

MARCH 2023

VBR

Party On!

**Creating In Weslaco
Valuing Volunteers
Starting Over At SPI**

For the latest in RGV news across the web, find us online!
www.ValleyBusinessReport.com



VBR



info@valleybusinessreport.com • www.valleybusinessreport.com

**INQUIRE TODAY ABOUT 2023 MULTIMEDIA
ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS.**

*Point your browser to www.valleybusinessreport.com
to subscribe to VBR e-Brief!*

todd@valleybusinessreport.com
www.valleybusinessreport.com

“Your Pro-RGV News”

The Journey Is The Victory

by: Todd Breland

Sure, winning the championship earns the ring but the processes along the way determine the outcome. Education, training, practice, success, failure, sweat and tears make up the road to success. Wrong turns will happen, but regaining composure and getting back on track quickly is the key.

Falling isn't losing. Staying down and giving up is failure. We all know that is not an option. A common Rio Grande Valley trait is finding the strength to dig deep, getting back on our feet and walking tall again.

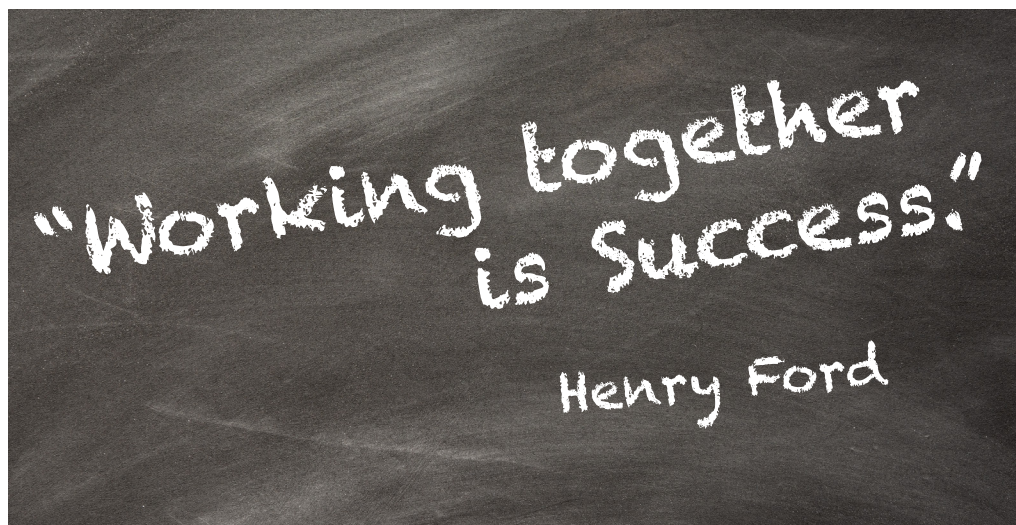
How many drills did Roger Staubach endure before he became a Hall of Fame quarterback? What time did Larry Bird start practice before he almost never missed a three-pointer? Nolan Ryan didn't go to bed one night and awaken as the only seven-game, no-hitter legend. Becoming great doesn't happen at the flip of a switch.

The Rio Grande Valley knows all about competing at a high level through the finish

line. Economic prosperity and enhanced quality of life is the result of unified leaders working together with a common goal. Our region is seeing the fruits of decades and generations of labor, and we will continue

to lend a helping hand to our neighboring community until we bring the championship home.

We are family. We are neighbors. We are one. That's the Rio Grande Valley way.



The Valley's Bank

Celebrating 40 Years!

From Starr County to Cameron County, from the Rio Grande Valley to San Antonio, Lone Star National Bank is growing across South Texas. Our banking centers throughout South Texas are providing the resources and the expertise to help Texas businesses grow and prosper, communities expand and invest in the future, and individuals and families succeed in achieving their dreams.

Lone Star National Bank has provided banking services to communities in South Texas for 40 years. An independent bank with over 3 billion in total assets and thirty-six (36) full-service Banking Centers throughout South Texas.

Come by and meet our outstanding team of bankers. Lone Star National Bank...The Valley's Bank.



Lone Star
National BankSM

1-800-580-0322
www.lonestarnationalbank.com



Member FDIC

Table Of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Thinking Outside The Bun	5
A Leap Of Faith	8
Enduring Legacy	10
Heart Of Volunteering	12
Recovering And Healing	14
Chamber Of Hope	16

VBR Staff

General Manager
Todd Breland
todd@valleybusinessreport.com

Content Editor
Ricardo D. Cavazos
ricardo@valleybusinessreport.com

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

Writer
Chris Ardis

Design Director
John M. Hazlett
john@valleybusinessreport.com

Production - Daniel's Printing Place



**CHOOSE HARLINGEN
FOR BUSINESS & MORE**

Let us help you start your next project

- Hundreds of acres of certified shovel-ready industrial land
- Diverse mix of industries: *aerospace, logistics/distribution, industrial, automotive, & healthcare*
- Accessibility
 - Free-Trade International Bridge
 - Port of Harlingen
 - Valley International Airport
 - Ranked top 100 busiest cargo airports in US.
- Opportunity Zones



2424 BOXWOOD ST., SUITE 125, HARLINGEN, TEXAS 78
956-216-5081 | WWW.HARLINGENEDC.COM

Entrepreneur Goes ‘Savage Not Average’

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Kimberly Avila had a college degree in hand, a bachelors in cognitive psychology, and worked in law offices and as a car sales manager among a variety of jobs tried. Nothing in those employment fields, or others she could think of, felt or sounded fulfilling. Avila then decided to go way outside of her comfort zone and venture into something her parents warned had little chance of being successful. Avila decided to go into the food services industry.

“I had never worked in a restaurant,” said Avila, a Weslaco native. “My parents were

scared for me. They told me the chances of it working were very slim.”

What Avila lacked in experience she compensated for in enthusiasm. She also possessed a fierce work ethic to succeed in something that would give her freedom “to do my thing.” The path to that goal would go through, of all things, hot dogs, but not just any hot dogs. They would be Qweenie hot dogs, “where the hot dogs are savage – not average.” To underscore that point, there’s a cartoon version of Avila’s miniature schnauzer, Diego, seated in a vintage looking

UFO. The depiction also serves as Qweenie’s logo.

Going For It

Avila started out in a borrowed and modest-looking food truck.

She took her version of California street dogs with Rio Grande Valley sensibilities on the road. From Harlingen to communities throughout Hidalgo County, her new business found willing and supportive customers. The vision of combining pizzas with hot dogs and dressing them up with Hot Cheetos, cilantro

Kimberly Avila opened a fixed location restaurant in Edinburg in 2022. (Courtesy)



and pico de gallo overwhelmed taste buds. Avila soon built a following.

Word of Avila's offerings then grew via social media and vivid photographs of her culinary creations. By 2019, Weslaco was launching its first food truck park in the community's downtown. Avila was among its first commitments with a bigger and higher capacity food truck. Qweenie with Diego as its mascot was taking off and becoming legit. The next big step came in 2022 when Avila opened a physical location in Edinburg, with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley main campus across the street on University Drive.

"I put everything I had into it," she said of starting her savage hot dog business. "It drained my bank account. I had to make it happen."

Taco Dogs & Macaroni

Walk into Qweenie's in Edinburg and the immediate impression is that it's a business owned by a female entrepreneur.

The walls are painted in pink with images of butterflies fluttering and girls with flamboyant hair styles and big glasses. In the counter area where Avila takes orders, the background is again pink with crescent moons, stars twinkling, and Saturn and its rings floating in space. A Winter Texan couple walks in and the husband declares himself "a hot dog guy," bringing a smile to Avila's face as she shows the customer a menu.

"I have Winter Texans come in and ask if I have a Chicago-style dog," she said in firing up her kitchen to prepare the order. "I say, 'no I don't have those but I do have Rio Grande Valley dogs.'"

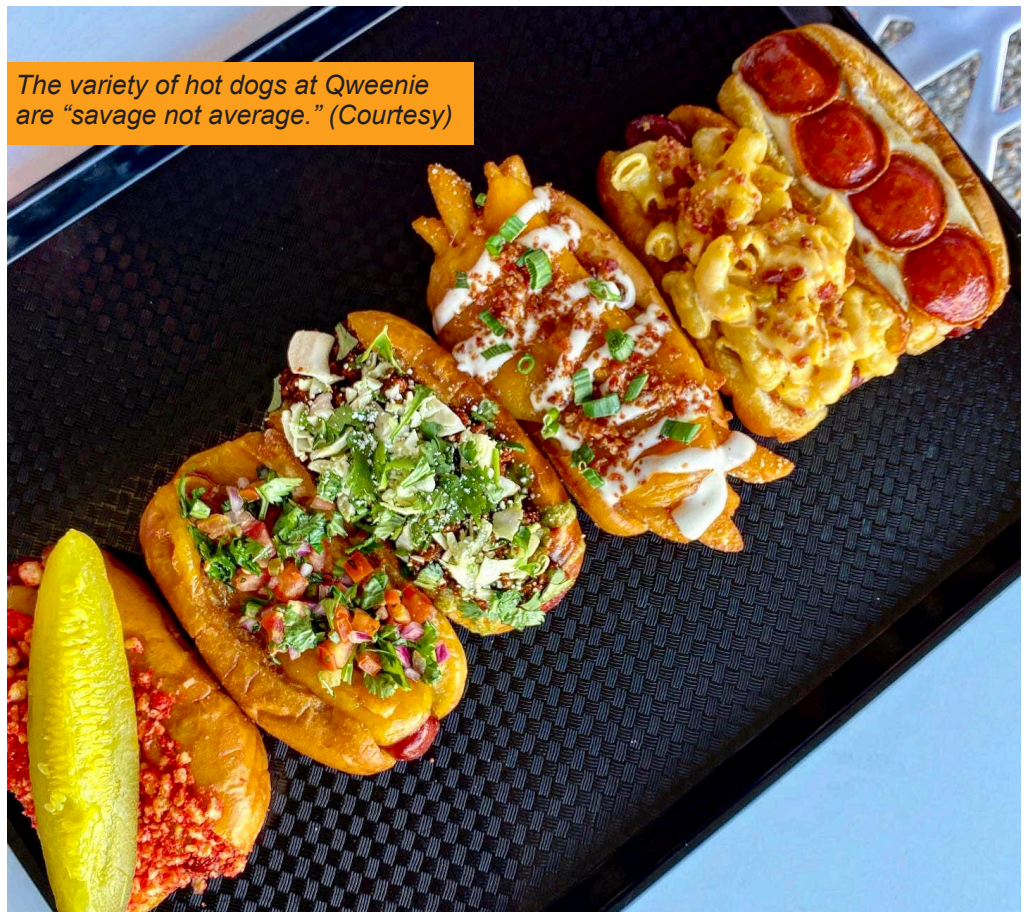
The Qweenie menu testifies to that fact. There's a Hot Cheetos Dog selection with beef smoked sausage between a hot dog bun topped with fries, grilled cheddar, a pickled spear and of course the key ingredient – Flamin' Hot Cheetos crumbs.

"It's the Valley," she said. "Everyone here loves Flamin' Hot Cheetos."

Move down the menu list and there's a Taco Dog. The smoked sausage dog is topped with beef, grilled onions, cilantro, cabbage and spicy guacamole. A Street Dog features some of the same ingredients with grilled cheddar and pico de gallo. It's no wonder when her food truck opened up for business in Weslaco that Avila was swamped with customers waiting in long lines.



Qweenie's colorful food truck is one of the mainstays at Weslaco's downtown food park. (Courtesy)



The variety of hot dogs at Qweenie are "savage not average." (Courtesy)

Thinking Outside The Bun

“It’s putting familiar foods in unfamiliar ways,” she said in talking about another menu item, the Mac Dog that features slow cooked macaroni. “You get a hot dog and add comfort food to it. Put your own twist to it.”

Avila appears to have a good handle on the business despite her previous lack of restaurant experience. She and her initial co-investor, Bryan Nunn, are on to something good with hot dogs that are savage and not average.

“I’m a serial entrepreneur,” Avila said. She adds that her business also incorporates marketing and fashion retail into the food services industry. “I created the Qweenie brand to remind people not to be afraid to take risks and follow their dreams regardless of how big they might sound to others.”

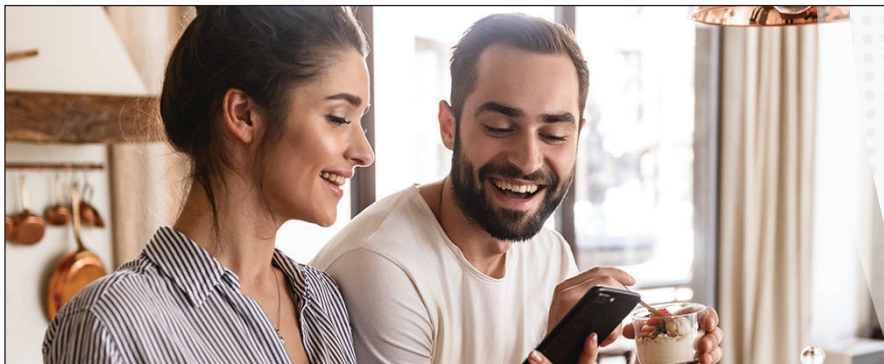
Hot dogs with Hot Cheetos shows what an entrepreneur with imagination can do when she goes outside of her comfort zone.



Kimberly Avila’s Edinburg restaurant features a colorful interior and hot dogs with an RGV twist. (Courtesy)



Qweenie of Weslaco and Edinburg offers a wide variety of hot dog-centric dishes. (Courtesy)



Open Your
Checking Account
Online Today



Banking made easy, **FAST** & secure

Member
FDIC

www.rio.bank
956-631-7890

Rio Bank
www.rio.bank

f Facebook.com/RioBankTexas
in Instagram.com/riobanktexas
t LinkedIn.com/company/riobank



Counselor Takes 'Leap Of Faith' To Help Others

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Christina Vasquez in her 15-plus years of being a school counselor believed in getting out of the office.

"Be visible, be out there," Vasquez said, recalling how she greeted students in school hallways. "I always felt that it was important to be out there and to have that visibility with the kids."

Vasquez was initially a teacher before settling into working as a counselor for students at every grade level at various campuses in the Weslaco school district. Weslaco is where she spent the vast majority of her public-school teaching and counseling years. She enjoyed those years and speaks highly of her colleagues and administrators in the Weslaco schools. Vasquez would eventually yearn to set out and try her own ideas and counseling approaches that did not always adhere to structures of a public education system.

"I wanted to do more," she said, detailing the array of mental health issues facing young people today.

Vasquez had already begun offering some private counseling services. She envisioned doing it full time.

"I asked myself, 'what's stopping me?'" Vasquez said of going out on her own full time three years ago. "I had to take a leap of faith. There's always some fear going outside the stability of working for a school district."

Making Transitions

Vasquez's leap took her to establishing Creative Being Counseling & Consulting in Weslaco.

She offers individual counseling for clients 12 years of age and older. Her company also conducts workshops with public and private sector groups. The motivational programs she leads with these groups are customized to the team she's addressing. She also focuses on optimism and awareness to envision improved workspaces.

"She led our team in different activities and got everyone engaged," said Cynthia Cabaza, a vice president for Shepard Walton King Insurance Group, in describing Vasquez's programs. "It seemed more like a deep conversation than a presentation, which we fully enjoyed."

Vasquez is a state-licensed professional counselor. She details the overlap of mental

health issues affecting teenagers and adults. Youngsters can struggle to fit in and are especially conscious of how peers see them, often comparing themselves to others. Adults struggle with transitions in life, be it divorces, the passing of a loved one, or losing a job or career and having to adjust anew.

"Life changes are hard on people of all ages," Vasquez said.

Mental health struggles can lead to eating disorders and depression among teens, she said. The same goes for adults, with Vasquez saying she sees anxiety issues among people of all ages.

Expressing Feelings

Vasquez is an advocate for using art, creative writing and journaling as methods of therapy.

Being creative through art and journaling helps people to express their feelings and organize their thoughts. Part of this process is recognizing triggers that can ignite bad habits and behavior. She said, in essence, it's "catching yourself" before engaging in a negative action.

Many of these themes and subjects will be part of an upcoming Girl's Conference that Creative Being is organizing for a



Christina Vasquez has utilized her years of experience as a school counselor to establish her own counseling and consulting company in Weslaco. (VBR)

June 10 event at the Mid-Valley campus of South Texas College in Weslaco. The purpose of the conference is to provide teen girls with opportunities to have meaningful conversations about their emotional well-being and participate in hands-on activities to bolster their confidence.

Vasquez has assembled an impressive roster of female speakers who can speak to teen girls about their own experiences at their ages and how they worked through them to gain success in their adult lives. She is involving the community in seeking sponsorships to cover costs for girls attending the daylong conference.

“Society has given them a certain image of what beautiful looks like,” Vasquez said of teen girls. “The program will fight the stigma that looking beautiful doesn’t just look one way.”

It’s also about taking that leap of faith, as Vasquez did, and working toward making it right.



Christina Vasquez's Creative Being & Counseling is organizing an upcoming Girl's Conference at South Texas College in Weslaco. (Courtesy)



Christina Vasquez leads a group session in helping public and private sector organizations build better teamwork. (Courtesy)



Counselor Christina Vasquez believes expressive arts can help her clients organize their feelings and thoughts. (Courtesy)

U.S. Customs Broker Ocean Freight Forwarders

We know the rules to move your goods to Mexico and the World. Automatic electronic communication gives you up-to-date status of shipments.
A full service company providing solutions to your logistics needs. ISO 9001 Certified 2008 Standards.



PARKER & COMPANY
WORLDWIDE

U.S. Customs Brokers • In-House Mexican Brokers • International Forwarders Warehouse & Distribution • Truckers • Custom Consulting • Agent Network Worldwide

Brownsville (956) 831-2000 • McAllen/Hidalgo/Pharr (956) 843-8989 • Laredo (956) 728-9000 • Corpus Christi 1-888-831-4130 • Monterrey, Mexico (52) 81-8320-6163
www.parkerandcompany.com

Couple Keeps Gas Building's Flame Going

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The Brownsville of the post-World War II era was pushing west on its main street – Elizabeth Street – in branching out from its downtown core to develop new retailing and business offices.

The Rio Grande Valley Gas Company Building was part of that movement. The 21,000-square-foot building, two stories high, got its start in 1947. Additional phases of the building would come in the late 1950s and mid-1960s. The gas company headquarters added tenants, ranging from the Brownsville navigation district to lawyers and accountants. It was also the place where everyday local residents came in daily to pay their gas bills.

The RGV Gas Company was a public utility corporation that supplied natural gas. Its customers reached across the far South Texas counties of Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy. Among the gas company's West Elizabeth Street neighbors of the mid-20th century was a then Harlingen-based grocery chain named after one of its founders – Howard E. Butt. H-E-B got its foothold in the Valley. One of its first RGV stores was just down Elizabeth from the gas company building. So were new pharmacies and car dealerships springing up to sell Studebakers, Chevrolets and Fords.

"The post-Second World War decade, when the first phase of the Rio Grande Valley Gas Co. Building was constructed, marked the pinnacle of W. Elizabeth Street's tenure as Brownsville's most important suburban retail center, second only to downtown," wrote Stephen Fox, a fellow of the Anchorage Foundation of Texas.

Enduring Legacy

Much of what was West Elizabeth from Palm Boulevard to Central Boulevard is no more. Brownsville has moved on through the decades.

The RGV Gas Company Building endures, still standing, thanks to longtime Brownsville realtor Dora Bermudez and her husband Alfredo. For two decades, the couple has worked as a team to modernize the building's infrastructure and utilities while leaving many of its old touches intact.

Today's tenants now include county offices, lawyers, bookkeepers, photo studios, health care administrative offices and even a church. The building is now known as the Bermudez Building on 355 W. Elizabeth Street.

Maribel Guerrero is the daughter of the Bermudez couple and the mayor of Rancho

Viejo while serving as Brownsville's assistant engineering and public works director. She finds the Bermudez Building to be a large part of Brownsville's history.

"We felt this building was connected to Brownsville's story where people worked and paid their bills," said Guerrero. "The historical content of a building like this one is part of the story of Brownsville and what helped make it what it is today."

A Partnership

Alfredo Bermudez is giving a tour of the old gas building, making his way up a flight of stairs. Soon, a stunning mural depicting South Texas life emerges between the building's two floors.

"We love this building," he said, as he pointed

out the intricate artwork on the wall. "We feel good about what we've done to bring the building back."

The idea to revitalize the building was the idea of his wife, Dora. In the early 2000s, she was intrigued by the abandoned gas company building on Elizabeth. The building had been on the market for three years. The realtor looked over the building with her husband and decided to make a go of it.

"I know how to do maintenance," said Alfredo, a retired master welder who worked for major industrial companies in Houston and at the Port of Brownsville. "My wife knows business and can take care of administration."

They went about updating all of the air conditioning and plumbing systems, and fixing the roof. They redid all of the interior work



Alfredo and Dora Bermudez have invested in a historic gas company building in Brownsville and kept its legacy alive. (Courtesy)

regarding walls and floors. The couple got a major break early on when one of the Valley's first charter schools moved in, taking the first floor. They haven't stopped since Alfredo continues to tinker on the building and Dora works to fill it with tenants.

Bringing Memories Back

The National Park Service has listed the West Elizabeth building in its listing of the National Register of Historic Places.

There are personal historical elements as well.

"We've had so many people come in to see the building who grew up here and tell us, 'This is where we came with our mom to pay bills. I can't believe it's still here,'" Dora Bermudez said. "That always makes us feel good and proud of what we've done."

Maribel Guerrero marvels at the commitment and dedication her parents have shown to the West Elizabeth Street building.

"It's my mom's ingenuity to recognize a good commercial buy when people thought she was crazy to purchase this building years ago," said Guerrero. "My parents have brought a lot of memories back with this building."



The Bermudez building, once home of a gas company, today houses a variety of tenants. (VBR)

Alfredo Bermudez looks up from a wall mural dating back decades at what was the Rio Grande Valley Gas Building. (VBR)



SAVE THE DATE

25TH ANNUAL STORMWATER PLANNING & MANAGEMENT CONFERENCE MAY 21-26, 2023

SOUTH PADRE ISLAND CONVENTION CENTER
SOUTH PADRE ISLAND, TX

**BRINGING BACK
Fishing Tournament
Saturday, May 27**

COURSES OFFERED

- Construction Site Inspector Training, May 23
- HEC-RAS Introduction and Advanced (3-D), May 21-23
- GIS Training, May 22-23
- Soil Erosion, May 21-22

For Sponsorship & Exhibitor information Info email: mgonzales@lrgvstormwatertaskforce.org
For General information email: jguerrero@lrgvstormwatertaskforce.org

www.lrgvstormwater.org

Volunteer Firefighting Endures In RGV

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The Los Fresnos Volunteer Fire Department is celebrating its 75th anniversary of serving southern Cameron County and one constant has defined it through the years.

The department is manned by volunteer firefighters. It is, in fact, an all-volunteer force, the only one of its kind in the Rio Grande Valley. The department is unique in another way as well in that it is not part of a city government. The Los Fresnos Fire Department is a non-profit, a 501c3 organization that operates from funding via contracts with the city, county and area communities that need the department's emergency services.

The department and its 35-member volunteer staff cover 140 square miles while also handling the largest volume of rural county calls of all fire departments in Cameron. The professionalism and commitment of the all-volunteer staff is a point of community pride in Los Fresnos and for its fire chief, Gene Daniels.

"We're real particular on who we bring in,"

said Daniels, who has been with the department for 32 years. "If you come in and qualify, and get the necessary training and want to serve the community, we'll find a place for you."

In Mercedes, it's the same, as Fire Chief Javier Campos Jr., speaks glowingly of how the 10 volunteer firefighters in his city supplement and support the efforts of paid staff. He grew up the son of a volunteer Mercedes firefighter. Campos took charge of the department in 2020 and quickly brought back the volunteer force after it had been disbanded by his predecessor.

"It was a no-brainer to bring them back," Campos said. "I wanted to bring back that volunteer culture to the department."

Deep History

The history of volunteer firefighting runs deep in the Valley.

Its most legendary figure may be the late Johnny Economedes, who was Edinburg's fire chief for years and mentored many young

firefighters who went on to lead departments themselves. There was a time in Edinburg, like many Valley cities, when volunteers made up all or the vast majority of a community's firefighter force. Blaring sirens would go off under water towers and from other city landmarks alerting the volunteers to an emergency.

This was long before the days of cell phones and other forms of more modern technology. Today it's customized cell phone apps that do the alerting. In Economedes' day, it was the sirens and schoolchildren seeing the volunteers running into small town fire departments like super heroes as they dashed off to emergencies.

Edinburg, like most RGV communities, grew to the point where full-time and paid staff were in need to man fire departments. In Mercedes, Campos said volunteers once made up 80 percent of the city's firefighter staff. Now, it's the other way around, 80/20, paid to volunteers. It's a testament to the history of



Fire Chief Javier Campos Jr. grew up in Mercedes as the son of a volunteer firefighter. (VBR)

volunteer firefighters in the Valley that in some communities they endure as important members of their departments. In Mercedes, Campos felt something was missing when they were no longer there.

"They're still the backbone of our department," he said. "They're there when we need them."

Heart Of Volunteering

In Los Fresnos, the volunteer firefighters are more than the backbone.

They fill every slot in the fire department. They must earn the proper certifications and go through fire school training in Edinburg and at Texas A&M's fire training academy in

College Station. From there, the volunteers in Los Fresnos receive monthly trainings and updates to stay prepared and qualified. Most of the volunteers in Los Fresnos have full-time jobs in the fire district area that runs from FM 106 to the north and then south to Brownsville's city limits, with east/west boundaries being from Laguna Vista to Expressway 77/83.

Daniels, the chief, lauds employers who allow the firefighters to leave their jobs as needed when emergencies arise. He called it "a belief in our community service," and a bedrock in allowing his all-volunteer force to operate and function. Daniels also relishes the fact that the department exists outside of

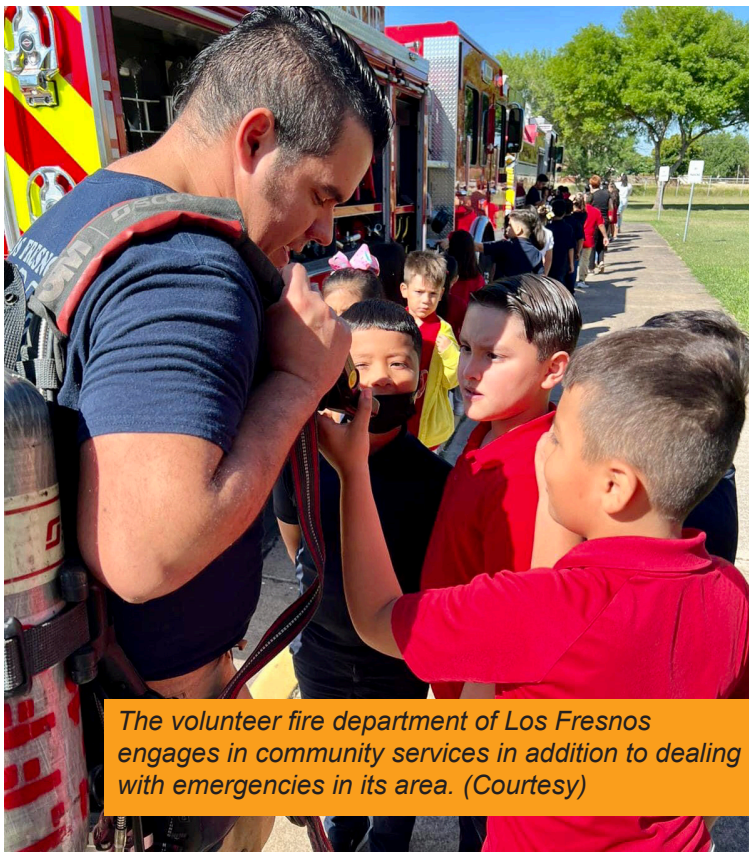
city government while commending local officials for their support of his staff.

"At some paid departments, politics gets in the way," Daniels said. "We keep that out here in providing emergency services."

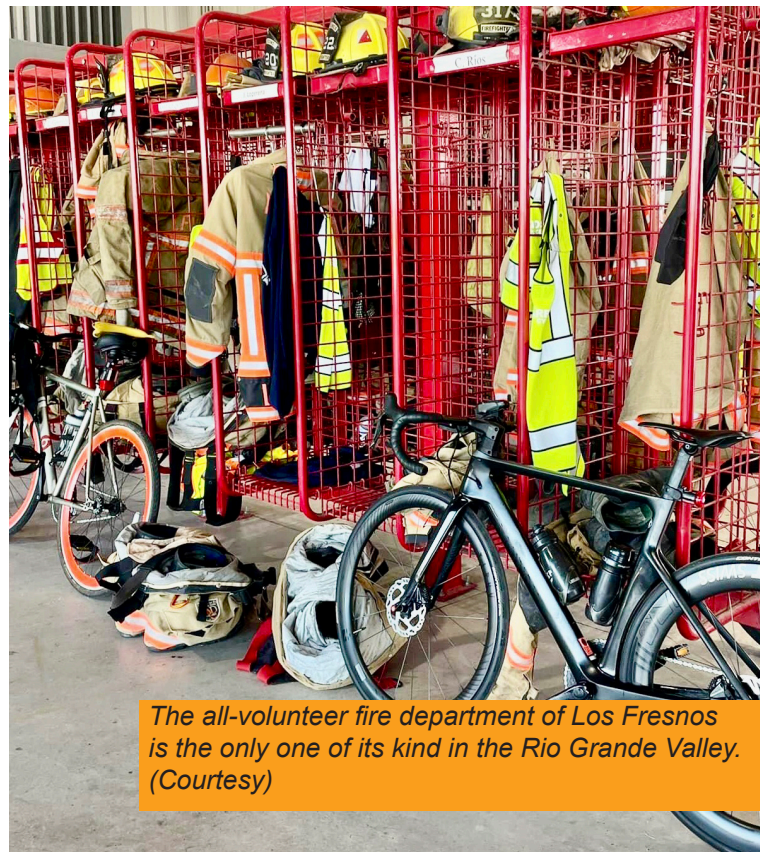
Daniels speaks from a 33,000-square-foot station that nearly five years since its opening still looks new and is four times larger than the former Los Fresnos fire building.

"We do this because we want to, not because we get paid for it," the chief said.

Spoken like a true leader keeping a legacy and tradition of community service alive nearly eight decades since volunteers put out their first fire in Los Fresnos.



The volunteer fire department of Los Fresnos engages in community services in addition to dealing with emergencies in its area. (Courtesy)



The all-volunteer fire department of Los Fresnos is the only one of its kind in the Rio Grande Valley. (Courtesy)

WI-FIGHT SOARING PRICES?

No Contracts. No surprise price hikes.

Sign Up Today!



VTX1 Internet

1-844-GET-VTX1



www.vtx1.net



Therapists Recover & Heal At SPI

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

South Padre Island with its soothing feel and leisurely coastal vibe is as good a place as any to start over again.

It has been that and more for two massage therapists who came to the Island years ago after divorces required them to start anew. Pippa Brooks tells of coming to South Padre in 2008 with nothing. Fellow therapist Mina Amesquita recalls getting to SPI “with \$60 in my pocket” about a year earlier.

What each woman had was determination and a skill they clung to when they had little else.

“I never let my license lapse, thank God,” Brooks said of her state authorization for massage therapy.

Amesquita had worked as a certified nursing assistant and then a chiropractic technician. She went a step further and

became a state licensed massage therapist. Her first places to try her new craft were Port Isabel and then South Padre Island.

“Go start your new life,” Amesquita recalled a friend telling her when relocating to the coast.

Both women did just that and years later, they made it through their trials and tribulations to establish successful practices. It includes their own Island offices and the mobility to go anywhere to see clients relying on their therapy treatments.

“This is what I was born to do,” said Amesquita, who also possesses a state license.

Brooks from her place of business on Padre Boulevard speaks of gratitude for how far she’s come.

“I had to get back to work and knuckle

down,” Brooks said. “My clientele is brilliant. I’m so happy with what I’ve got.”

Finding Their Homes

The backgrounds of the two therapists could hardly be different.

Amesquita is a native of Zapata and was a high school dropout before overcoming that shortfall later after her divorce. Brooks is a Brit by way of Houston who came to the United States as a teenager. She traveled many roads before settling in the SPI/Laguna Vista area. Their respective ways to recovery and healing brought them far south to the Island, where they felt welcome. They laud the coastal communities for their support.

“The people here are amazing,” Amesquita said. “This is where I came to find my way.”

Brooks came to the Island to find calm



Mina Amesquita's book is full with appointments on South Padre Island. (VBR)



Pippa Brooks found a new life and success on South Padre Island. (VBR)

after the storm. Hurricane Dolly had just passed through the area in 2008. She came down south to see how her mother and stepfather had fared with their bed-and-breakfast business post-Dolly. Fresh off her divorce, she decided to stay and rekindled her massage therapist skills she had honed for years in Houston.

For Amesquita and Brooks, they both had years of working for established spas and massage therapist offices on the Island and in Port Isabel. Eventually, they each set out on their own. Now there's Massage by Mina on the 5200 block of Padre Boulevard. A few blocks south of Mina's is Massage by Pippa on 3400 Padre Boulevard.

"Deciding to work for yourself will always work out," Brooks said. "I could never work for anyone else again."

Staying Busy

Mina's massage room is cool and serene with enough light for a client to drift into relaxation in receiving a healing treatment.

Lemongrass scents are in the air. Amesquita sees a wide range of clients, from the older set dealing with arthritis to the athletes and wind surfers recovering from the aches and pains of practices and competitions. Referrals from doctors and chiropractors to go with her longtime clients keeps her busy.

"My book is always full," she said.

Brooks can say the same. Winter Texans are frequent clients this time of year and she enjoys going mobile with her massage tables and equipment, going all over the Rio Grande Valley as well as outdoor massages at Isla Grand Beach Resort.

"I'm all about quality over quantity at this stage of the game," Brooks said.

Amesquita, meanwhile, went back years ago to Zapata to get her high school diploma. She sensed a judge in a custody case with her ex-husband had literally and figuratively looked down on her as a dropout.

"As a woman, it built me up to not be seen like that again," she said.

It's about recovery and redemption, the building back of lives, and practicing a skill sought by many and at levels they can deliver after years of experience. Amesquita and Brooks have each made it as successful businesswomen.

"I love doing it, and for me, it's not work at all," said Brooks, in a comment that could just as well be said by her colleague down Padre Boulevard.



Beachside massages are offered by therapist Pippa Brooks. (Courtesy)



Soothing essential oils are utilized by massage therapist Mina Amesquita. (VBR)

Disability Chamber Advocates For Opportunities

By Chris Ardis

The Edinburg Chamber of Commerce recently hosted a lunch-time workshop with a focus on diversifying workforces in recruiting people with disabilities.

Evelyn Cano co-founded the Disability Chamber of Commerce-RGV. She serves as the nonprofit organization's president and presented the Jan. 19 workshop. She also serves on the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities. The governor appoints all 12 members with at least seven board members being persons with disabilities.

The RGV's disability chamber was founded in late 2019. It became only the fourth cross-disability chamber of commerce in the nation. Cross-disability is defined as "the concept of addressing the needs and rights of people with disabilities, regardless of the specific type or nature of their disability."

The disability chamber's mission statement reads that it "provides disability-friendly employers in the Rio Grande Valley with educational workshops, networking events, corporate training and

easy access to available resources so that they can provide meaningful, dignified, integrative employment opportunities to individuals with different abilities."

Broadening Scope

Cano told the workshop audience that one in four people in the United States has a disability.

The three founders of the RGV disability chamber are mothers of individuals with autism. They are Esmeralda Leal and Stephanie Wilson in addition to Cano.



Evelyn Cano, co-founder and president of the Disability Chamber of Commerce – RGV, shares important resources available for employers. (Courtesy)

The chamber's founders have advocated for their children's access to the best educational opportunities. The realization came that they had to broaden their vision.

"There's something we weren't thinking about," Cano said. "The future."

They learned about the lack of resources, funding and jobs for people with disabilities and that others besides parents need to be part of this mission.

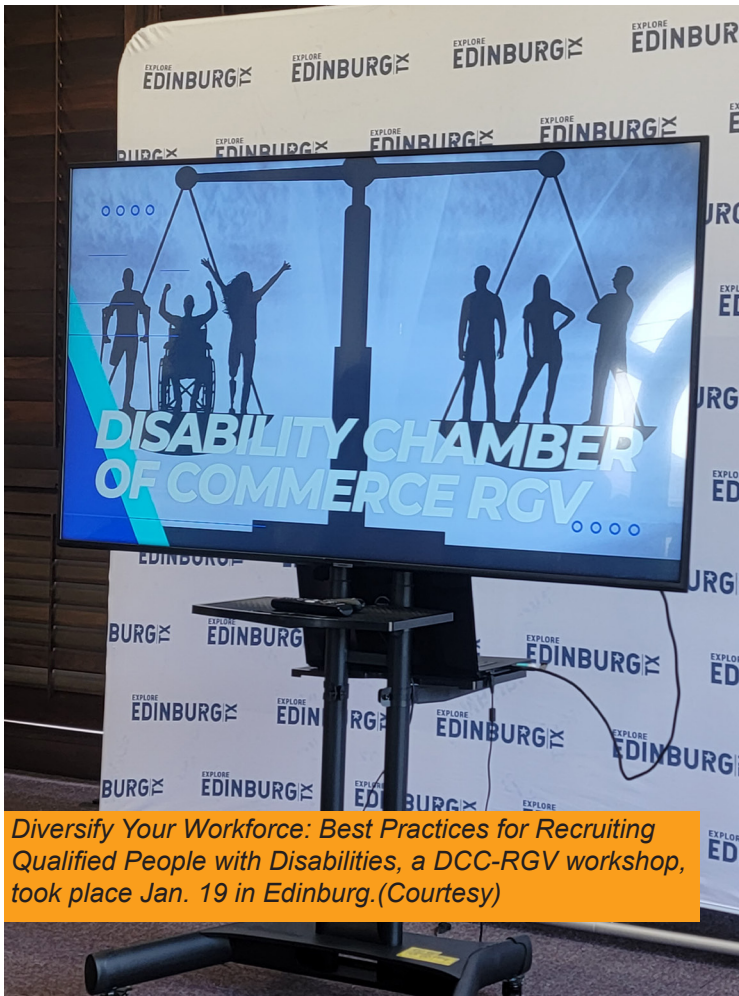
"They need a seat at the table," she said, referring to individuals with disabilities. "This is no longer my story to tell. It's my son's."

Cano's son is a freshman in high school. She seeks his opinions and ideas and gathers input from other individuals with disabilities as well. What was learned from these conversations is that individuals with different abilities yearn for the education and training they need to be hired for and retain meaningful jobs. It's not only about having access to housing, transportation and health care.

Cano emphasized that the disability chamber focuses on helping employers identify a "qualified individual ... a person



Audience members, including administrators from McAllen ISD, listen attentively to Evelyn Cano as she presents a DCC-RGV workshop at the Edinburg Chamber of Commerce.(Courtesy)



Diversify Your Workforce: Best Practices for Recruiting Qualified People with Disabilities, a DCC-RGV workshop, took place Jan. 19 in Edinburg.(Courtesy)

DAVIS EQUITY REALTY

MEDICAL OFFICE IN WESLACO



Located in the heart of the Weslaco Medical Area and adjacent to Knapp Medical Center. Spacious office and exam rooms. Most furniture will convey. Equipment is negotiable.

3 Exam rooms, 1 surgical room, large Dr. office, medical records office, accounting office, 3 restrooms, covered parking for Dr., condominium format.

SALE PRICE: \$450,000 • BUILDING SIZE: 3,216 SF
LOCATION: 1402 E 8TH ST., WESLACO, TX 78596

2300 W. PIKE BLVD. SUITE 101 • Weslaco, TX 78596
info@davisequity.com • www.DavisEquity.com
(956) 969-8648

able to perform the essential functions of the job” who also meets the prerequisites for the position. Accommodations requested by the applicant or employee should never bring a hardship to the employer, Cano said.

“People with disabilities truly just deserve the opportunity to enter the workforce,” she explained.

Building Partnerships

Todd Miller, the assistant superintendent for human resources for McAllen school district, attended the workshop with several other district representatives.

“McAllen ISD is continuously exploring various recruiting avenues to be more inclusive with our hiring practices to ensure that we are truly recruiting and hiring the best-qualified applicants,” Miller said. “This luncheon was very informational, and the information gained will be incorporated into our current recruiting practices.”

Cano shared Inclusion@Work, a framework for building a disability-inclusive organization. This seven-pronged approach provides a pathway for

organizations to build an inclusive business culture while hiring and keeping the best employees. People with disabilities are the third-largest market segment in the United States, consisting of over 50 million people.

The Valley’s disability chamber believes this market is more than ready to receive training, develop their talents and receive the opportunity for employment. Cano lauded area school districts in Pharr, McAllen, Brownsville and Mission for developing transition programs that provide opportunities for students with disabilities to earn certifications.

“I never want you to feel you have to have all the answers,” Cano said. “The disability chamber doesn’t have all the answers, either. We are seekers.”

To learn about the DCC-RGV and its membership opportunities for individuals, nonprofits and employers of all sizes, visit dccrgv.wildapricot.com or the organization’s Facebook page. At the top of the DCC-RGV website, you will read the words Cano personified throughout her presentation: *Inclusion is an action!*



The Disability Chamber of Commerce – RGV held a workshop for employers, *Diversify Your Workforce*, at the Edinburg Chamber of Commerce Jan. 19. (Courtesy)



NOW IN MERCEDES!



350 N Virginia Ave • Mercedes • (956) 376-9554



Your SPI Area Businesses Appreciate Your Support!

F&B
SPI
FOOD AND BEVERAGE



MODERN COASTAL CUISINE



Open Daily 5-10pm / Sunday Brunch 11am-3pm / Happy Hour 5-7pm

3109 padre blvd., south padre island, texas 78597
956.772.8114 / www.fandbspi.com

Casual Waterfront Dining Overlooking South Padre Island

PIRATES LANDING
Now Serving Breakfast!

Open 7am Serving Breakfast, Lunch & Dinner

956-943-FOOD (3663)
PiratesLandingRestaurant.com
Located at the Foot of the Causeway
in Port Isabel's Lighthouse District

PIRATE'S LANDING FISHING PIER

at the base of the Causeway, Port Isabel
FB: Pirate's Landing Fishing Pier



OPEN 24 HOURS
All Year Long
(weather permitting)

THE LONGEST FISHING PIER IN TEXAS!!

SNACKS • SANDWICHES
COLD DRINKS • BEER • ICE
TACKLE • BAIT, LIVE & FROZEN

956-943-PIER (7437)
Waterfront at the Historic Lighthouse
501 E Maxan St., Port Isabel

Fish. Eat. Stay.

Book Your Weekend Getaway!

5701 Padre Blvd.
956.761.4913
windwaterspi@gmail.com
www.windwaterspi.com

WINDWATER HOTEL

VBR

ValleyBusinessReport

The Valley's Pro-Business News
www.ValleyBusinessReport.com

**FEATURE YOUR
BUSINESS HERE!**

Call Todd
956.310.5953
todd@valleybusinessreport.com

Your Port. Our Community.

Since 1936



JOBS

Cultivating sustainable workforce opportunities and developing our human capital.



COMMUNITY

Promoting educational initiatives and improving quality of life in the Rio Grande Valley.



ENVIRONMENT

Preserving the regional ecosystem and natural resources for present and future generations.



INDUSTRY

Supporting existing industries and fostering economic growth by connecting the region with global markets.

PORT OF 
BROWNSVILLE
the port that works

1000 Foust Rd • Brownsville, TX 78521 • (956) 831-4592 • 1-800-378-5395
portofbrownsville.com