

NOVEMBER 2022

VBR

Filling Educational Gaps

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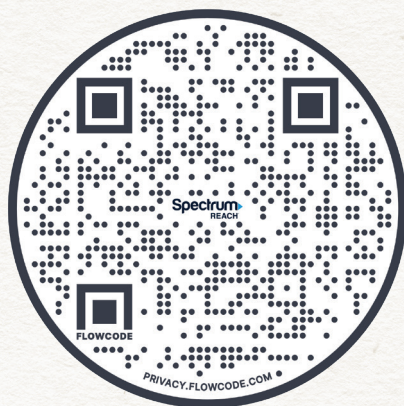


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The Finish Versus The Start

by: Todd Breland

I just love November. As a sports junkie, things are heating up to a fever pitch level. Plus, cooler temperatures and lower humidity is an inevitable start to tamale season. What a glorious time to be alive!

The calendar year started with plenty of uncertainty as it relates to operating our businesses and organizations. We were rebounding with baby steps, moving forward with cautious optimism and then all of a sudden -- the Valley went to all systems go: full throttle and high gear!

Our four counties have a very distinct position. When economic troubles hit, other markets seem to be affected harder and for longer periods of time, but the Rio Grande Valley bounces back quicker and less damaged. As a bi-national region, Deep South Texas recovers very Fast and Furious-like.

By some supernatural occurrence, or blessings from God as I prefer to give

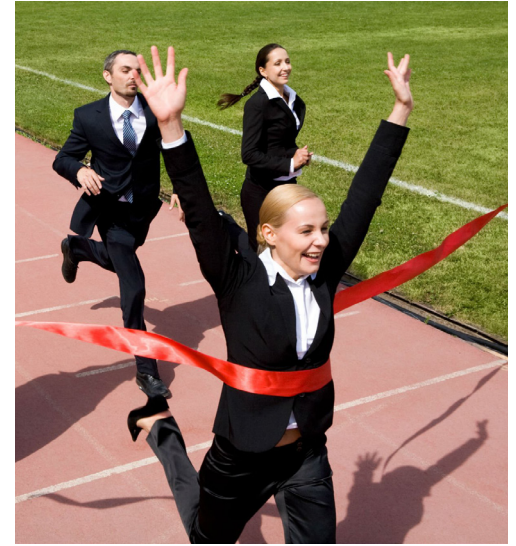
credit, our RGV is headed in the right direction to finish the calendar year strong and/or start 2023 with confidence, strength and economic stability. Increased sales tax revenues, permits plus commercial and residential developments are up, and more positive indicators are prevalent Valley-wide.

Sure, nine to 12 months of economic uncertainty are never fun, but other regions throughout the U.S. beg for such shallow recession conditions. Our RGV is tracking for a solid finish to 2022 with a strong forecast over the next 12-18 months.

Teams in all of sports know very well a rough start doesn't have to define the final score. Adjustments are made to personnel and strategy to overcome adversities with a positive attitude leading the charge. Our Valley battles through the challenges, tweaks the game plan and finds a way to win. The unified teamwork of Starr,

Hidalgo, Cameron and Willacy leaders is obvious.

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STC Filling Gaps In Mid-Valley

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The Rio Grande Valley communities between McAllen and Brownsville for much of their history lacked a local higher education option to college campuses a long commuter drive away.

Donna, Mercedes, Weslaco and surrounding Mid-Valley communities with their high school graduates may have seen a college education, or technical training, as being out of reach. In the late 1990s, the gap began to be addressed with the launch of the Mid-Valley campus of the South Texas College system.

The campus is housed on the site of the old Texsun juice plant in Weslaco. A single building from the Texsun days still stands and was one of the first buildings utilized by the then-new campus of the late 1990s. Its start was modest with two buildings and portable classrooms. The Mid-Valley campus with its humble origins nonetheless previewed the college to come and what it would mean to area communities.

“It used to be a four year-college or nothing,” said Daniel Montez, the campus administrator for STC’s Mid-Valley campus. “Our communities back then didn’t have the resources McAllen, Harlingen or Brownsville had, or Edinburg with UT-Pan American. What we’ve done here is fill a gap and met a need.”

Student Transitions

The MVC acronym that dots some of the buildings on the Weslaco campus indicates its brand has worn well in the Mid-Valley.

The campus has grown from a few hundred students of over two decades ago to 4,200 students today. There are 10 buildings on the campus – including a library and student union. The courses and programs are replete with curriculum in nursing and health care professions, and five bachelor degree programs. There are also a whole host of skills training programs in welding, culinary and air conditioning/heating.

Montez offers a crisp overview of those programs on the Mid-Valley campus along with a typical student profile and trends he sees unfolding. A student at the MVC is usually around 25 years of age, returning from military service or perhaps joined the workforce right out of high school and is now trying postsecondary education.



Daniel Montez leads STC's Mid-Valley campus with an enrollment of more than 4,000 students. (VBR)

“You see life differently when you’re 25, 26 years old as compared to when you’re 18 coming out of high school,” Montez said. “You’ve had jobs, or been in the military, maybe married with young children.”

There’s a practicality to what older students are looking for when enrolling for college-level courses and training. They want to see the time and effort they’re making will lead to jobs that are available and suit their skills. Montez speaks of “micro certificates” and “competency-based education.” These are all variations of older students taking a limited number of courses that fit into lives which include full-time jobs while going to school.

“What we’re doing is offering another option,” he said. “We’ll catch you up on your writing and arithmetic, you take courses at your own pace and show competencies, get credits and transition over to one of our programs.”

Being Able To Adapt

On the other end of the age spectrum are late teens to early-20s students who expect and want remote learning to be part of their




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college experience.

Montez said younger students are unlike their college-aged predecessors in many ways, including a general disdain for sitting down for hours in a classroom for lectures. Online learning when mixed with in-person instruction often works best for younger students and keeps them better engaged, he said.

One of the strengths of community colleges, Montez said, is they can move more quickly to adapt and adjust. Four-year colleges are usually more institutional and bound to traditional thinking, he said. The STC Mid-Valley campus has been flexible and innovative in meeting the needs of its student population while establishing a higher education foundation for its communities.

"We've made education more accessible," said Montez, who has been with the STC system for 22 years. "We're serving areas that had traditionally high unemployment rates. I think STC has done well in addressing those unemployment numbers and making a difference in our communities."



The STC campus in Weslaco has added new facilities and programs to fill a higher education gap in the Mid-Valley (VBR)

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Garza Finds New Opportunity In Edinburg

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Raudel Garza's career in economic development leadership has taken him to Mission, Pharr and Harlingen.

He is now heading to a new challenge – and city.

Beginning Nov. 7, Garza will be the new executive director of the Edinburg Economic Development Corporation. His new job will come after a 10-year tenure as the chief executive officer of the Harlingen Economic Development Corporation. Edinburg is hoping Garza's experience and stature in economic development circles will stabilize a wing of city government that has seen many directors come and go.

Garza's hiring comes during an era when Edinburg is experiencing the fastest population growth in the Rio Grande Valley. At current projections, Edinburg will outpace McAllen in total population within the next 20 years. The surge in growth is part of what attracted Garza to Edinburg. On the personal side, it will mean a much shorter commute from his McAllen-area home to the Edinburg EDC offices, which will lead to more family time for the EDC executive.

"Looking out 10 to 20 years, Edinburg has the opportunity to become an urban center," Garza said. "It has a lot of good characteristics. There's the main UTRGV campus. It's the county seat with a new courthouse that's about to open. The hospitals and the healthcare industry are really growing there."

Garza spoke enthusiastically of his new job ahead while expressing gratitude for his Harlingen EDC staff and thanking city leaders for their support during his lengthy tenure in Harlingen.

Gains In Harlingen

Garza mentioned an overall number of 60 projects he considers to be among the Harlingen EDC's significant accomplishments during his time as its CEO.

The top projects he cited are:

- The emergency loan program for small businesses "during the COVID outbreak" of 2020.

- The development of the Bass Pro Shop retail area that would lead to attracting Sam's Club and numerous restaurants and other retail outlets.
- Helping to bring the psychiatric hospital Palms Behavioral Health to Harlingen. Garza said the facility established a level of mental health care that did not previously exist in Cameron County.
- The growth and development of major hospitals in Harlingen and the EDC's role in capably utilizing enterprise zone designations in boosting health care industry growth in the city.

The thread going through the list is that they all created or saved jobs. Garza estimated the emergency loan program saved over 400 jobs in Harlingen. Palm Behavioral generated over new jobs in the city, he said.

"Looking back, I think we built good relationships with UTRGV, TSTC and the county," Garza said. "It has led to better cooperation among all the entities."

Promoting Edinburg & RGV

Garza will now lead an EDC organization in Edinburg that has been separated out



Raudel Garza is leaving his leadership post in Harlingen to take on similar responsibilities in Edinburg as the executive director for the economic development corporation. (VBR)

from city government to be more along the lines of how similar organizations are set up in the Valley.

A previous city manager had brought EDC operations into the city's organization as a department of municipal government. Under a new mayor and city commission, the Edinburg EDC will be more of its own entity, keeping its own board of directors while charting a course to identify fresh goals in attracting new businesses and pursuing jobs growth in the city.

For Garza, a Pharr native, his new job in Edinburg is another opportunity to contribute to the RGV community.

"The Valley is home for me," he said. "You want to give back to the place where you come from, whether it's Harlingen, Edinburg or the Rio Grande Valley. I want to promote and talk about the Valley and what we have to offer here."



Edinburg's growth in the healthcare industry is a key sector its new economic development director will further pursue. (VBR)



Raudel Garza cites the growth of hospitals and the healthcare industry in general as a positive characteristic as he takes the helm of the Edinburg EDC. (VBR)



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Farm Fest Raises Historical Awareness

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Mercedes was one of the first Rio Grande Valley cities established between Brownsville and the Starr County communities of Roma and Rio Grande City.

There was the American Rio Grande Land & Irrigation Company setting up operations in what would become Mercedes in 1909. The land company and its investors brought one of the first east-west railroad extensions from Brownsville to Mercedes and into the heart of what would become the RGV. Some of the first canals that would define RGV agriculture were dug south of Mercedes in bringing Rio Grande water to promising farm fields.

For all of its history, Mercedes has no museum to honor and commemorate its beginning and early years. There is a rich farming and ranching history, but Mercedes has no official institution to mark it. This fact dawned on Victoria Eschete and other participants during the inaugural class of Leadership Mercedes. Mercedes has a 100-plus year existence and still lacks a historical museum to tell its story.

“We’ve talked about the importance of

history, wanting a museum but not having one in Mercedes,” Eschete said. “Having that conversation did it for me. We need a celebration of our people and how we got started.”

Those were discussions that led to the organizing efforts to establish the South Texas Farm Fest. It will be an all-day Saturday event on Nov. 5 at the Mercedes Dome Safe Center. There will be a \$5 admission with all proceeds going toward establishing a historical museum.

“For me, it’s the start of a museum,” Eschete said. “A museum is not going to happen next year. It’s going to take some time, but now there’s a seed to get some momentum going.”

Right Time

The history of Mercedes – past and present – leans heavily toward agriculture.

The Rio Grande Valley Livestock Show is an obvious indication of that fact as the largest production of its kind south of San Antonio. The show grounds have been part of Mercedes since the 1930s. The Farm Fest will feature

those aspects along with other historical elements in the city’s history. For example, some of the first banks in the Valley’s history began in Mercedes. The First National Bank of Mercedes was one of those banks. Its financial descendant – Texas National Bank – celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2020 as FNB was chartered in 1920.

Eschete said there needs to be a telling of those elements and others during a time when Mercedes is beginning to experience an economic resurgence. New retail and housing construction are going up in the city.

“Right now is the right time because we have the right people,” said Eschete, who is part of a family-owned livestock business on Mile 2 West Road in Mercedes. “We’re passionate about our history. We’re good enough. We matter.”

Spreading The Word

It was at the Eschete Livestock Company where Victoria and her daughter, Hailey, along with two other local youths, Xandiera Rodriguez and Kaitlyn Hendricks, gathered to



Victoria Eschete, right, and students Xandiera Rodriguez, Hailey Eschete and Kaitlyn Hendricks, are working to promote the upcoming South Texas Farm Fest in Mercedes. (VBR)

talk about their city's agricultural history and the upcoming Farm Fest.

The three students are active in Future Farmers of America and 4-H. They are classmates at Mercedes High School and are getting the word out among their peers about the Farm Fest.

"I'm telling everyone that it's important we all get together and work together to do something nice for our city," Hailey said.

Xanderia concurred in enthusiastically highlighting the history of farming and ranching in her hometown while insisting Mercedes' story is not one dimensional.

"We're known for having the livestock show, which is great, but we're more than just one thing," she said. "We have lots of great history here in Mercedes."

The Farm Fest will run from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Nov. 5 on the grounds of the Mercedes Dome at 1202 North Vermont. In the Dome, there will be historical displays and speakers discussing the city's history. On the park grounds there will be food trucks, kiddie rides, an outdoor market, live music, local vendors and a super farmer contest.



The history of Mercedes has a strong connection to farming and ranching origins in the Rio Grande Valley, as celebrated yearly at the RGV Livestock Show. (Courtesy)



Some of the first banks in the Rio Grande Valley began in Mercedes, including the First National Bank in 1920. (VBR)

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Return Of Citrus Thrills Edinburg

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Nick Cantu makes his way up the back stairs of the old Citrus Theater. If walls could only talk, the stories the eight-decades-old movie house could tell.

In an upstairs hallway, Cantu points to a room where he said the original owner of the Citrus, a doctor, practiced medicine in World War II-era Edinburg. For decades, the Citrus played the role of the hometown single-screen theater.

The multi-screen movie plexes in nearby McAllen would inevitably come. The passing of eras relegated the venerable Citrus to the shadows. The downtown square theater was mothballed, a storage facility closed off to a community it long served. There it stood for over three decades before Cantu, a 30-something Edinburg native and commercial developer, took the plunge and pursued a project long wished for in his hometown.

Cantu was going to bring the old Citrus back.

It will return in a different form. It will be a venue to match the times with comedy shows, intimate concert settings, and space

for wedding receptions and other celebrations. Cantu does aim to show some classic movies at the restored Citrus if he gets the necessary permissions. The reception thus far indicates many in Edinburg would be happy just to have the iconic movie house back in business.

"This place has some good bones," Cantu said of the 1930s-era construction of steel beams and intricate woodwork. "This baby still has a lot of life to it."

With that, he flips a switch to one of the old projectors that long ago flickered and looked over the balcony to the big screen on the bottom floor. It snapped on with a start, ready to go, proof positive that Cantu's optimism rings true.

Community Connections

Cantu calls it Citrus Live.

In early 2022 he made his plans public and he began marketing the return of the Citrus. Cantu offered a one-night tour of the theater he has still to revitalize. There were 350 slots available

at no charge. They were gone within 24 hours of being made available online. During the April tour, Cantu and his staff found out just how much the old theater meant to people in Edinburg.

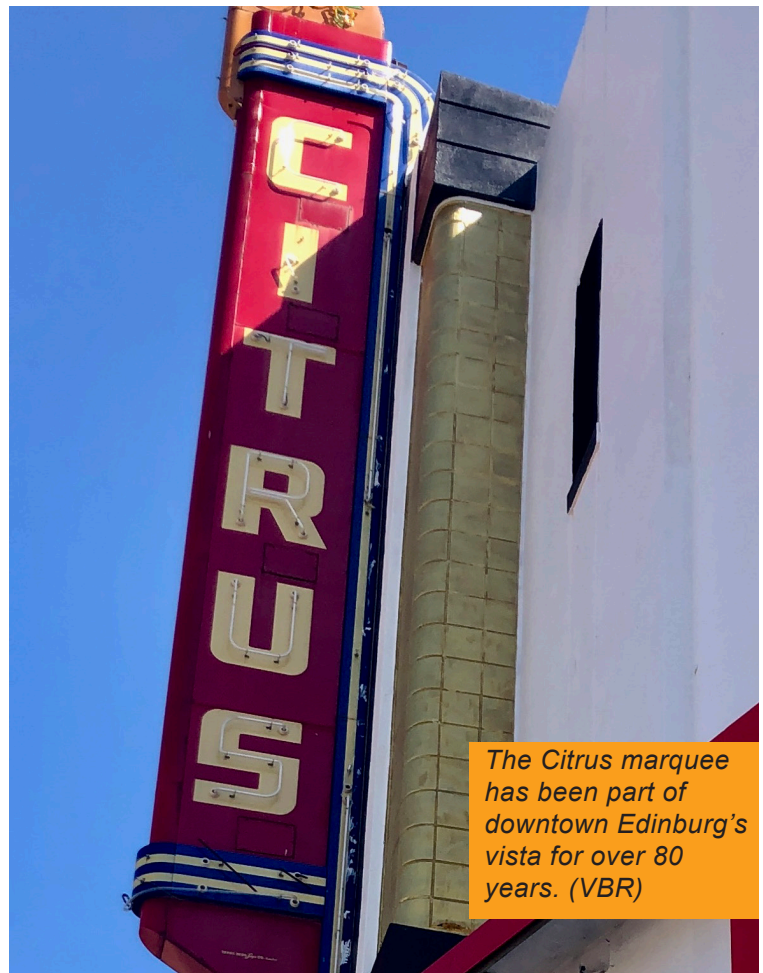
"People told us, 'this is where I went on my first date,' and 'I got my first kiss here,'" Cantu said, recalling some of the stories. "People told us they were praying for us. The level of support we've gotten has just been amazing."

The Citrus will be back and Cantu can already point to one downtown building he has revitalized. It's the Society 204 coworking building that houses lawyers, architects, engineers "and everything in between," said Cantu, who has his own office in the facility. In a previous life, it was Edinburg's JCPenney, of the sort that were all over the country before the advent of shopping malls.

The Penney's building, like the Citrus, laid vacant for years. Today, it's a stylish facility with modernistic design touches to suit the professionals who office and work in what was



Developer Nick Cantu is restoring the historic Citrus theater in Edinburg. (VBR)



The Citrus marquee has been part of downtown Edinburg's vista for over 80 years. (VBR)

once one of Edinburg's favorite retail shops.

"It's like a gym for professionals," Cantu said of the 204 building. "I look at real estate like art."

Bringing Movies Back

The Citrus for now looks much like it did when Cantu purchased the building nearly a year ago.

It won't stay that way. The 11,000-square-foot facility with a height of nearly four stories will have a flexible lower floor that will have seating for some events and have it removed for others. Up top, the balcony with its nearly 300 seats will become anew. It is from up there that Cantu envisions moviegoers once again seeing images flicker on a new screen down below.

Artist renderings show the Citrus once again being a visual masterpiece. It will sit across from the street from the new Hidalgo County Courthouse that looms over a downtown Edinburg that's getting a makeover nearly 100 years after the old theater opened. Cantu hopes to have the Citrus Live open in mid-2023 – and with it – a restoration of a piece of Edinburg's soul.



Hundreds of Edinburg residents and natives of the city returned in early 2022 to tour the historic Citrus Theater. (Courtesy)

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Central Plumbing Stays True To Principles

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Pablo Pena started small with three employees, including himself, his wife and a friend.

It was 1964 and the beginnings of Central Plumbing Supply in Weslaco on Kansas Avenue, just adjacent to the city's iconic Tinaco cement water tower. Pena had worked in the plumbing supply business for a local company that closed when its business affairs weren't properly managed.

Starting his own small business, Pena knew he would do things differently, building customer relationships and paying his vendors.

"My dad said, 'I'm going to pay my bills and take care of my vendors,'" said Gene Pena, the current president and chief executive officer of Central Plumbing & Electric Supply Co.

A Family Affair

It was a classic small business operation. Pablo ran the company, built it from scratch, with his wife, Eva, by his side doing the bookkeeping.

"My mom was in the background but she was a big part of the business," Gene Pena said. "My dad had that persona, outgoing, working with his customers, doing it all."

Pablo Pena would go on to be Weslaco's first Hispanic mayor in the early 1970s. By then, the company he started so humbly was established and on its way to bigger things. In the mid-1970s, Central Plumbing Supply had moved to its present location on Airport Drive in Weslaco. A young Gene Pena was finishing up high school and was sure where his work future lay.

"I've known since I was 8 that I wanted to be in this business," Gene said. "I told my dad, 'Why do I need to go to college? I know what I want to do.' He insisted I go to college, so I did, and I'm glad I did."

After an education at the University of Texas at Austin, he was back home, put in charge of buying and selling operations of Central. He learning more from his father as he groomed the company's next leader. Today, Central Plumbing & Electric is a 120-employee company with locations in Weslaco, McAllen, Pharr, Harlingen and Brownsville. Most recently, it added appliances to its line of products with the acquisition of Stevenson Appliances stores

in Brownsville and McAllen.

Keys To Success

Gene Pena walks the grounds of his multi-building headquarters on Airport that includes more than 50,000 square feet of warehouses and storage.

The ability to be well stocked with inventory is one of the keys to Central's success in competing against big box stores and the online shipping giants. High quantities of on-hand stock at affordable prices gives customers the products and parts they are seeking without having to wait days on shipments. Central can add in the generations of building individual business

(relationships with customers, a personal touch that can't be replicated elsewhere.

"It is a relationship business," Pena said. "My dad helped many plumbing businesses in the Valley get started years ago and that's something people don't forget. We have third-generation business relationships all over the Valley."

Central itself is a multi-generational business. Pena and his two brothers, David and Pablo Jr., are partners in the business. Gene's wife, Nori, works at the Pharr store, and the three brothers have sons and nephews involved in the business. Central is a business that has grown organically and steadily over the years. A McAllen store



Gene Pena follows in his father's footsteps in running Central Plumbing & Electric. (VBR)

was opened in 1983. Then in the 1990s came store openings in Pharr, Harlingen and Brownsville. Electric supplies were added as well in the 1990s.

“The vision was we needed to cover the Valley,” Gene Pena said. “It went well quickly when we opened the new stores. People knew us.”

Staying Strong

The acquisition of the Stevenson’s stores added a major piece and fulfilled a long-held goal to sell appliances.

Next comes the goal of adding e-commerce to the mix with the immediate goal being servicing Valley customers with quick delivery after they order online. At 64, Pena remains enthused about running the business his parents started nearly 60 years ago.

“To me, it’s not work,” he said of running and operating Central with his brothers.

For all of his family’s business successes, Pena is still not satisfied, or complacent.

“The day you think you’ve made it is the day you’re done.”



Central Plumbing & Electric of Weslaco today has 120 employees in the RGV after starting with three employees in 1964. (VBR)



Central Plumbing & Electric has been a Rio Grande Valley mainstay in fixtures since 1964. (VBR)



Giving With Full Hearts On Thanksgiving

By Chris Ardis

For many across the Rio Grande Valley and the nation, November symbolizes food, fellowship and family.

The month is rife with fall festivals. We find an abundance of turkeys in local supermarkets. Gratitude takes a front-row seat. November marks an anniversary of fellowship for a group of men in McAllen. They share a commitment to broadening the definition of “family.”

It all started in 2017 when former Mission Police Chief Leo Longoria reached out to former McAllen Police Department detective Ric Tamez through Facebook Messenger.

Longoria had seen Tamez’s spiritual testimony on the social media platform. The chief decided to reach out to Tamez as part of his own journey of faith. They knew each other from their days in law enforcement but they weren’t close.

The two started talking about their journeys. In 2019, they brought a group of eight men together who committed to meeting every Thursday evening for food and fellowship. Before they knew it, they had developed into a family. The group made a decision after the first year of meeting weekly.

They would close out their meetings for the year the day before Thanksgiving. These men from various backgrounds and on different career paths decided their final meeting for 2019 would be spent putting their cooking skills to good use making turkeys for others.

“At the time, because Leo and I had been in law enforcement, we knew some others in the field who were going through hardships,” Tamez said.

Longoria recalled it as wanting to “perform an act of kindness. We wanted to let them know that even though they left public service, someone does care.”



David Ceron, Marc Flores, Ric Tamez, and Tony Alvarado make up part of the turkey-grilling team of 18 that will be preparing meals again this Thanksgiving for families throughout the Upper Valley. (Courtesy)

They grilled 10 turkeys that first year and delivered them to former members of law enforcement battling critical illnesses and to other families they knew were struggling. They weren't average food deliveries. The group spent 20-25 minutes at each home and formed a circle of prayer around those receiving gifts.

The group of men have continued to meet every Thursday evening over the last four years. Their group has now grown to 18 men. They plan to deliver 18 turkeys this holiday season.

"But now, it's not just a grilled turkey," Tamez said. "Now we include three sides,

gravy, bread and pie."

Last year, Tamez' wife, Sofie, and Longoria's wife, Olga, added their cooking skills to the project.

Blessings Of Sharing

The first turkeys will go on the grill at the Tamez and Longoria homes at 3 a.m. on Nov. 23, the day before Thanksgiving.

Their team will be with them. The group will have already purchased everything needed to complete the meals. By early afternoon, they will begin delivering, traveling across the Upper Valley to spread kindness.

They have lost some of their law-enforcement friends but the group still delivers to their families. One of those is the family of former McAllen police officer Lupe Gonzalez, who played an integral role in the PD's Training Department. His daughter, Debbie Gonzalez Harris, lives with her mom and has witnessed the group's work since their first delivery to the family in 2019.

"It was an unexpected blessing," Gonzalez Harris said of the group's visit after her father passed. "You know they are doing it with all their heart and they don't expect anything in return. They even pray over us,



Leo Longoria, Albert Hinojosa, and Ric Tamez are part of the group of 18 that meets every Thursday evening to share their walk of faith and then spreads kindness the day before Thanksgiving each year. (Courtesy)

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just like they did when they came to visit my Dad when he was in hospice. They're a big family."

The group also delivers to the families of students in need as recommended by teachers. Tamez expressed gratitude that their group is not alone.

"A lot of organizations and a lot of people show acts of kindness," he said. "Even if you did it for a neighbor, it would have an effect. Do something for someone who lives nearby. It could change the world."

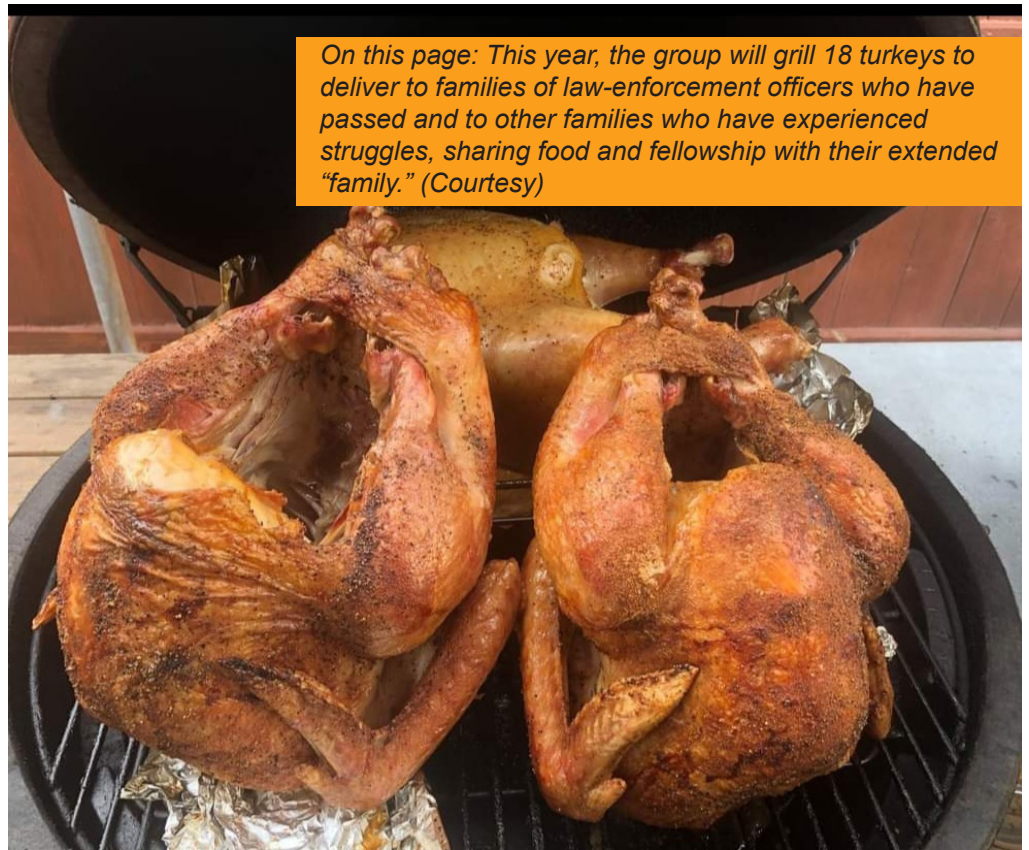
Giving & Receiving

Longoria said the yearly holiday effort allows him to return what he has received.

"I've never been without," he said. "The more I am kind and give, the more I have."

Their work goes beyond the one day they make and deliver Thanksgiving meals, Longoria said.

"It's personal for us," he said. "It's not a seasonal thing. We select the families and we care for them. The ones who have lost someone. We were family when that person was alive and we're still family."



On this page: This year, the group will grill 18 turkeys to deliver to families of law-enforcement officers who have passed and to other families who have experienced struggles, sharing food and fellowship with their extended "family." (Courtesy)



ALAMO EDC REVOLVING LOAN FUND PROGRAM

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