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From A House To A Home

by: Todd Breland

From design conception to construction of a new home or even remodeling your current home can be exciting, stressful and very rewarding. Beginning a new project takes capital, guidance, patience and teamwork.

Launching such an endeavor first requires a huge leap into the unknown. Sure, the plan can be detailed, budgeted, scheduled with a vision of the finished product, but the hiccups along the way can pressure our nerves till the point of full blown gray on the crown.

We all have our own definition of home improvement. The constant is this -- reaching the finish line brings challenges necessitating cooperation from all participants, including outside forces. Compromising opinions when it comes to likes and dislikes, picking the real battles versus nitpicking and seeing the light at the end of the tunnel are all part of the game. Staying sane during the journey is my definition of a successful home improvement.

Some call it a leap of faith. Some call it

crazy. Maybe it's a combination of both. Building a new home or remodeling an existing home is adventurous on so many levels. Full satisfaction sets in while sitting under a shaded new deck or enjoying the street view

of a brand new home. Enjoy the ride, even the bumps in the road and misdirection along the way.

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Housing Construction Surges

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

There are few industries more sensitive to the immediate changes in the push-and-pull of economic trends than the housing industry.

A year ago, the general economy came to a near standstill in the United States with the arrival of COVID-19. The housing industry was hardly immune to the shock.

“There was a pullback last March and April,” said Eddie Cantu, a Hidalgo County commissioner who is also a land developer. “People were waiting it out for a few months to see what would happen.”

The slowdown, at least in housing, did not last in 2020. In May going into June, sales and construction began to pick up. It was steady growth at first. It then accelerated as builders and realtors began to figure out what was happening in a fluid market.

Interest rates were dropping. Families were spending more time at home, spurring more to consider their options.

“People started realizing that they could use a little more space, or maybe a new home,” said Ivan Guajardo, the owner of Dynasty Custom Homes in Hidalgo County. “With interest rates so low, it made it easier to reinvest in a new property.”

The flip side to building a new home was staying put, adding space and making home improvements. There was a declining inventory of existing homes and a growing interest in new homes. The two factors added together have created a surging market.

“This backlog of clients, along with new clients who were just beginning the process created a surge of buyers all ready to start at the same time,” said Jason Cano, the owner of Nest Custom Homes of Harlingen. “Most made preparations and plans to start construction pre-pandemic, leaving them anxious to break ground.”

Putting all of these factors together, Cantu marveled at what he has seen in recent months.

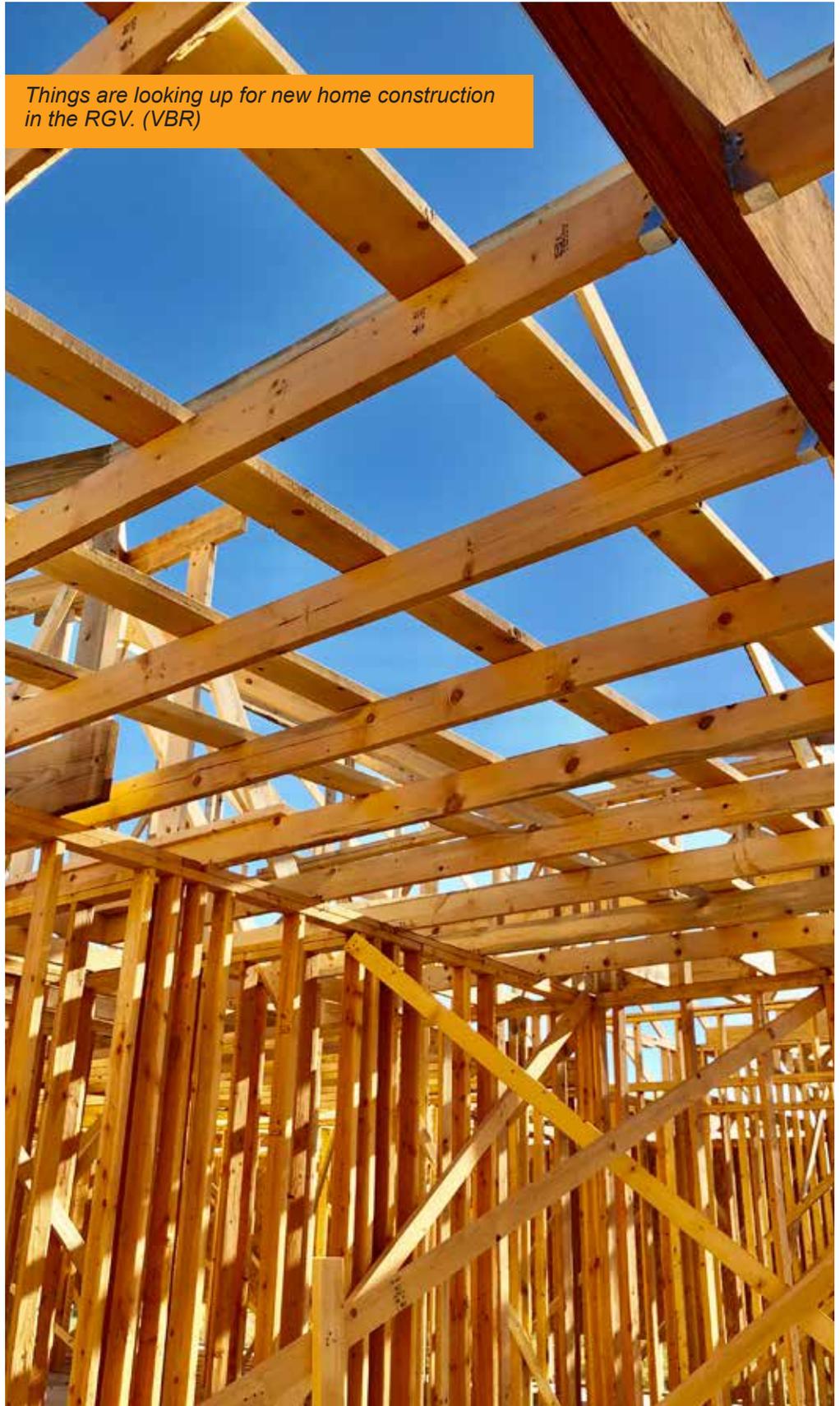
“It’s the hottest market I’ve ever seen,” he said.

Keeping Up With The Demand

Cano drives between active building sites in southwest Harlingen. Signs bearing his company’s names pop up throughout that part of the city.

“New developments and lot availability have spurred interest and starts,” Cano said. “Several new subdivisions have been completed or are

Things are looking up for new home construction in the RGV. (VBR)



in progress. With better options, buyers and builders alike are moving forward with projects and feeling optimistic and confident.”

The Harlingen-based builder is busy. His company started building four new homes in mid-February. There’s another 12 construction starts scheduled in the coming months. Cano is also looking ahead to developing 20 acres into 65 residential lots in Harlingen later this year.

“The opportunity to design a space and enjoy a home that’s never been inhabited is extremely appealing during these times,” Cano said. “During the pandemic, people are opting for new construction and the known history of a home.”

Dealing With Challenges

One adverse development during the course of 2020 as builders adjusted was the rapid increase in lumber prices. Cano said the cost of lumber began rising in the fourth quarter of 2020, reaching record highs and making things more complicated for buyers and builders.

Loans and budgets were readjusted for buyers who had put building plans on hold and then moved forward as lumber prices rose. There have also been some material shortages as of



A steep rise in lumber prices does not deter a healthy increase in new home construction. (VBR)

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late to go with a competition for available labor with workers being hired to build several large commercial projects in the area, Cano said.

There have also been some slight delays due to pandemic procedures and guidelines, he said.

“Everything is taking a little longer,” Cano said in reference to permitting, processing, surveying and closing contracts. “There are many tools and apps in place, such as virtual closings, online notaries and Zoom calls, that are making things safer and more convenient for everyone.”

Through all of these challenges, Cano and Guajardo point to stable and growing employment sectors in the medical industry, law enforcement and education that have created a stable market of home buyers. Cano specifically cited nurses and federal law enforcement officers who have been buyers of his homes in recent times.

“We’ve had several calls on new homes,” said Carmen Reyes, the owner of Casa De Reyes homebuilders of Mercedes. “Some of our customers are recent retirees and are using their 401Ks and other resources to build new or upgrade homes.”

With interest rates at historic lows and the

supply of pre-existing homes for sale being low in volume, Guajardo sees no letup in home construction anytime soon.

“You’re able right now with the interest rates to afford something bigger and better and with a good monthly (mortgage) payment,” he said. “People are seeing those opportunities. I’ve never built as many homes as I did the second half of 2020.”



Builders are competing for available labor in demand for new home construction. (VBR)



The sun rises behind home construction in Harlingen. (VBR)

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Investor Group Boosts RGV Entrepreneurship

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

In his days as a business school professor in Brownsville, John Martin had a key piece of advice for his students.

“If you want to be a high salaried employee, leave the Valley, but if you want to be an entrepreneur, stay here,” Martin said.

Martin is a member of the Rio Grande Valley Angel Network. The investor group provides seed money for aspiring entrepreneurs in return for equity in their companies. The Angel investors also serve as mentors for the entrepreneurs working to make their mark while connecting them to additional resources and expertise.

There are 42 investors in the group. They include a cross-section of business and financial experts who have also been successful in their endeavors. Federal government rules require a group such as Angel to consist of individual investors who have a net worth of at least \$1 million and/or have an annual income of exceeding \$200,000. Since 2017, the group has invested almost \$1 million in 13 startup companies.

Local Success Story

One of its success stories is Composite Access Products of McAllen. Angel

invested \$175,000 into the manhole cover manufacturer in return for just over a three percent company interest. Along with the much-needed capital, CAP also receives business expertise and connections to other resources.

“The influx of capital really helped us at that moment,” said Chad Nunnery, the owner and chief executive at CAP. “They filled in that blank that we didn’t expect as we grew our business.”

Like many startups, Nunnery used his own resources as well as those of family and friends in CAP’s formative years. The time for additional capital then came and securing a bank loan at that point for the young company was unlikely. Nunnery then turned to the Angel Network, making his pitch for the group’s capital in return for equity.

Angel was suitably impressed in the company’s start and early successes, and made the investment in Nunnery’s enterprise.

“John and the group bring in a lot of expertise and connections,” Nunnery said. “We definitely got a lot of help and encouragement.”

It was the Angel group and Martin who introduced Nunnery to Ford Sasser, the president and chief executive officer of Rio Bank. Sasser was impressed by Nunnery’s ties to the investment group and the capital it provided to CAP. The banker then agreed to provide the young manufacturer with a loan. It was a hard-earned gain that would have not been possible without the Angel group’s involvement.

“If a person wants to start a manufacturing business, banks are not the first step,” Sasser said. “A group like the Angel investors are critical for startups. They provide valuable resources to a company with a good plan that’s having some success. From a banker’s perspective, we’re willing to take a risk and get a payback.”

Getting The Word Out

The success and story of CAP is one Martin and his network of investors would like to replicate with other Valley entrepreneurs.



Capital from the RGV Angel Network is key to the manufacturing of manhole covers by a McAllen company. (VBR)

To this point, CAP is the only Valley company that Angel has invested in, but Martin hopes that will change. He wants to get the word out that Angel is willing to help other emerging local companies. The group also wants to listen to their presentations and possibilities.

“We’re hearing a lot of great ideas that have a lot of potential,” Martin said. “The biggest problem is that we need more entrepreneurs to bring out more investors and plant the seed for more entrepreneurship in the Valley.”

The group picks its spots carefully in making its investments, knowing that not all of their efforts will succeed.

“We don’t take one project and put all of our money into it because we know some of these companies are going to fail,” Martin said. “You hope to make lots of money with your other projects that do succeed.”

Nunnery’s company is one of those projects as it grows sales with its products throughout the United States. The Angel group hopes to plant the seed with other local, emerging companies in helping them to prosper while making a return on their investor capital.



An employee at Composite Access Products oversees a step in the making of a manhole cover, which in part, is made possible by capital provided by a Valley investment group. (VBR)



Composite Access Products with help from the Angel investor group manufactures manhole covers. (VBR)

San Benito Store Honors Paramedic's Legacy

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Aracely Salinas' start in business was born of grief as well as inspiration from her late husband.

Michael Bryant Salinas was a longtime Rio Grande Valley paramedic and CPR instructor. For years, Aracely accompanied her husband to classroom and training sessions. It was where Michael taught the essentials of emergency medical care.

When he died in August 2018, Aracely had life-changing decisions to make. One came fairly quickly when she decided to open a business that would serve the sort of front-line medical workers Michael knew well and

were part of in his years in healthcare.

Walk into Aracely's Uniforms Etc. and you will see row after row of medical scrubs hung up along with lab coats, shoes, socks and head wear for professionals in the medical field. The downtown San Benito store is conveniently located between large hospitals in Harlingen and Brownsville as well as a number of other medical facilities in the two cities.

It's not just business for her. Aracely also feels an emotional connection to the health-care workers given the years her husband dedicated to the field.

"She relates to them on a deeper level," said Trish Saldana, an employee at the San Benito store in describing Salinas' bond with nurses, medical assistants, technicians and other medical workers. "She knows what they go through."

Transitioning From A Career In Education

Salinas has had an interesting career of her own. She worked for years as a social worker for the state. She went from there to a career in education as a teacher, assistant principal and principal. A common thread, Salinas said, in her work and that of her husband is service to the community. She wanted to carry on that legacy through her store, which she opened in April 2019.

Salinas also decided to follow in her husband's path in becoming a certified CPR instructor. The new role she chose would take her to some of the same places her husband went to provide training. She knew doing so would be emotional for her, but saw it as a way to honor Michael's legacy and meet people who knew her husband.

"It's a way of connecting with people he helped," Salinas said. "I was also hoping to hear stories about him, and maybe learn more about what he did."

Extended Support

Working in the medical field is a calling and those working in it have been tested like never before in the last year. Salinas is sensitive to those challenges and the long working hours medical workers are putting in. Her San Benito store has extended hours that include 9 p.m. closing times, Monday through Saturday, with Uniforms Etc., open on Sunday afternoons.

If needed, Salinas will rush from her nearby home in the city to open her store if a medical worker calls or messages her in asking for a special time to come by outside of normal business hours.

"We work our schedule around their schedule," she said. "They work really long hours, and we need to be available."

Saldana can attest to Salinas' willingness to serve her customers.

"She's come back at 9:30 at night to open the store and help them," Saldana said. "We're the only location that is accessible to all frontline workers no matter the schedules



Aracely Salinas honors her late husband, a paramedic, through her business. (VBR)

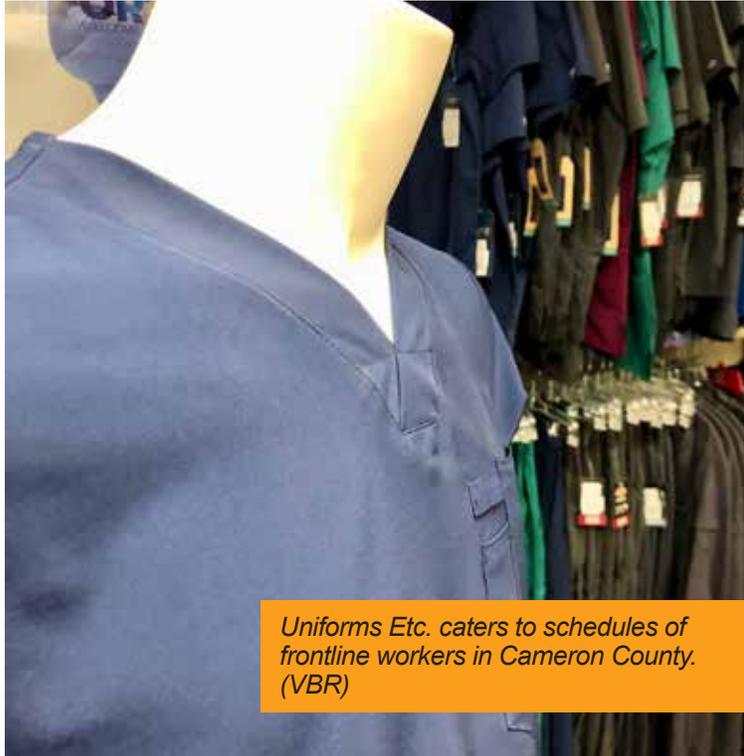
they work.”

Salinas knows her life would be different if her husband was still living and working as a paramedic.

“I’d probably still be working in education,” she said.

Salinas is happy to be in the space she’s occupying, honoring her husband’s legacy and supporting the medical field he dedicated his life to representing.

“I know he would definitely be proud of me,” she said. “I feel like I’m taking over what he was doing and helping the people he served.”



Uniforms Etc. caters to schedules of frontline workers in Cameron County. (VBR)



Work wear for healthcare workers is well stocked at Uniforms Etc. (VBR)

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Experience Brings New Vision To Edinburg

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Ron Garza built a reputation as an administrator who could foster cooperation among Rio Grande Valley cities when seeking state funding and developing transportation systems.

He served for years as the executive director of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council. The job allowed him to work on projects with county judges, mayors and city managers across the Valley. Regional agreements are becoming more the norm in a historically divided area when it comes to recruiting business and securing state infrastructure funding.

Garza enjoyed those challenges but the right opportunity to take on a key leadership post at a fast-growing Valley city came along a year ago. The San Benito native took it and is now the city manager in Edinburg. The city has indisputably seen robust growth. At the same time, it has also experienced its share of political turbulence and turnover of administrative leadership.

Revamping Operations

Garza has worked to bring more professionalism to city administrative functions and gain the confidence of his City Commission in streamlining and reorganizing some key components of local government. One area of particular focus has been economic development. Garza has revamped those efforts from two separate organizations to merging them under the umbrella of city government.

Edinburg still has an economic development entity with its own board. It now also has a city department of economic development. One manager oversees both parts while reporting to Garza and an assistant city manager. For Garza, it's a matter of avoiding duplication when it comes to recruiting business and industry, and aligning those efforts under the vision and priorities of the city manager and commission.

"It was a bold move," Garza said of reorganizing economic development in Edinburg. "We want to sync all these efforts. We sought to create a stable model that would achieve a healthy balance where there's some autonomy, but there's also alignment with the city."

In some Texas cities, there are struggles to achieve cooperation from the local economic development corporation and city government. Turf battles can ensue. This makes it difficult to attract industries and companies

to a city that appears to be at odds with itself. Garza hopes to avoid that in Edinburg, and have one point of contact. This is where developers and business interests can efficiently deal with the city on issues pertaining to permitting, and planning and zoning matters.

Garza's model, which the City Commission approved, seeks local input outside of city government via EDC board members who represent different economic sectors in the city. Education, the medical industry, small business owners, and public entities each



Medical towers and facilities are plentiful in Edinburg along McColl Road bordering McAllen. (VBR)

have representatives on the EDC board.

Poised For More Growth

The city, as the historical home of the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and as the county seat, has seen considerable growth in facilities from both institutions in recent years. Edinburg’s medical district is filled with hospitals, specialists and clinics. Many of those institutions are located on McColl Road, bordering McAllen. Then there’s the university system’s medical school which has its regional main office located in Edinburg.

The city also has plenty of room to grow, especially to the north. Garza sees more industrial parks opening up north of Monte Cristo Road that will include cold storage facilities.

All in all, Garza sees a city on the upswing with plenty of possibilities. He wants a city government that works efficiently and supports what he calls “smart growth.”

“You want to leverage the assets you have,” Garza said. “We want to avoid duplication when it comes to recruiting (business), eliminate red tape, and form partnerships, (with other cities), where we can all benefit.”



UTRGV's main campus is in Edinburg as well as the main office of its regional medical school. (VBR)



The new Hidalgo County Courthouse is among the new projects emerging in Edinburg. (VBR)

Business Inspired By Service To Community

By Chris Ardis

In thinking of entrepreneurs, we usually envision individuals who take on the risk of establishing a business because they have a product or service, which they believe potential customers want, knowing if they are correct it will lead to personal financial gain.

The ladies who established The Lamb's Loom felt the same way, though the personal gain they sought had nothing to do with money.

For 14 years, these ladies met in coffee shops. Here, they would sip coffee, chat and crochet items they could donate to someone who would be touched by their gifts. They called themselves KnitWits, a shortened version of Knitting a Witness for Christ. One of the entrepreneurial women, Ann Gamblin, pondered if they could develop some kind of shop to grow their mission.

"Then we came to realize we would do it for God," Gamblin said, "and it all came together."

Another founder of The Lamb's Loom, Jeanie Rowell, often helped Jacquie Hull, owner of Jac-Lin's Florist & Art Gallery, when she had technology troubles. One day in May 2014, Rowell went to help Hull. As they stood in the shop, then on Pecan Boulevard in McAllen, Hull said, "I have two empty rooms."

As Hull tells the story, Rowell did not speak a word but a funny expression crossed her face.

"You get back with me on this," Hull told her.

Rowell talked to Gamblin and they filed a 501(c)(3) nonprofit application and received it in just three months. They planned to file under the name "KnitWit," but it was taken.



The smiles on the faces of Jeanie Rowell and Ann Gamblin of The Lamb's Loom in McAllen say it all. This little piece of heaven is, indeed, their Happy Place. (Courtesy)



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Sitting in a coffee shop, the ladies began to scribble down other possible names.

Rowell wrote “The Lamb’s Loom” just as Gamblin pulled out a drawing she had made. It showed three lambs, a string of wool from each one rising up and wrapping around a knitter’s loom. They had no doubt it was divine intervention.

“We know whose shop this is,” Gamblin said. “We just show up.”

The Lamb’s Loom, now an official nonprofit, moved into Jac-Lin’s. The ladies bought yarn in a multitude of colors and weights, crochet hooks, knitting needles and looms for knitting. Along with a variety of other items, these were things they knew their fellow Knit-Wits and customers would welcome.

They would use all profits from sales toward operating costs for the shop and shipping costs to send their handmade items around the world. The Lamb’s Loom added a Donation Chest. Here, donated hats, shawls, blankets and other items could be placed. They also set up a Sit-n-Knit Room.

“We have open Sit-n-Knit here because we are about community,” Rowell said.

She and Gamblin still laugh as they recall that they called themselves KnitWits and opened a yarn shop, even though none of them, at the time, knew how to knit.

It did not take long for The Lamb’s Loom to start inching into Jac-Lin’s space. The ladies then knew they had to look for a larger place. On March 1, 2018, they moved into their current location at 1102 Tamarack in McAllen. They moved everything in two-and-a-half days, praying over the building first.

“It’s God’s place,” Gamblin said. “We are here to do His will.”

Now they had space for even more merchandise, as well as for their Baa Baa Boutique, where customers can buy handmade

leather goods by Abel Mukete, ceramic mugs made by Jason Bready, elephant-grass baskets handwoven in Ghana, ceramic knitting bowls created by Isaac Cardona, and jewelry and embroidered items made by his wife Katia. Customers will also find handmade mittens, prayer shawls, hats and more.

Making Adjustments & Helping Customers

With the order for businesses to shut down

last March due to the pandemic, the ladies went home for three or four days before deciding they had to find another way. Their entrepreneurial spirits kicked in once again.

“There was a button shortage,” Rowell said, “and we have a boatload of them,” so they put out the word and began offering to ship them or for curbside pick-up. Gamblin designed hand puppets and created kits with everything needed to make them. Now they offer Happy



Yarn, handmade items, and a variety of other products are available in the Baa Baa Boutique at The Lamb’s Loom in McAllen. (Courtesy)

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Place Time, an online Sit-n-Knit group, every Wednesday from 10-11:30 a.m.

Those who gather for these meetings show each other what they are making, share ideas and just enjoy spending time together. They share devotional time every Friday via Zoom. They also offer their crochet, knitting and loom-knitting lessons one-on-one now and have set up an outdoor Sit-n-Knit area, by appointment.

Rowell mentioned a Winter Texan who came in to shop recently. She told them she had come in before when she was going through a difficult time in her life. The “lamb” who helped her that day sensed it, prayed for her and then gave her a prayer shawl.

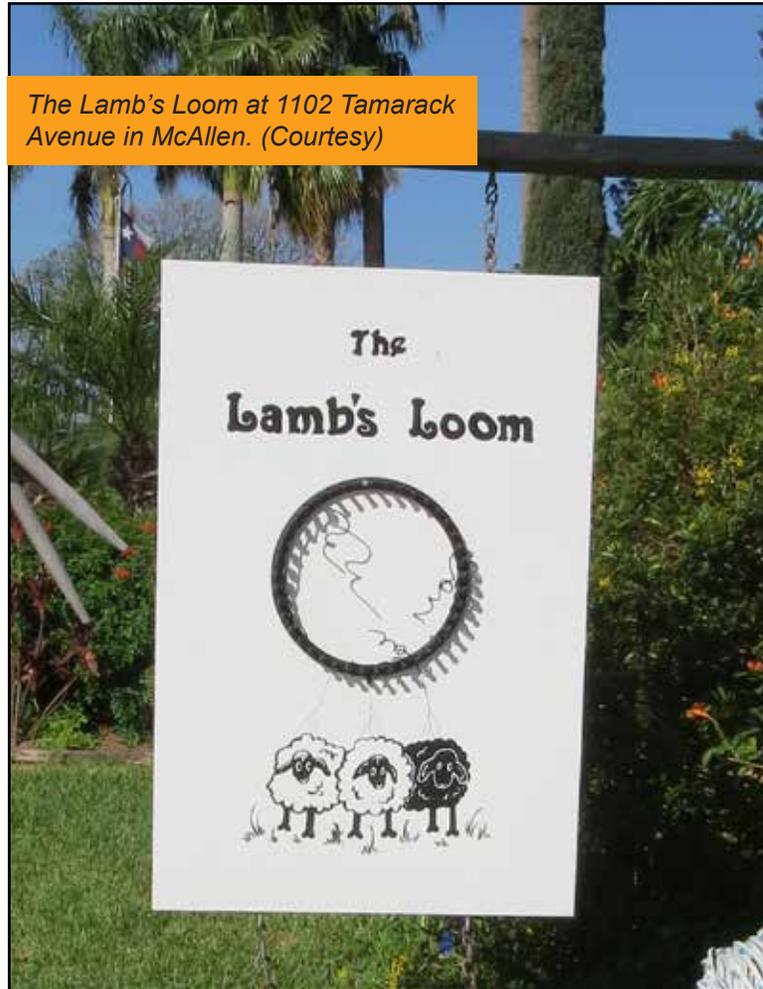
“About the time when we’re tired,” Rowell said, “God will have someone come in and give us a story like that to remind us.”

Rowell remembers hearing the word “entrepreneur” for the first time as a seventh grader.

“I thought that word was so cool that I decided I wanted to be one.” She laughs at the idea that anyone would consider her and the other ladies at The Lamb’s Loom entrepreneurs. Oh, but they are.



Ann Gamblin displays some Knitted Knockers made by creative people in the RGV. If The Lamb’s Loom can get more people in the Valley to make and donate the Knitted Knockers, volunteers will stuff them here and distribute them locally. (Courtesy)



The Lamb’s Loom at 1102 Tamarack Avenue in McAllen. (Courtesy)



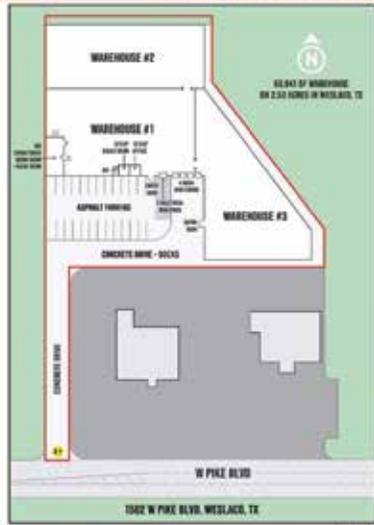
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Connecting The Valley To Better Opportunities

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement has proven to be a nimble workforce training program. In 25-plus years, it has been helping unemployed and underemployed residents land better-paying jobs.

It demonstrated that again recently when VIDA launched an electrician journeyman training program. Administrators at VIDA see the Liquefied Natural Gas project coming closer to reality at the Port of Brownsville. They recognize there is a growing market for electricians.

Getting the necessary training and licenses to reach the status of being a professional electrician is a lengthy process. The new VIDA program in that field covers at least two years of training and experience. There is also a pathway to two additional years of career preparation. It's just one example of how Rio Grande Valley residents can use a VIDA program to secure rewarding careers.

"This is an opportunity for us to prepare our workforce to have the first shot at those jobs,"



Priscilla Alvarez, executive director, and Isidro Ramos, workforce development manager, lead the VIDA training program. (Courtesy)

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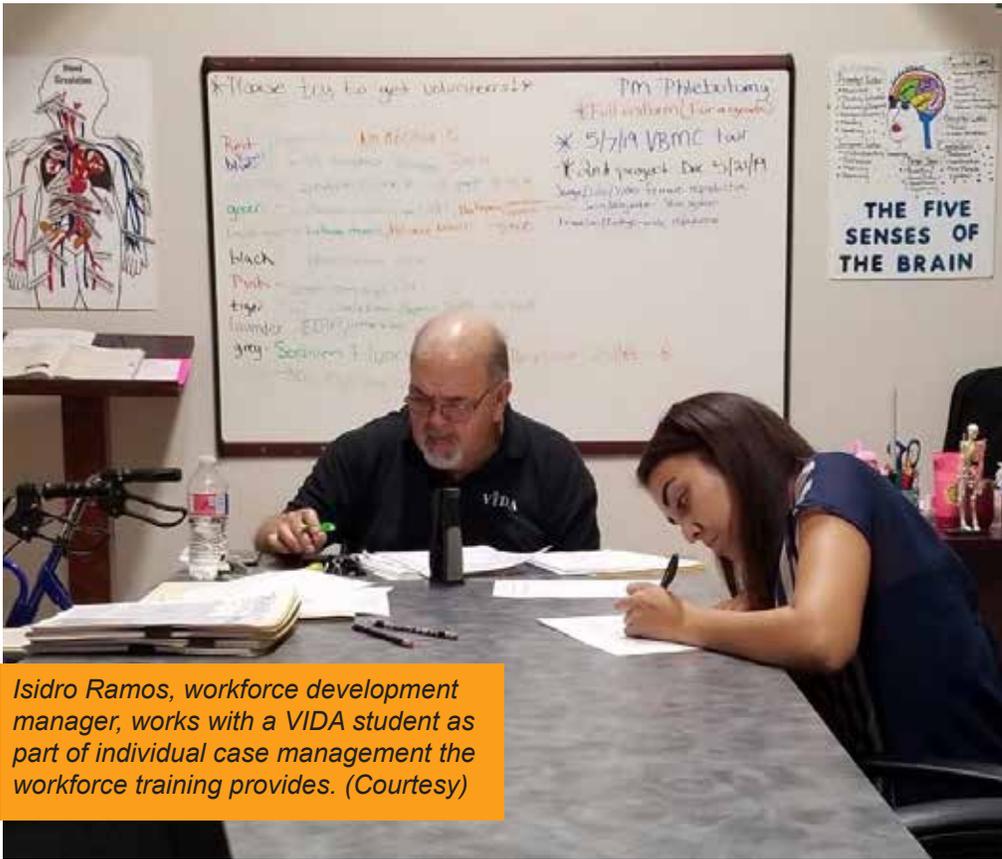
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Isidro Ramos, workforce development manager, works with a VIDA student as part of individual case management the workforce training provides. (Courtesy)

A Mutually Beneficial Return

The formula has worked as VIDA students have a 90 percent program completion rate. Then there's the economic impact on the Valley economy. A study by the UT Rio Grande Valley Data & Information Systems Center showed that for every \$1 invested in VIDA, there is a return of \$14.74 to the communities served. In the 2018-19 fiscal year, per the UTRGV study, it meant the addition of 600 direct and indirect jobs in the regional economy and an added \$8.8 million to the Valley economy. This also includes the state and local taxes VIDA graduates pay from their new jobs.

The VIDA organization is a non-profit which receives funding from Valley cities, economic development corporations, state grants, and funding from foundations with an eye for lifting people from poverty and low-income jobs.

"The best thing you can do is invest in people and see them succeed," Ramos said. "We measure what we do and see it through with our students."

The new electrician program is one of the more recent additions to VIDA. Its bevy

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FOR LEASE • 2850 SF WESLACO RETAIL CENTER

Lease Rate: \$24.00 SF/yr (NNN)
Property Type: Retail
Building Size: 2850 SF

Highlights:

- Anchor Stores
- Major Interstate
- Paved Parking
- Busy Retail Center

Description:
This 2,850 SF retail space is located in the 178,618 SF Class A Retail Center known as Valley Crossing Shopping Center. It is anchored by JC Penney and TJ Maxx, Lowes, Academy, and Petco. Other tenants are Olive Garden, Longhorn Steakhouse, Chuck E Cheese, Eyemasters, AT&T, Approved Money Center and Game Stop. Located on Interstate 2 between North Texas Blvd. and Paso Del Norte, the primary east/west highway in the Rio Grande Valley.

665 E. Expressway 83, Weslaco

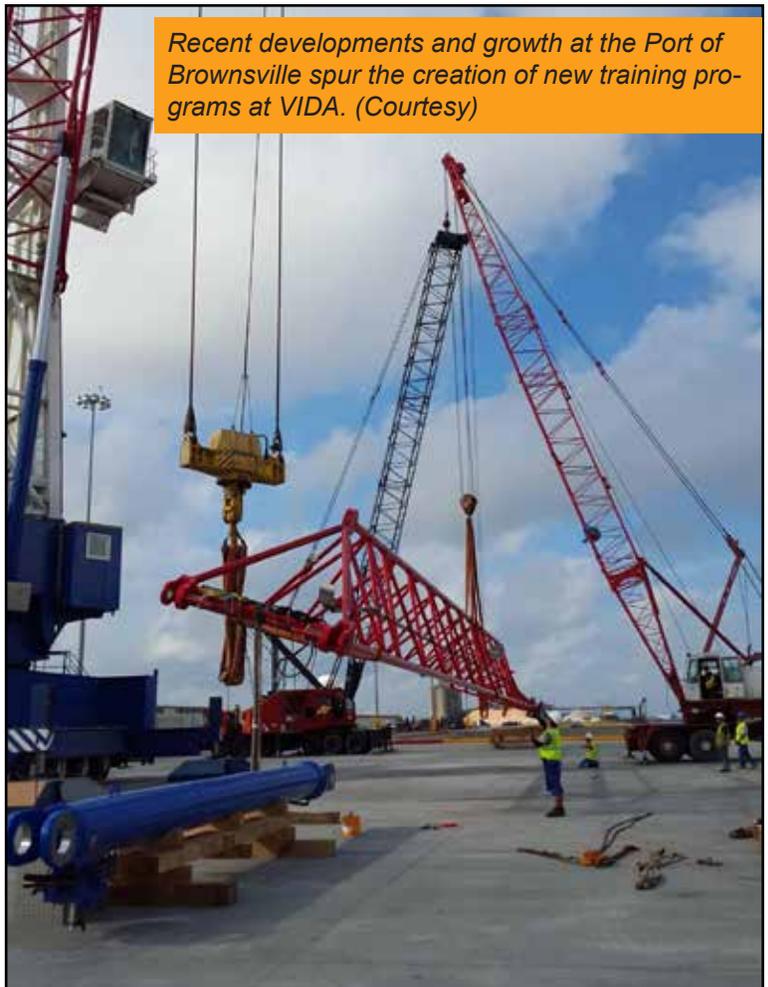
FOR LEASE • VALLEY CROSSING SHOPPING CENTER

Lease Rate: \$18.00 SF/yr (NNN)
Property Type: Retail
Available SF: 4000 SF

Highlights:

- Anchor Stores
- Major Interstate
- Paved Parking
- Busy Retail Center

Description:
This 4,000 SF junior anchor lease space is located in the 178,618 SF Class A Retail center known as Valley Crossing Shopping Center. It is anchored by JC Penney and TJ Maxx, Lowes, Academy, and Petco. Other tenants are Olive Garden, Longhorn Steakhouse, Chuck E Cheese, Eyemasters, AT&T, Approved Money Center and Game Stop. Located on Interstate 2 between North Texas Blvd. and Paso Del Norte, the primary east/west highway in the Rio Grande Valley.



Recent developments and growth at the Port of Brownsville spur the creation of new training programs at VIDA. (Courtesy)

of programs includes allied health such as nursing, and the specialized trades in welding and automotive technology. There are also programs in criminal justice and law enforcement.

ployers and high wage jobs, one VIDA at a time,” says the motto of the workforce training program. The results of more than the last 25 years indicate it is doing just that for its students.

“Connecting Valley residents to em-

Below: The first group of students in the electrician journeyman training program are making their way through the new VIDA program. (Courtesy)



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