 for those efforts.

Cardoza is setting off on his own, gaining his brokerage license. With his fiancé, Nora Caballero, he is setting up his own company, the Altus Real Estate Group. His new office is along Expressway 77/83 near the intersection with Boca Chica Boulevard, a thoroughfare synonymous with Brownsville. Cardoza, however, wants to go beyond the local market and have a reach throughout the Rio Grande Valley.

"I wanted to create my own brand," he said. "I want to grow market share in the Valley. We're all seeing how the Valley is growing into one metro area like Dallas-Fort Worth and you want to be in the middle of those opportunities."

Young Professionals Emerging

Cardoza is among the younger generation of business and community leaders emerging in Brownsville. He sees real estate as a way to guide and influence his age peers to find properties that match their interests plus working in all aspects of the local market. The visual and technological sensibilities of his generation are a good fit for how the real estate industry has changed.

"You do need experience," Cardoza said. "You also need to bring to the table the visual

aspects like video, Instagram, Facebook, all those elements that improve visual presentation."

It also helps to understand what a customer is looking for and find that aspiration rather than just offering a generic answer. He cited a recent example of a young couple moving to Brownsville from Austin. He gave them an overall presentation of the market but knew the couple had an interest in older homes. In Brownsville, there's a number of historic homes to be found.

Cardoza helped his clients find a beautiful historic home on Palm Boulevard. In earlier Brownsville eras, it was a high profile area for some of the city's most affluent residents. The attraction of Palm Boulevard waned for years, but it has made a comeback of sorts in recent years as younger residents are drawn to historic parts of the city as good places to live.

"I see it as being part of the overall experience of the (real estate) process," he said. "The experience is not only the transaction,

Hector Cardoza hopes to find new opportunities in Brownsville and RGV real estate. (VBR)



Port Lands Major Ship-Building Project

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

A Seattle-based maritime contractor has chosen a Port of Brownsville tenant to build the largest hopper dredge in the United States.

Manson Construction Co. is one of the nation's leading builders of marine infrastructure projects. Its contract with Keppel AmFELS has AmFELS building a 15,000-cubic yard hopper dredge. It will have a length of 420 feet and a breadth of 81 feet.

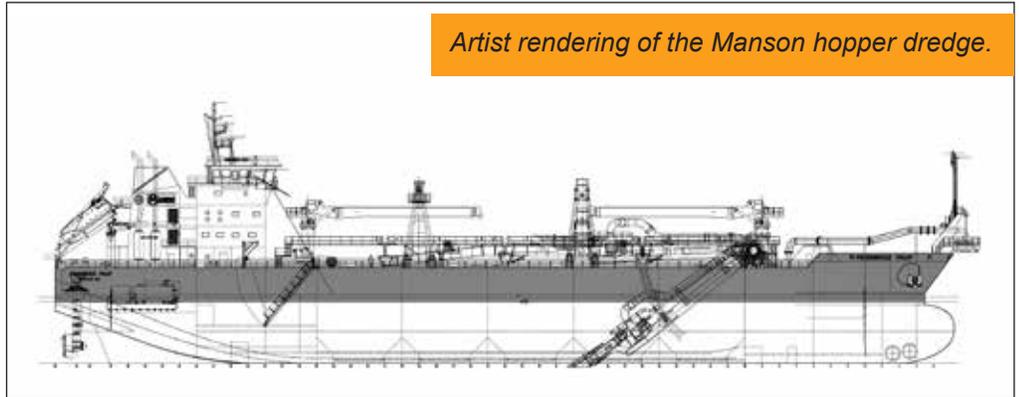
A dredge is a marine vessel – a ship – that is fitted with an excavation tool capable of scrapping off and removing sediment deposits. This helps ensure clearance for safer voyages through major waterways. They are also essential for maritime travel of all types. The sediments a dredge collects are also of use in the creation of new harbors and reclamation of areas oil spills and natural disasters damage.

For Manson, the project with AmFELS also represents the company's single biggest investment in its 115-year history. It is scheduled to be completed in the spring of 2023

“We are pleased to be partnering with Keppel AmFELS due to their impressive vessel construction capabilities,” said John Holmes, the Manson Construction president, in a statement released by the company. “We are proud that it will be U.S. built, U.S. flagged, U.S. crewed and will support the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers’ mission of keeping the marine transportation highway open throughout the United States.”

A Boost For The Port's Profile

AmFELS is a Port of Brownsville mainstay tenant and was established in 1990. It is among the best-equipped shipyards in the Gulf of Mexico. AmFELS has a long history of constructing, refurbishing and repairing a range of mobile drilling rigs, platforms and ships. The company services industries involved in renewable energy and transportation as well as oil and gas.



Artist rendering of the Manson hopper dredge.

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Company and local officials confer recently at AmFELS shipyard.

“This project will be supported by our highly skilled local workforce and suppliers across the U.S.,” said Mohamed Shahlan Bin Salleh, the president of Keppel AmFELS. “This is our first new-build project with Manson and we look forward to supporting them as they grow their fleet of vessels.”

The Manson project will provide a further boost for the Port of Brownsville. It will grow the value of imports and exports moving through the port and its Foreign Trade Zone. The port, according to its CEO Eduardo Campirano, saw a record-setting \$8.9 billion in combined export/import value in 2019. He further expects more growth this year.

Campirano cited shipbuilding equipment such as the type utilized by AmFELS as a key component in this growth. AmFELS describes itself as “the foremost offshore shipyard in the Gulf of Mexico,” adding that it has placed “Brownsville on the map for world class offshore solutions.”

The company has long been an active corporate citizen in Brownsville. It has partnered with University of Texas System campuses in the area as well as the local United Way to improve literacy, employability and the general well-being of Brownsville and southern Cameron County.

Activity is busy at Keppel AmFELS at the Port of Brownsville.



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Ideas Sprouting At Weslaco Therapy Business

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

There's a little patch of green on Texas Boulevard in downtown Weslaco.

The morning sun lights up a beautiful courtyard that's lush and green with oak trees and a small playhouse with hanging plants. It's the sort of place of calm and reflection that Yvonne Reyes seeks in bringing her patients for therapy. Reyes, an occupational therapist, works to improve the focus, motor skills and sensory perceptions of her patients.

"Therapy is a whole body experience – mental and physical – and the elements of nature can reduce stress," said Reyes, who owns and operates Sprouts Sensory Garden & Occupational Therapy.

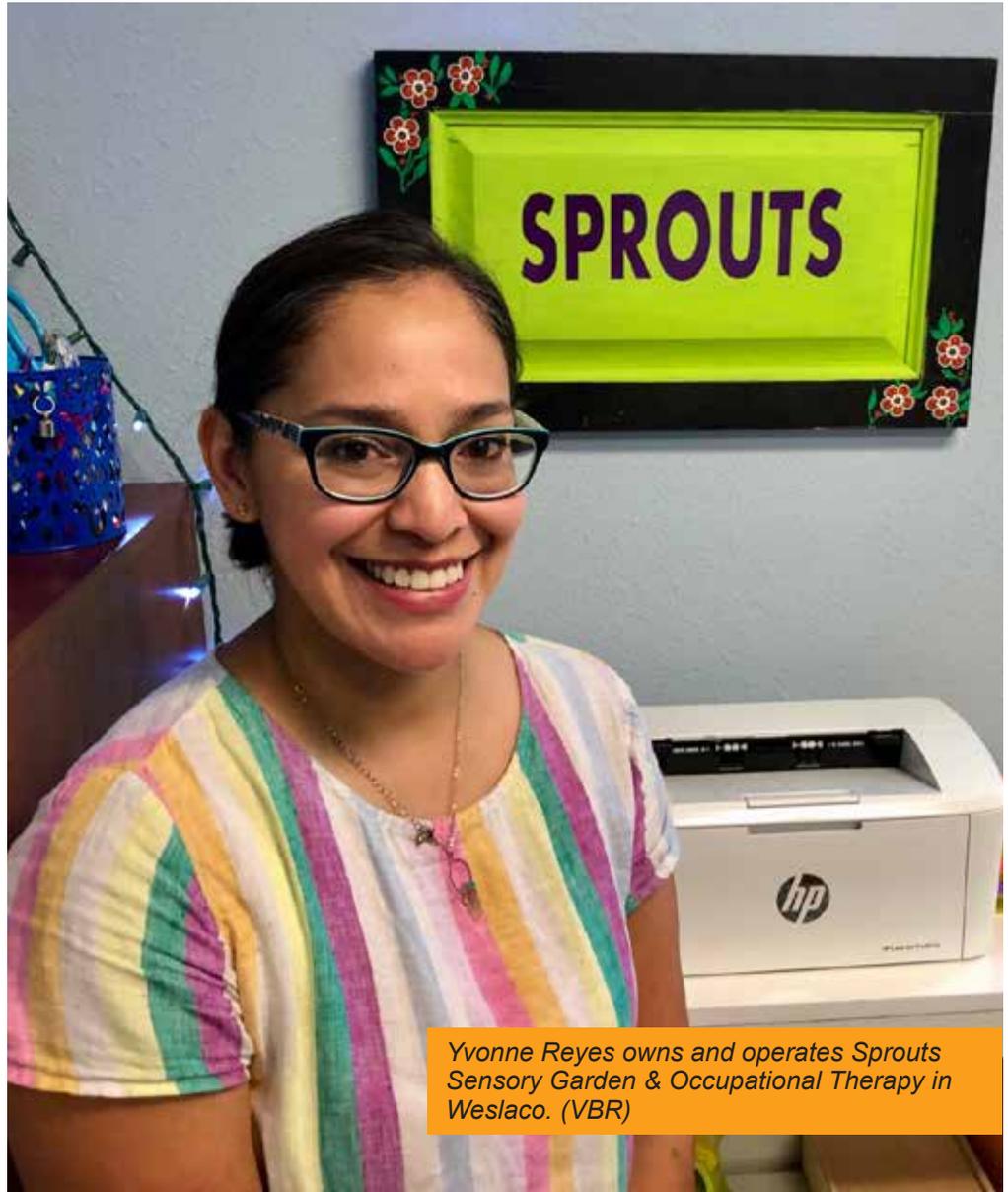
The Weslaco native opened her business in 2019 in Mercedes before moving it recently to her hometown. Most of her patients are children with a range of conditions from attention deficit disorders to autism. Using gardening and green space as treatments isn't new in occupational therapy, Reyes said. Yet, she adds, it is still outside of normal practices.

Reyes has a master's degree in occupational therapy from the University of Texas. She has worked at area hospitals and other health care facilities. Sprouts, however, is where "my heart is," she said, and hopes to develop the Sprouts business into a full-time practice.

"I wanted to stay close to the Mid-Valley," Reyes said. "I also needed office space with access to green space to try my ideas."

Ideas Taking Root

Reyes has nearly a decade's worth of experience in the occupational therapy field. She has worked in more traditional settings throughout her career with practices deemed to be more



Yvonne Reyes owns and operates Sprouts Sensory Garden & Occupational Therapy in Weslaco. (VBR)

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tried and true. Reyes yearns to do more and “try something different,” a place where “my ideas can go forward.”

Her ideas are taking root at Sprouts Sensory Garden. She describes how therapeutic gardening and outdoor activities can help a patient build improvements in following instructions. It can help them maintain attention to a subject, and be more talkative and engage others in doing a task. Green space therapy can help an active child slow down and focus on a task, even as the sounds of traffic or a nearby train coming through town compete for attention.

“Gardening takes a certain amount of physicality,” Reyes said. “You feel the earth and the plants, and that in itself, can reduce stress and improve focus.”

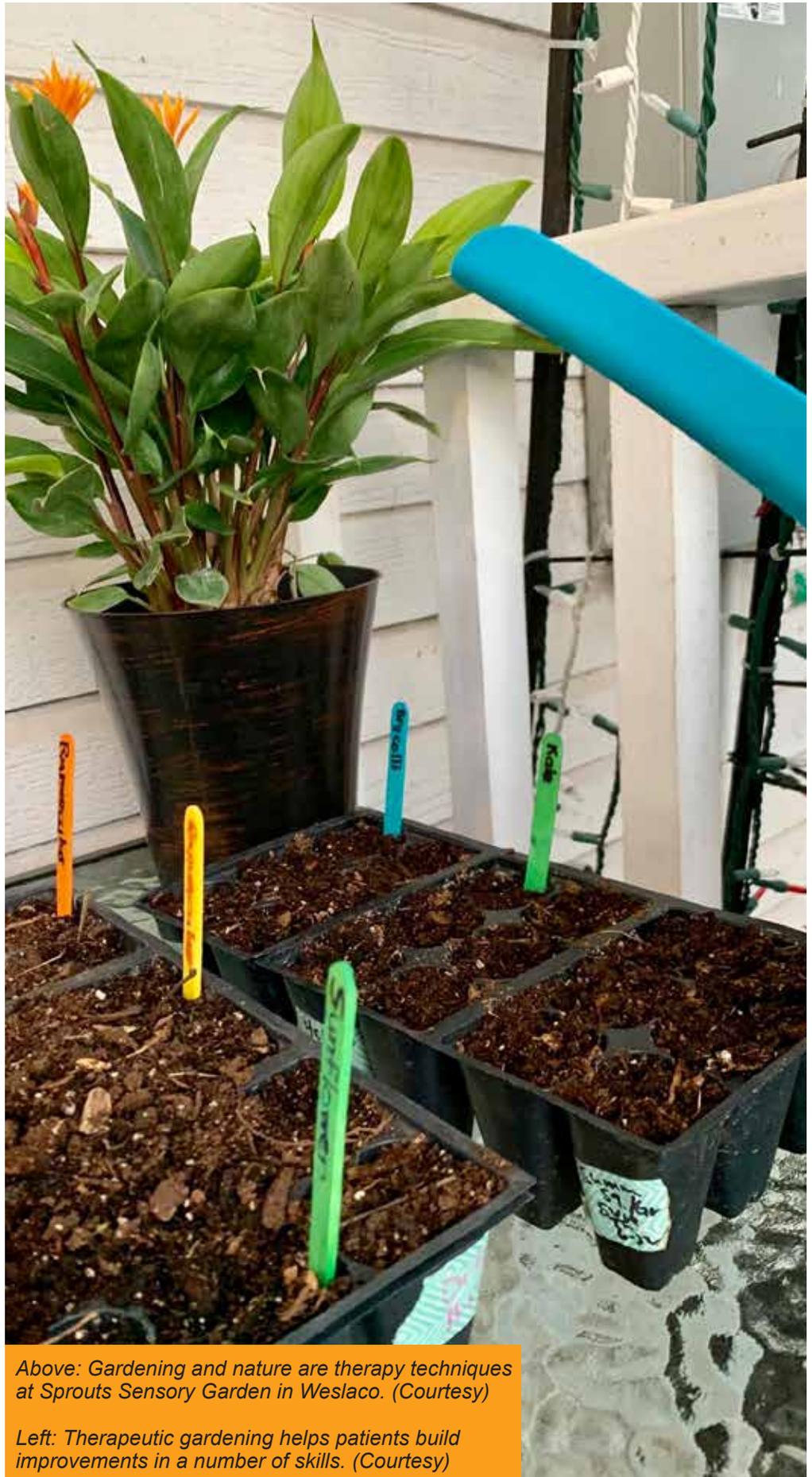
She alluded to that in a Facebook post on her Sprouts page where she described her patients mixing seed with soil, scooping and pouring into containers.

“We addressed sensory, fine motor coordination, visual motor for handwriting,” and Reyes added, it was “all outdoors, so calming that I know we addressed the psyche.”

She also has an indoor work space where she can sit with patients. Reyes combines more standard practices learned in her clinical work with innovative ideas of outdoors therapy in her efforts to help patients. She is enthusiastic in describing how she generally analyzes a patient’s condition in accounting for social and physical environments.

“What is that you want to do to help a patient?” she asks as a therapist. “Then you come up with a solution.”

The little green space on Texas in downtown Weslaco is finding some answers under the watchful and trained eye of an occupational therapist searching for her own space.



Above: Gardening and nature are therapy techniques at Sprouts Sensory Garden in Weslaco. (Courtesy)

Left: Therapeutic gardening helps patients build improvements in a number of skills. (Courtesy)



Former Officer Finds New Life In Business

By Chris Ardis

Ric Tamez moved back home to McAllen in the early 1980s after working for Kroger in Corpus Christi.

He soon realized he should have secured a job before returning.

“I was young and stupid, and before long, I was desperate,” Tamez said.

He moved back in with his parents with only \$200 to his name when he received a job offer to work as a teller at Texas State Bank. That job changed the course of his life, but not because it launched a career in banking.

“Every other Friday, a customer named Pat Guerrero came to the bank to cash her check,” Tamez said.

Guerrero worked as a jailer for the McAllen Police Department. She suggested Tamez apply for a job at the police department as he handled her deposit.

“I owe my whole career to her,” he said.

Dec. 1, 1984 is when Tamez began working at McAllen PD.

“I immediately connected with the job of a police officer,” he said.

Joining the Force

Alex Longoria, the police chief at the time, started a Reserve Police Academy. Tamez joined the Academy in spring 1985. In November, Tamez joined the fifth McAllen Police Academy, graduating on Valentine’s Day in 1986.

After two years on patrol, Tamez joined the PD’s Criminal Investigation Division. He reached his next goal four years later when he was offered the role of investigator in the Major Crimes Unit.



Ric Tamez, right, owner of RGV SpyTek in McAllen, stands inside the store with his long-time sales associate J.D. Guzman.

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“I felt the elite investigators were in this unit,” he said.

Tamez cites police Captain Rolando Torres for seeing potential in him and the drive that was evident for police work. Torres assigned Tamez to serve as lead investigator when his fellow McAllen police officer, Rey Lopez, was shot and killed at the McAllen Tourist Center on South 10th Street while working off-duty security.

“Our team brought all of the people involved to justice,” Tamez said, pausing for a moment as he recalled the magnitude of the case. “It was so close to home. It was a very emotional time, and we never had a chance to mourn.”

Tamez served as lead investigator on another high-profile case, this one in early 1998. Two men had shot a security guard at South Texas Community College as students registered for classes. Tamez and his team tracked down both primary suspects. One, a Mexican national, confessed to the crime but would not return to Texas to testify against the shooter, a U.S. citizen, because he knew he, too, would be charged.

In 2000, Tamez decided to transfer to the Burglary Unit. He found working surveillance and stake-outs challenging and fun. His career ended in Dec. 2001 when Chief Longoria, a key mentor, passed away after a valiant fight with melanoma. Tamez decided it was time for a change.

Starting Anew

Tamez resigned from the police department and entered the world of private investigation, a lucrative yet exhausting job. He would eventually open RGV SpyTek near 10th and Nolana Avenue in McAllen. The business opened in late 2008 and Jaime Martin, a spy shop expert from Austin,



Audio recording devices are available in a variety of sizes and are sought-after items at RGV SpyTek.



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helped him get started during challenging economic times.

“I had been so busy that I didn’t know there was a recession,” he said.

Two years later, to accommodate the growth in sales, Tamez moved RGV SpyTek to its current location on north 23rd Street as his business expanded over the years. The shop’s most sought-after items, Tamez said, involve security and GPS trackers.

“We have all kinds of security cameras, spy cameras, and other devices to keep individuals and their families safe,” Tamez said. “I think we all just have a knack for spying.”

RGV SpyTek is a spy’s paradise, with non-lethal tasers, stun guns, pepper spray, a large variety of popular knives and high-intensity LED flashlights. Other popular items include Bluetooth sunglasses, doorbells with remote access and audio recording devices.

Though spying can be thrilling, Tamez warned that people must remember there are legal parameters. He and his staff inform their customers of the moral and ethical obligations in how they use the devices purchased at SpyTek.



RGV SpyTek, a spy-lover’s paradise, at 3620 North 23rd Street in McAllen.



Though they appear to be common household items, each of these is actually a diversion safe.

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Tucker's BBQ Roots Run Deep In Willacy County

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The drive-through line was snaking around a bend on a recent Friday at Tucker's Barbecue in Raymondville.

A Texas Department of Public Safety vehicle pulled up and dotted the line. Michael Guerrero kept the pit fire going as his wife, Cissy, and her staff worked through orders hanging on a wire with clothespins.

"It has been tough," Cissy Infante Guerrero said of dealing with COVID-19 challenges. "Our business has been cut in half, but we're blessed to continue doing what we love to do."

Dine-in services at Tucker's were curtailed in March and have not resumed since out of the business' concern to keep customers and staff safe. Drive-through business is brisk with lines of loyal customers. It's still not enough to maintain the operating hours Tucker's had prior. For now, the Willacy County barbecue business is open only on weekdays, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., as it waits out the easing of COVID.

The reductions, however, have not diminished the spirit and verve at Tucker's. They live by the credo, "good food, good eats, good people," and work hard while having fun at what they do. A recent award from the Small Business Administration has further boosted spirits. Tucker's Catering and Restaurant was named the SBA's 2020 rural-owned small business of the year in the Rio Grande Valley.

"It's such an honor for us and the county," said Infante Guerrero, who owns Tucker's with her husband and brother, J.R. Infante. "Willacy County gets overlooked, so it's nice to be recognized and know people like our product."



Michael Guerrero and Cissy Infante Guerrero own Tucker's Barbecue along with Cissy's brother, J.R.



Left to Right: Barbara Jean Garza-Weslaco Chamber CEO, Daniel Montez-Board Member, Danielle Silva-Miss Weslaco, Violet Kerr-Little Miss Weslaco-Jeffery Casares-Mr. Weslaco, Ronda Lewis-Board Member, Corina Rodriguez-Board Chair.

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Staying True To Willacy County

Tucker's got its start in 2009 in Lyford, which is the hometown of the restaurant's three owners. It is named in honor of Infante Guerrero's father, Rudy, who had friends with the same first name. The group of friends referred to each other as tocamyos, a term often used by Spanish speakers when referring to someone with the same first name. Somewhere through the years, tocamyo became Tucker for Rudy Infante.

"We grew up with barbecue," Cissy said. "For us, it's a form of carino."

Tucker's first eight years in Lyford were good ones but somewhat off the beaten path. They decided to make the move to Raymondville in 2017 and are located just off U.S. Highway 77 and immediately adjacent to state Highway 186, which is the city's main street off the expressway.

It was important for Tucker's to remain in Willacy County and stay true to its community connections. Tucker's opening in 2009 was front page news in the Raymondville Chronicle, which proclaimed it as the return of barbecue to the county.

"Willacy County people are united as a county no matter what town you come from," Infante Guerrero said. "Everyone knows everyone, so when people walk in, we want it to feel like they're walking into their home and not a restaurant."

Walking into Tucker's may be some months off, but when that day comes, it will be met with joy.

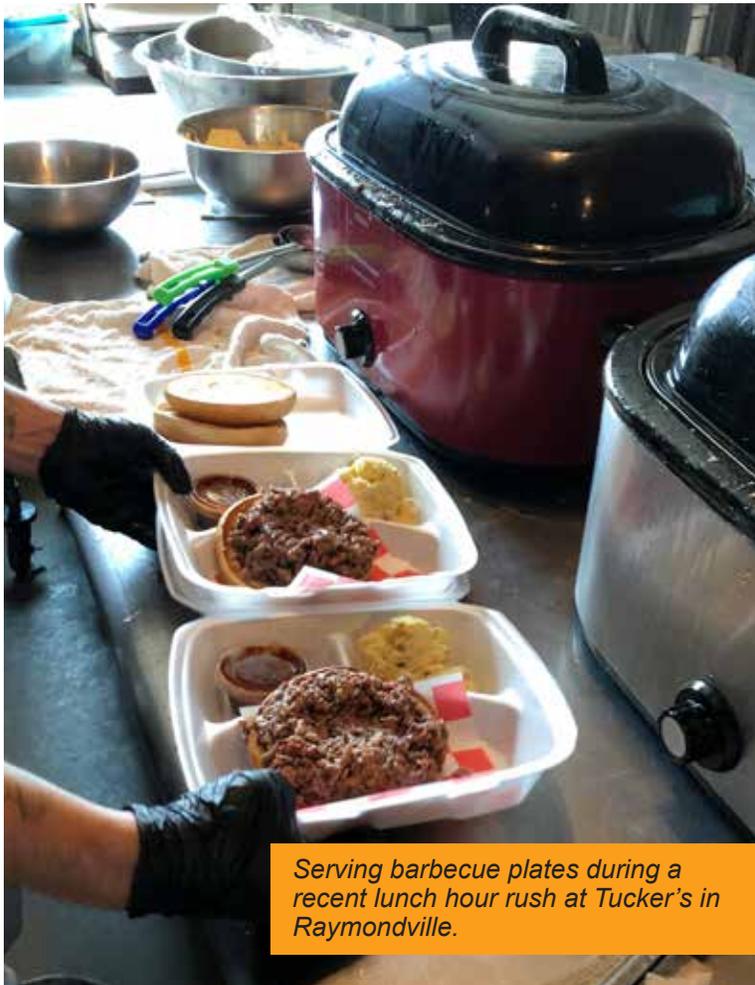
"I can't wait," Cissy said. "It's going to be great to open up and see everyone again."



Barbecue sandwiches are ready to go at Tucker's.



Tucker's barbecue sauces are filled and stacked up at the restaurant's to-go counter.



Serving barbecue plates during a recent lunch hour rush at Tucker's in Raymondville.

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New Terminal Transforms Air Travel

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

It's a two-block walk from the historic Pan American Airways Complex to the Brownsville South Padre Island International Airport's emerging \$70 million passenger terminal.

The 91,000-square-foot terminal is within easy view of the spot where on March 9, 1931, Charles Lindbergh flew in for the opening ceremonies of Brownsville's first airport with Amelia Earhart in attendance. History will be made again in December 2020 when Brownsville transforms air travel again with the opening of a sleek new terminal.

It will be an astonishing upgrade in facilities from the current 37,000-square-foot terminal that has a 1970s feel. The new two-story terminal is modern and efficient with expansive window views. An exterior design emulates a bird's wingspan in its facade with a rolling ocean wave rooftop.

The bottom floor will be for passenger check-in, baggage claim and airport administration offices. The top floor will be for passenger check in with four gates and ample boarding space areas. There will also be an increase in new parking spaces for short and long-term parking.

"An airport is the gateway to the community," said Francisco Partida, the airport's special projects manager. "When a business person visits and comes through the doors of an airport, it's the first face they see of a city."

Showing A New Face

It will soon be an entirely new face in Brownsville. The city has a rich aviation history beyond the visits of global aviation

icons like Lindbergh and Earhart. In the mid-20th century, Brownsville served as the Pan Am Airways hub for U.S. flights going to all points in Latin America. It has been eclipsed in more recent times for passenger travel by neighboring airports in Harlingen and McAllen. By the looks of it, that may soon change.

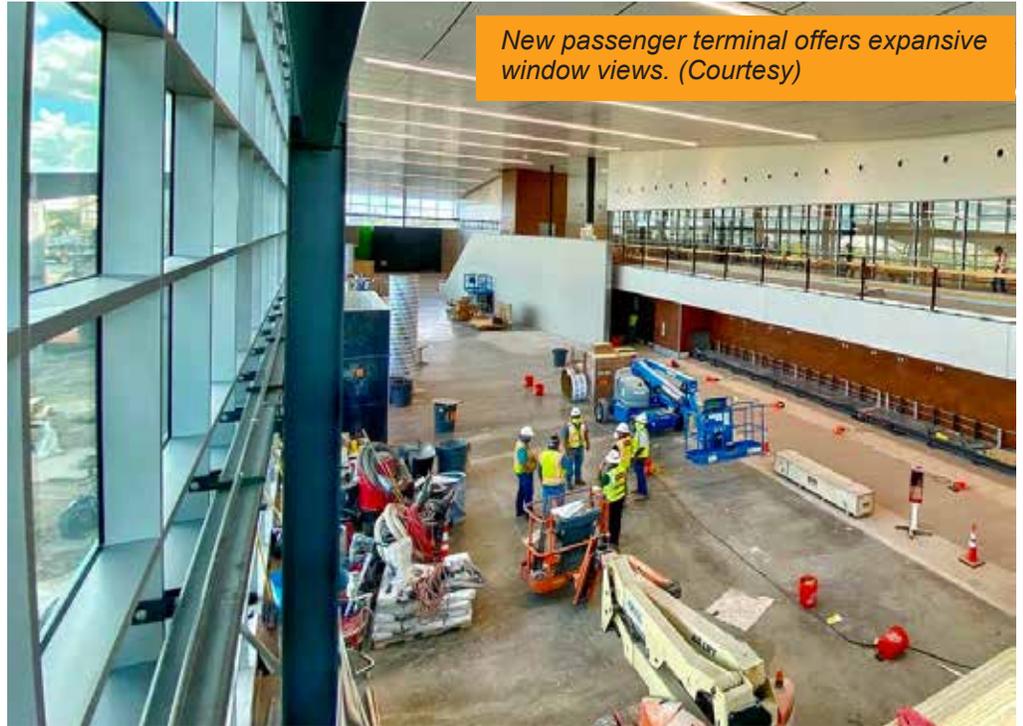
The new Brownsville passenger terminal is more than the equal of similar facilities to the other Valley airports. Partida said the airport is looking to double its volume of air travelers in the coming years.

"We know a lot of our customers go to other Valley airports," he said. "We're the largest city in Cameron County and there's no

reason to be losing business from our market to other airports. I think we will see a logical shift back to the home airport."

Expanding Opportunities

The Brownsville South Padre airport currently houses American and United airlines for passenger travel. The airport would like to have additional carriers, Partida said, but the emphasis is more on growing local air travel. They are also looking to add to the existing number of flights that make sense for customers and the market. One focus may be on more flights to the Midwest with business travel to automotive manufacturing and



New passenger terminal offers expansive window views. (Courtesy)

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operational facilities in both Matamoros and Brownsville.

“It’s not about aiming for five or six airlines although we will certainly have the capacity to add more carriers,” Partida said. “It’s about satisfying customer needs.”

The city was able to secure \$30 million in federal funding for the new terminal. The remaining funding came from local sources. From its groundbreaking in January 2018 to the present, Partida said the two-phase construction plan has gone smoothly. The expectancy is to open at the end of 2020.

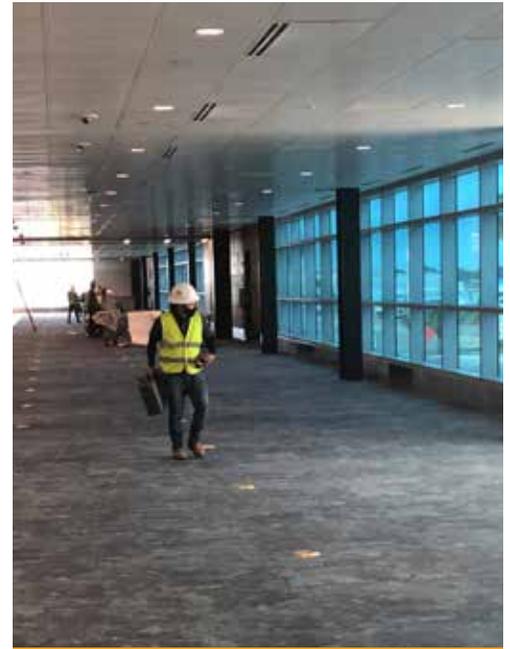
“Brownsville is just filled with opportunities,” Partida said.

He cites SpaceX and the many improvements and projects at the Port of Brownsville.

“It’s really exciting for us to be part of the growth we’re seeing in Brownsville,” he said.



Right: Construction is in the final stages on the exterior of the new Brownsville air terminal.



Construction on the new Brownsville terminal is expected to be complete in December.

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