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# VBR

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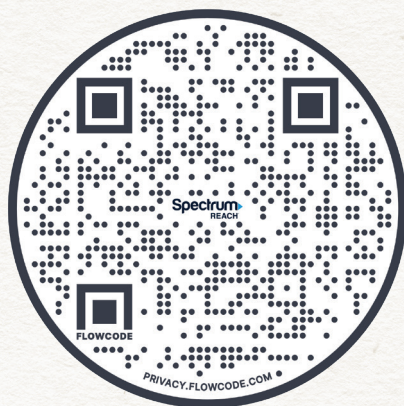


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# Work. Play. Enjoy.

by: Todd Breland

Who works while on vacation? To not get in trouble with spouses, it would be best to probably not answer that question aloud. I am certain while taking some time off during recent holidays, many of us replied to an email or two, or jotted down some topics to cover once we physically return to work.

It may not be completely wrong to throw in a job chore or two while spending some time away from the office. Balance is the key of course. If our jobs make us happy (which I hope for all of us we enjoy our means of helping provide for our families), keeping the brain active is healthy in my opinion. Some of the best work ideas come from leisure time when we're not drowning in duties at the workplace.

A 2023 project could prove to have originated while kicking back at SPI or driving back from Grandma's house. Freedom from office overload or deadline pressure sometimes allows our mind to

explore a production strategy or staff-efficiency system resulting in a huge company or organization victory. As long as the peace is kept on the home front, there is truth in the 80/20 rule.

While I am not encouraging 80 percent relax / 20 percent work while on vacation with our families, a brief break of at least documenting a work idea to be thoroughly pursued later could be healthy for most of us. If work destresses you at times, 15-30 minutes of writing down some work ideas shouldn't put anybody in the hospital, right?

Work. Play. Enjoy. Sometimes that order is interchangeable. Our 2023 and beyond challenges are fully on the table now, and we as Rio Grande Valley business leaders have tasks to face, conquer and win. Together, our teams will win because that's what we do.

We are one. We are the Rio Grande Valley.



wishing you a very

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# Don Gollito Serves It Up “Harlingen-Style”

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The block of West Van Buren Street where Don Gollito sits in Harlingen stirs a nostalgic feel.

The Tex-Mex restaurant is down home all the way, “Harlingen-style,” as one of its owners, Fred Uribe, puts it. He co-owns the restaurant with Rick Silva, a self-described “jack-of-all-trades” of the local restaurant scene. On Van Buren, vehicles park at an angle that’s

reminiscent of small-town America of previous eras.

It’s appropriate since the Jackson Street core of downtown Harlingen is a handful of minutes away. Don Gollito fits right in among an eclectic mix of coffee shops, architect offices and a fitness gym. Uribe and Silva opened Don Gollito in mid-2019, occupying a space formerly occupied by a previous restaurant.

A recent Saturday morning had a roomful of diners. Uribe and Silva walked from one table to another, offering warm greetings and gratitude to customers for their business.

“We’re Tex-Mex like the Valley,” Uribe said. “We offer really good comfort food where people can feel at home. Finding a family was one of our goals. I feel like we have that here with our customers and our employees.”



*Fred Uribe and Rick Silva started Don Gollito in 2019 and have endured some steep challenges in establishing a successful Tex-Mex restaurant in Harlingen. (VBR)*



### Getting The News Out

Uribe likes to put out what he calls “the Harlingen Associated Downtown Press.”

It’s an almost daily series of posts on Don Gollito’s Facebook page and ranges from promoting that day’s specials to customer photos to information about community events. Uribe is an energetic Harlingen hometown kind of guy who describes himself as being “a church boy” during his growing up years. Silva is originally from Alamo and came up in the restaurant business doing every job from cooking to washing dishes to waiting on tables.

“I wanted to work for myself,” Silva said. “I also want to treat my employees right because I know what it’s like to be a worker and have bad bosses. It takes a team effort to be successful.”

Uribe worked for years for the state department of health and has a background in human relations and overseeing payrolls. The business partners originally met while taking classes at Texas State Technical College in Harlingen. They decided to combine their respective fields of expertise and go into the restaurant business.

It’s a tough go under the best of circumstances. Within weeks of opening in 2019, a June downpour of over a dozen inches flooded much of Harlingen, including the downtown area. The following year they faced



*Don Gollito features different styles of artwork and flourishes at the Harlingen restaurant. (VBR)*



*Diners enjoy Tex-Mex/RGV breakfasts on a recent Saturday at Don Gollito. (VBR)*



a more imminent threat as state-mandated closures of restaurants put many small businesses – including Don Gollito – at risk of shutting down permanently in 2020.

“It was hard to figure out what to do,” Uribe said. “How do we survive?”

With no drive-through lane, Uribe and Silva improvised by starting up their version of Texas barbecue chicken with sides of potatoes and beans. It was the featured attraction and proved to be popular fare. Don Gollito made it. Today, the BBQ chicken is served up every Wednesday at the Tex-Mex restaurant.

### Local Favorites

A recent visit to Don Gollito brought two orders of hot fresh plates of beef enchiladas and soft beef tacos that were made to order.

The latter is a point Uribe and Silva emphasize. Plates at Don Gollito are not pre-made so there may be a bit longer wait for the dishes to arrive. It proved to be worth the wait as the traditional Tex-Mex plates delivered RGV-style. When the colder weather arrives, traditional soups like caldo de rez will be served up to warm up local diners.

A look over the restaurant’s menu shows a wide variety of botana and a la parilla choices to go with taco grande plates, a barbecue menu, and a seafood menu that includes fish tacos with rice and charro beans. Don Gollito is cozy and adorned with all sorts of artwork on walls and shelves overlooking diners. The name of the restaurant comes from a nickname given to Uribe’s father, which is appropriate given the family feel of Don Gollito.

“We feel like Tex-Mex is more the Valley,” Uribe said in contrasting Don Gollito to other restaurants. “McAllen is a little more high-end and Brownsville definitely has its own style. We’re right in the middle, Harlingen-style.”

*Don Gollito features RGV favorites like beef enchiladas and soft beef taco plates with toasty chips on the side. (VBR)*



# Weslaco

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**Dec 1st - Tree Lighting Ceremony & Holiday Market**

**Dec 10th - Santa Dash & Weslaco lighted Christmas Parade**

**Dec 15th - Alfresco Weslaco**

**\*Enjoy Holiday Light Displays all month long!**

**Feb 11 - Weslaco Royal Pageant**



# Los Fresnos Embracing Growth

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The population of Los Fresnos nearly doubled from the 2010 Census to the one done a decade later.

The city's current population of over 8,000 residents is a jump from the 4,500 in 2010. Los Fresnos at 47 percent population growth ranked second behind Edinburg among Rio Grande Valley cities in measuring 2020 over 2010 increases. The gross numbers are far below Edinburg's as that city has gone over 100,000 residents.

Still, the growth in Los Fresnos is bringing visual change to a bedroom community within easy driving range of Brownsville, Harlingen and South Padre Island. There's more retailing locally with a Wal-Mart Supercenter. A new Whataburger will soon open. New housing construction dots the city. A major state highway renovation running through town is just months away from completion and will boost traffic flow.

Mark Milum, the Los Fresnos city manager, said the city is pleased with its growth while acknowledging where Los Fresnos sits among its adjacent cities.

"We're OK with being a bedroom community," Milum said. "We embrace the growth while still keeping the small town feel and yet having some of the facilities so we don't have to drive to Harlingen or Brownsville for stuff."

## Small Town/Big District

A quick glance of Los Fresnos can be deceiving when sizing up the community.

It's a small town with a large school district. The Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District has an enrollment of over 10,000 students and its boundaries cover a wide swath of Cameron County. The school district's territory includes the northern stretches of Brownsville and Rancho Viejo as well. The school traffic when combined with vehicles coming and going from the Island gives Los Fresnos more volume of activity than a small town would normally see.

It took some years for corporate retailers and restaurants to catch on to this fact. The key, Milum said, is when the city started to attract new home construction and the rise

of new neighborhoods and subdivisions.

"They need to see rooftops," he said of developers investing in a community. "You can't depend on the traffic to the Island for business growth. Now that we're seeing

a lot of rooftops going up in our area, the growth and development is coming with it."

The growth of health care jobs and law enforcement officers among other Valley job sectors has families looking for nice



*City Manager Mark Milum is working to bring growth to his city while keeping the community's small-town charms. (VBR)*





places to live that are within an easy drive of their employment and have access to good schools. Los Fresnos fits the bill. A health care professional can live in a nice neighborhood in Los Fresnos and be a short drive away from work in Harlingen or Brownsville. Residents can also send kids off to schools belonging to a district with a reputation for quality.

“People in our area want their kids to go to school here,” Milum said. “When people living in Brownsville or Rancho Viejo come here for their kids’ school activities, that increases our trade area and helps our retail business. It’s also one reason we’ve seen more clinics and small businesses like insurance agents open offices here.”

### Well-Rounded Community

Los Fresnos has the same kinds of quality-of-life aspirations bigger cities have. Milum said city’s leaders have focused on improving parks and establishing the sort of hike-and-bike trails now commonly found in Brownsville, Harlingen and other Valley communities. Sidewalks have been improved as has general infrastructure. The state Highway 100 project running through town has provided major challenges, Milum acknowledged, but will eventually benefit the city.

Los Fresnos built a new City Hall that stands stylishly along Highway 100 heading to the Island. A large public safety building, also a new facility, sits behind the City Hall. Their size and design were meant to impress, Milum said.

“We wanted to make a statement about our city,” he said. “We’re proud of our community and what we’re working together to accomplish for our city.”



*New home construction in Los Fresnos is bringing new retailers and restaurants to the city. (VBR)*



*The quality and size of the Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District are among the factors bringing growth to the city. (Courtesy)*



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# Storybook Garden Connects Books To Community

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The Storybook Garden sits on a corner of Texas Boulevard just a moment's walk from Business 83 in Weslaco.

It's main street Weslaco and an appropriate place to find an independent bookstore with deep ties to its community. The historic hotel site suits the purposes and goals of Sarah Cuadra, the bookstore's owner.

"We want to be a place for families to come and meet and develop a love for learning," said of her bookstore that features children's books. "We talk books, share ideas and celebrate reading."

The bookstore has been a labor of love for Cuadra for the over two decades she has run and owned The Storybook Garden. Since opening in 2001, Cuadra has put in "a lot of blood, sweat and tears" into the store, surviving everything from digital reading and online bookstores to an avalanche of market changes.

## A Teacher's Touch

Being an educator and assistant principal at an elementary school in Weslaco, Cuadra's interest in reading is deeply rooted. In her youth, she arranged and put some order to piles of books at a thrift store in Mercedes, where she grew up the daughter of small business owners. As a teacher, she specialized in improving the reading skills of children as a dyslexia interventionist.

Cuadra is grateful for her public educator salary in that she says it has at times kept her bookstore afloat. Her sister has also been instrumental to her success, tending to the store during challenging times. Cuadra is hopeful that The Storybook Garden is on a good path. It was the host of a recent South Texas book festival with authors stopping in to promote their books with public readings and meet their fans.

"We're trying to find new customers," Cuadra said of the store's reemergence. "It looks promising."

She is looking forward to again hosting events connecting books to current events and happenings. She recalled a children's book about luchadores (Mexican wrestlers) and how a small ring was set up adjacent to the bookstore. Children made masks like the ones worn by wrestlers, and had fun discussing the sport and its place in border communities.

"How can we create events that relate to topics written about in books?" Cuadra asked.



*Sarah Cuadra brings a classroom teacher's perspective to her bookstore featuring selections for young readers. (VBR)*



“It’s how we can create a unique experience in our community.”

### Adapting & Connecting

These community gatherings and Cuadra’s experience with helping young readers is what keeps The Storybook Garden relevant and a place to go during changing times and eras.

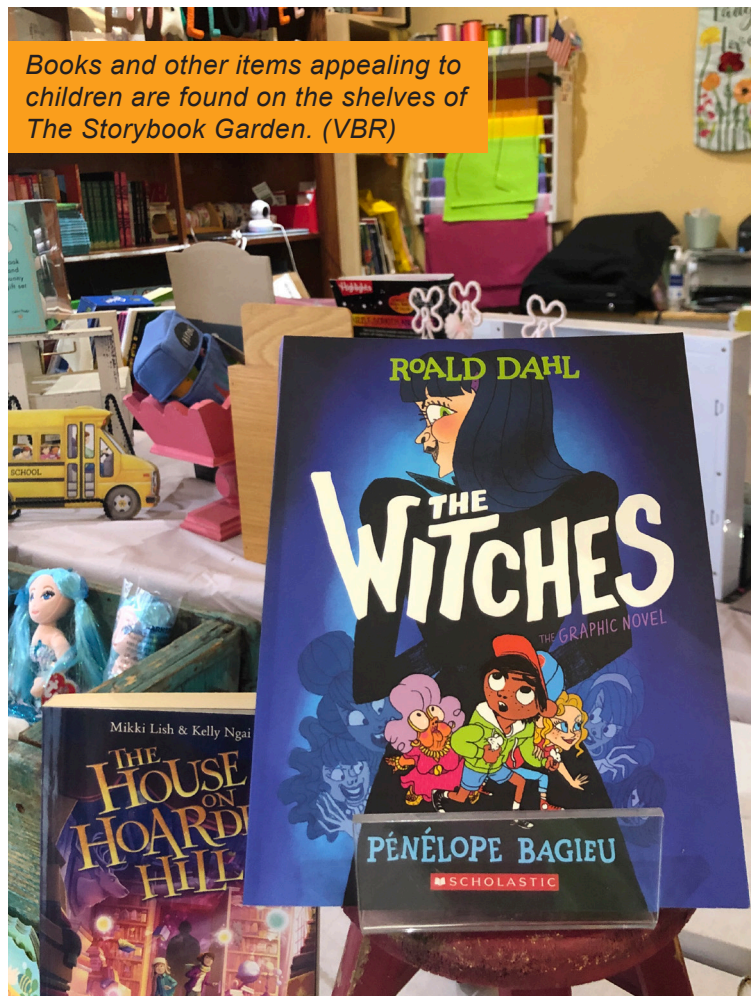
“Thank you for always helping my son and being so kind,” said Sarai Garcia in a Facebook post on The Storybook Garden’s page. “He loves your place!”

It’s the kind of bond and personal touch that can’t be replicated at larger chain bookstores in bigger cities. Cuadra has a classroom teacher’s experience in connecting with young readers and knowing that many of them prefer holding a book in their hands over a computer tablet. The quest for learning and love of a good book continues through the changes in times.

“We’ve had to adapt,” Cuadra said. “What keeps us going is our local customers who shop local and support a business like ours. We don’t make a ton of money, but I’m a big believer in having a bookstore in the community.”



The Storybook Garden is a haven for young readers and their parents in the Mid-Valley. (VBR)



Books and other items appealing to children are found on the shelves of The Storybook Garden. (VBR)

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# Mission EDC Eyes New Trade Opportunities

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Mission within a year will have direct access to a full-service, cross-border international bridge.

The city, anticipating new opportunities in international trade, has hired an economic development executive with expertise in that field. Teclo Garcia is the new chief executive officer for the Mission Economic Development Corporation. He comes to the job after a three-year stint as Laredo's economic development director in dealing with the Mexican business community and international trade on a daily basis.

Garcia began his new job in late October and is already eyeing the opportunities ahead with the expansion of the Anzalduas International Bridge underway. The bridge is located just south of Mission and will transition from a basic vehicular, non-commercial span to one with the added facilities that will enable it to be a fully functioning commercial bridge that can handle heavy truck traffic.

"We're being provided with an opportunity we didn't have before," Garcia said. "We have to be ready to pounce on those opportunities and understand where we are."

For Garcia, his new role is a return to the Mission EDC. He formerly worked as director of strategic planning and program development for the EDC. He is now leading the organization and working with the board that hired him to set the strategies and plans that will create investment opportunities and generate job growth for Mission.

## From Journalism To Economic Development

Garcia's career has taken him from military service in the Air Force to a lengthy career as a journalist to years of working in municipal government and economic development.

He is a South Texas native from Kenedy who has spent the majority of the last 25 years living in the Rio Grande Valley. Garcia believes his stint in Laredo where he worked to bring major investments and projects that led to job growth there will serve him well in Mission. He realizes the volume of trade he saw in Laredo cannot be replicated in Mission but knows there is a growth to be had in that area for the city.

"No city in the Valley is at the level of Laredo," Garcia said of international trade. "We'll do it here as how it pertains to Mission and this market."

The \$85 million expansion of the Anzalduas bridge will be a key component in generating new opportunities for the city. A groundbreaking was celebrated in late October at the 13-year-old bridge that marked the imminent building of inspection booths, docks, parking and the equipment needed to transform the bridge into an international commercial land port. The Anzalduas project is expected to be completed in late 2023.

Garcia said the city is working closely with Killam Development, which is developing a major industrial park adjacent to Anzalduas as new opportunities in manufacturing, logistics, cold storage and distribution facilities emerge with the bridge's expansion. The city of McAllen owns the Anzalduas bridge and operates the span in partnership with Mission, Hidalgo and Granjeno.

## First-Class Facility

Garcia lists enhancing the local workforce and working with small businesses in the city among his key goals in addition to the



*Mission EDC Chief Executive Officer Teclo Garcia will bring a wealth of international trade experience to his new job. (VBR)*



international trade opportunities.

A 55,000-square-foot Center for Education and Economic Development provides the Mission EDC a spacious facility to hold meetings and workshops to boost business development and expertise. The EDC offices are located at the center, which once housed a Kmart. The former retail space today serves as office and meeting space for entrepreneurs, professional services, nonprofit organizations, and federal and state offices.

In his first job with the EDC, Garcia organized several meetings and events at the center, including social media workshops for small businesses and celebrations to honor successful local businesses and companies. He looks forward to hosting similar events next year as the EDC's new plans and goals unfold.

"It's a valuable asset," Garcia said of the CEED center. "The vast majority (of EDCs) don't have a facility like this one. It's a challenge to manage and operate it, but we're glad to have it for what it can do for the city and the residents and businesses in our community."



The 55,000-square-foot Center for Education and Economic Development houses a variety of entrepreneurial and nonprofit tenants. (VBR)



Mission's CEED Center is utilized for meetings and workshops and is also where the city's economic development corporation offices are located. (VBR)





# Food Bank Passes 'Ultimate Test' In Giving Aid

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The over 100,000-square-foot space of the former Valley Fruit Company is a place in motion with forklifts motoring between towering rows of canned goods.

The Food Bank of the Rio Grande Valley runs its operations from the historic warehouse site where citrus and vegetables were once processed and packaged. Today, millions of pounds of foodstuffs and produce are shipped out from the same Pharr location to food pantries and nonprofit organizations in the Valley and many destinations nationwide. The last few years have been unlike any others seen in the Food Bank's history.

Libby Saenz, the organization's chief executive officer, described how the Food Bank faced its "ultimate test" in the years of 2020 and 2021. The Food Bank faced a demand like it had never seen between COVID and a hurricane. It subsequently had to vastly increase its volume of foodstuffs being sent out in a condensed period of time.

The Food Bank shipped out 58 million pounds of comestibles and produce in its 2020-2021 fiscal year. A more typical year would see just over 40 million pounds transported from its north Cage Boulevard location in Pharr. The Food Bank met those challenges with the help of hundreds of volunteers and partners, along with the Texas National Guard lending help during the most urgent months of 2020.

"They were a huge help," Saenz said of the Guardsmen. "I don't know what we would have done without them."

The Food Bank endured those months and moved into a new year building new alliances across the Valley.

"We're always trying to tap into every single opportunity we can find to distribute food," Saenz said. "Our goal is to fight hunger and get people out of the line."

## Reaching Out To Communities

Late September, at Anne Magee Elementary School in Edinburg, a Kids Produce Market truck from the Food Bank pulls up. Trays of fruits and vegetables are unloaded for students to look over and pick and choose their favorites.

It's a festive event and an example of the partnerships the Food Bank seeks to reach in its communities. In this case, it's the Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District and UnitedHealthcare as the Food

Bank's partners in one of its many community projects. UnitedHealthcare donated \$210,000 for the mobile product market on wheels that takes fruits and vegetables to students in the Edinburg school district.

"These are minds of the future," said Patricia Longoria, a community advocacy director with UnitedHealthcare. "We need them to be at full capacity and we want to partner with that."

Saenz was at the Edinburg event to celebrate the produce market kickoff with Edinburg school administrators and community leaders. Such partnerships came into play in 2020 when

entities working with the Food Bank stepped up efforts to pass out food supplies when the Pharr headquarters was swamped with people asking for help. Saenz likened it to going "into disaster mode." The Food Bank and its partners helped well over 100,000 residents during those trying months.

The numbers in more normal times are demanding enough. Food Bank statistics show that the organization and its partners help to feed over 76,000 people weekly and distribute over 48 million meals yearly. The holidays are always a time when distribution amounts



*Libby Saenz is the Food Bank's chief executive officer and oversees a staff of 80 employees that with volunteer assistance feeds about 76,000 people weekly. (VBR)*



increase with Thanksgiving being a time of particular demand.

“Our desire is to serve everybody but we can only do so much,” Saenz said. “Our partner agencies do so much in their communities. Even during the toughest of times, they said, ‘let’s keep going.’”

### Seeing Organization Grow

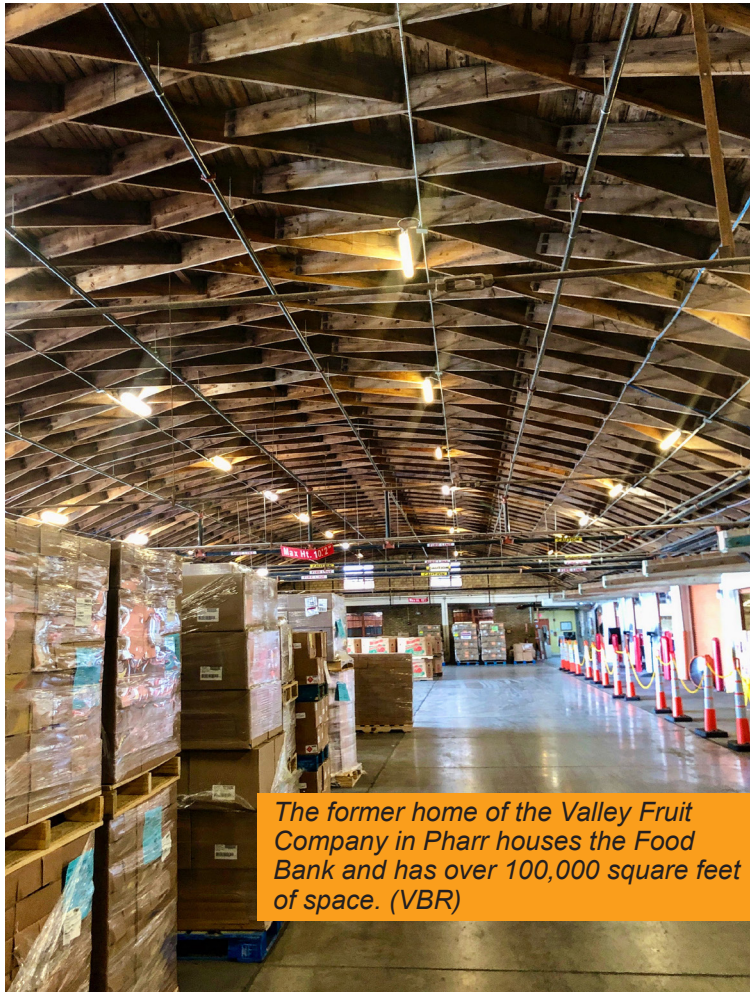
Saenz has spent over two decades with the Food Bank organization.

The Monte Alto native worked her way up the organizational chart. She recalls the days when the Food Bank at its former headquarters in McAllen had 25 employees operating out of a 25,000-square-foot center. There are 80 employees today working out of a Food Bank facility that is four times larger than that site. Volunteers play a crucial role in helping meet the growing demand for supplies with nearly 800 assisting. The Food Bank needs that help as it ranks as the seventh largest in Texas. It is also 49th in size in the United States out of 200 network food banks.

“Get food in, get food out,” said Saenz, with the view of busy forklifts through her office windows, getting shipments ready to go.



Schoolchildren in Edinburg look over the selections offered by a produce market truck from the Food Bank. (Courtesy)



The former home of the Valley Fruit Company in Pharr houses the Food Bank and has over 100,000 square feet of space. (VBR)



### ALAMO EDC REVOLVING LOAN FUND PROGRAM

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# Spec's Boosts Spirits In RGV

By Chris Ardis

Company lore has it that Carroll B. "Spec" Jackson opened a store in Houston in 1962 for two reasons.

One, he wanted to work for himself, and second, he didn't want his wife, Carolynn, to have to work. Investing \$7,000, he opened the first Spec's, a wine, liquor and beer store. He opened on April Fool's Day, which fit Spec's personality perfectly. Spec's son-in-law, John Rydman, now owns the company with his wife, Lindy Rydman, and serves as president.

"He was a character," Rydman said of his father-in-law.

Rydman said Spec wanted a logo no one could hate. Spec spotted a rabbit carrying an umbrella on the cover of a monthly wholesaler magazine and asked, "Who could hate a rabbit?"

A rabbit logo began taking shape. Spec

didn't want a typical rabbit. The company's founder earned his nickname because of the characteristic spectacles he wore, so it only made sense that the rabbit would don similar specs. It held a flagpole with its flag imprinted with "Specs." The flagpole was unusual, looping into a classic umbrella hook.

The business grew and so did the number of locations and sizes of the stores. The March 1973 issue of Southern Beverage Journal featured "Spec Jackson: Dealer on Wheels." The magazine store featured a picture of Spec in roller skates, hauling a box of liquor on his shoulder.

"I wasn't too serious when I started this skate stuff, but my new store that I opened last fall is 15,000 square feet, and I discovered the skates enabled me to cover in two or three seconds what formerly took 30 seconds or more to

walk," Spec said in the article.

## Keepers Of The Legacy

Rydman met his wife Lindy, Spec's daughter, at the University of North Texas.

They were music majors. The job market didn't match their aspirations so their short-term jobs at Spec's morphed into a decision to join the business in 1971. Spec and his wife passed away in 1996, and the Rydmans assumed the roles of owners and keepers of Spec's legacy.

Spec's is celebrating its 60th anniversary in 2022. A recent highlight has been moving into the Rio Grande Valley market in adding to its nearly 200 stores across Texas. There were many requests over the years to enter the Valley market. Rydman said Spec's resisted doing so out of respect to a decades-long

*This Spec's location at 7700 N. 10th Street in McAllen opened Oct. 1. (Courtesy)*





friendship with the Feldman family, which owned liquor and wine stores across the Valley for many years.

A way into the Valley came when Rydman's friend, Steve Jabour, acquired the Feldman's stores. It would ultimately provide an outlet for Spec's to come into the Valley and acquire the former Feldman's stores from Jabour, who now serves as Spec's wholesale division director.

Spec's is now occupying two former Luby's locations in the Valley. One is in Harlingen and the other in Brownsville. A large new Spec's opened recently on 10th Street in McAllen, just north of Trenton Road. There's also a Spec's on 2700 Expressway 83 in McAllen. A few stores still bear the Feldman's name as they await renovation and a name change.

### Company Values

Explaining the Spec's philosophy comes easily for Rydman.

On the business side, he explains it like this: "The things I hear the most, besides the incredible selection we've always been known for, is that we have really good prices and we really work hard with our people. We train them so they are knowledgeable about our products and we insist that they treat people nicely."

The Rydmans often take their buying staff with them on trips because when they see where products are made, they understand them better. In the process, they also develop friendships with people around the world.

One of Rydman's favorite places is Ukraine, where Spec's purchases one of the chain's most popular items, the Shevkoff vodka. Rydman is an unabashed fan of the product. On a trip to Ukraine, he said, he learned not to keep the best vodkas in the freezer because it does not allow the product to fully open up its flavor. It's better to keep it in the refrigerator, he said.

On a more personal side, Rydman explained the Spec's philosophy centers around sourcing better-value products like those produced by family-owned wineries and distilleries. He is proud of the charity work Spec's does across the state, which focuses primarily on

education, the arts and veterans. He said the company refuses to price gouge and cares for its employees.

"We are responsible for an awful lot of families," Rydman said. "A lot of our people love to stay with us. Many have worked for



*Spec's specializes in offering a vast assortment of wines, including labels from family-owned wineries. (Courtesy)*



*In addition to alcohol, Spec's carries a variety of snacks. (Courtesy)*



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Spec's for 15-20 years or more. Our employees are family to us."

Inside Spec's, customers find a wide assortment of wines, liquor and even cigars from around the world, as well as snacks, mixers, Spec's apparel and gift items. They feel what the company strives to do: "Keep everyone in good spirits."



*The founder of Spec's, Carroll "Spec" Jackson, was widely known for being quite a character and for rolling around his larger stores for the sake of efficiency. (Courtesy)*



*Inside of Spec's on North 10th in McAllen, a humidity-controlled Humidor displays a wide range of cigars. (Courtesy)*

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