





Mother May I

by: Todd Breland

Credit was earned and is due. She loved us before we had breath. When we deserved serious punishment but only received a soft hand of discipline, it was her.

Our biggest cheerleader screamed from the highest bleacher. She mended the cuts, helped with the homework, and shaped us who we are today and forever will be.

Moms are the greatest. Like my late high school principal told us numerous times, "Nobody will defend you like your mother -- not your classmate, teammate or best friend. Your mom is the only one who has your back till the end."

Where we are today, how we lead our organizations and companies is because of her. Our mothers shaped us, guided us and instilled core life and business practices into us without us even knowing at the time. The first and most important reason for our successes is credited to our mothers, and we give gratitude for her unconditional

love and support.

I am certain we can all vividly remember countless lessons, not just about school subjects but about life. We execute our daily tasks and plan our teams' projects with a style and demeanor our mothers taught us. Our true professional development mentor was and is the one who we celebrate not only this month, but hopefully every month.

My personal experience is probably much like yours. I was stubborn (still am) and needed the stern look, a twisting of the ear and many times more to fully grasp Mom's lessons. But she never gave up. Until she breathed her last breath, my mother's encouragement pushed me to do the same never give up.

As leaders, those lessons we learned are carrying us still today. If you are blessed to still get a phone call from your mother or enjoy a delicious Sunday meal, truly

appreciate that precious time. Many of us have wonderful memories we treasure and hold dear. Either case, let's always give the deserved credit to our #1 life and business teacher.

Moms, we appreciate you.



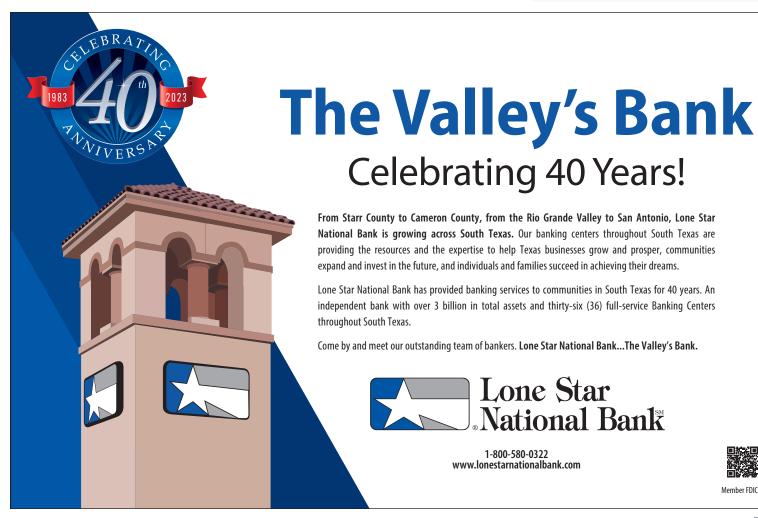




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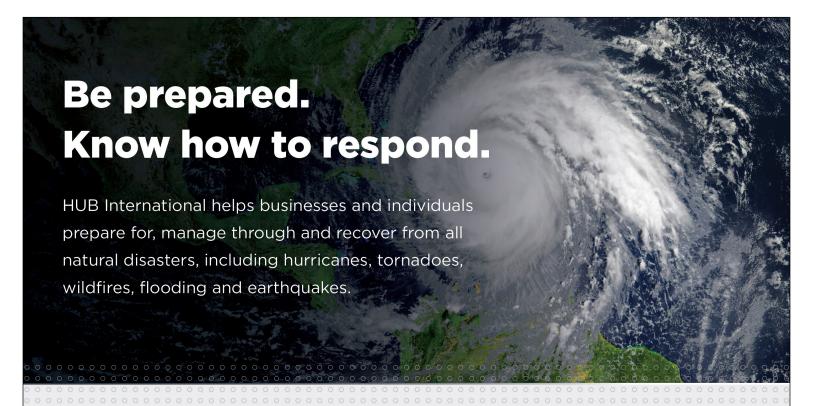
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Entrepreneurs Build Partnership Via Friendship

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, Content Editor

Anna Gomez and Deborah Rios were the best of friends before deciding to become business partners.

Friendship and business don't always mix but this is a partnership that works. Gomez is a banker by profession and manages a branch bank in north McAllen. Rios is a teacher in Edinburg who co-owns a business with her husband. They had previously bandied about the idea of someday going into business together. For Gomez, the time was right in 2022 to try a new endeavor.

"My kids had grown up," she said. "It was a good time to start exploring."

Anna went to her friend Deborah and pitched the general concept of going into business together. Rios was all in, quickly, as were their spouses, offering help in identifying the best opportunity for the two aspiring women entrepreneurs. Deciding what that should be in a retail and restaurant-saturated McAllen/Edinburg market wouldn't be easy.

"We wanted something different," Gomez said. "Something for families, a fun environment, a place that would be good for date nights too."

Their lengthy research led to The Dolly Llama, a Los Angeles-based restaurant

chain that was on the upswing after being launched in 2017. The Dolly Llama describes itself on its corporate website as being the "waffle master." One of the company's founders is a European restaurateur who had the concept of pairing ice cream with waffles and creating flavor combinations featuring fruits, syrups, sauces and cookie crumbs.

"It looked great but does it taste great?" Gomez recalled thinking after seeing images of The Dolly Llama menu items.

There was only one way to find out and that was to fly to California and see – and





taste - for themselves.

"We interviewed them as much as they interviewed us," Gomez recalled of talks with Dolly Llama management.

Each side liked what they heard and saw and eventually a plan was made. Gomez and Rios would open one of the first Dolly Llama restaurants in Texas by opening a store in McAllen.

Standing Out In The Crowd

The spot Gomez and Rios chose is high on traffic and activity while also being located in the midst of a crush of dining out choices.

The intersection of Trenton Road and 10th Street in north McAllen didn't have much of a business presence 20 years ago beyond a McDonald's and a few convenience stores. Today, that part of the city with fast-growing Edinburg coming up to its edge ranks among the Rio Grande Valley's busiest retailing and commerce areas. It includes a bevy of big box stores, banks and restaurant choices, one after another.

It goes to the confidence that Gomez and Rios had in their business acumen and the desirability of their waffle-and-ice cream store to go beyond being a typical dessert shop and become a destination. The shop has an aesthetic flair and design with artistic images on its walls. It's a fun place for a date while also being family friendly. Their menu choices are unique ones in being the first Dolly Llama franchise in the Valley and South Texas, and features the many ways it combines waffles, fruits, cookies and sauces.

The shop opened in early March. The business partners are excited by the early successes and welcome they've received. They feel right at home in that sweet spot where McAllen and Edinburg converge and where they also happen to live and work.









"We wanted convenience for both of us," Rios said. "This is a location where we have family and friends nearby to support us while we get the business established." Fun Of Partnership

Gomez, as a banker, has to analyze the prospects of clients and applicants as they seek loans and capital to start or build up an existing business. When asked if she used some of those same metrics and assessments with her own business startup, she smiled and said, "No, not really, this is something I've always wanted to do." To operate a business with such a good friend is added plus and her partner in the operation feels the same way. "It's a learning process. We're still

"It's a learning process. We're still educating ourselves," Rios said in true teacher fashion. "Anna is the type of person you want to partner with in starting a business. When she asked, I said, 'Let's do it.'"

The Dolly Llama Waffle Master shop is located at 7600 N. 10th Street, Suite 800L at the Trenton Crossing Shopping Center.







Brand Names Reach Smaller RGV Markets

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, Content Editor

The development of open spaces along Expressway 83 between Pharr and Harlingen is accelerating as developers look to fill gaps and bring brand names in retailing and restaurants to smaller communities.

Cities like Donna and Mercedes were formerly excluded from the Rio Grande Valley's rapid growth of the last two decades. The same was once the case for San Juan. In the early 2000s. San Juan was a community that had only seen a nudge of growth. Today, the city is the home of luxury new car dealers, new coffee shops and restaurants along the expressway.

Donna and now Mercedes are seeing the same sort of developments. Weslaco has already seen its share and is rapidly developing more property sites for retailing and restaurants. Access to the expressway corridor combined with open property are bringing new interest to these communities. The direction of growth goes east along the expressway.

"We have available property," said Alberto Perez, the city manager of Mercedes, who in recent weeks has been busy going from groundbreakings to ribbon cuttings in his community. "There are opportunities here. We're centrally located to everything in the Valley."

Neighboring Donna can say the same in seeing the emergence of retailing and restaurants just west of Salinas Boulevard along the expressway. The Donna-Weslaco-Mercedes expressway corridor is coming into

"Being centrally located matters more than it ever has," said Steve Valdez, the executive director of the Weslaco Economic Development Corporation, when describing Mid-Valley growth.

Finding A Midpoint

Joe Castro enjoyed the fanfare and buzz of a ribbon cutting of a new Starbucks in Mercedes.

The Starbucks district director had reason to feel the good vibes in being welcomed by city officials as the new coffee shop opened on a cool early April morning. Customers packed the house and a brass section from the local high school jazzed up the proceedings. Busy RGV commuters going in either direction can now make a quick Starbucks pit stop via an expressway exit in Mercedes.

"We didn't have a presence like this between Weslaco and Harlingen," Castro said. "Being here in Mercedes at this location fills that spot. We're happy to be here to provide the Starbucks experience in a new location."

Castro talks of seeing changing customer behavior since 2020, with more of an emphasis on drive-through service and quick in-store pickup. In smaller cities, however, there's a bit smaller pace and an enjoyment factor to meet friends for coffee and conversation.

"There's an excitement like you're seeing

today in Mercedes when we open a new store location," Castro said. "In larger cities, it's more hustle and bustle and getting your order and leaving. For smaller cities, a Starbucks is a gathering place. There are more spaces to do that in larger cities but in a smaller town there's fewer places to meet, so we can be that place."

More Opportunities

The Starbucks opening came less than a week after ground was broken on a new





McDonald's in Mercedes on Texas Avenue. The expressway is just a couple of hops away. Franchisee Hector De La Garza saw a city without a McDonald's – a rarity in the Valley – and moved on an opportunity to develop available land along and near high traffic corridors.

"We have an H-E-B across the street and the expressway is close by," De La Garza said. "It's what we look for with good traffic and a great location."

All indications are that market trends will continue to favor Mid-Valley communities.

Texas Roadhouse, Olive Garden, Chick-fil-A and Chili's are among the major name brands that have opened or are making plans to build new restaurants along the Mid-Valley's expressway corridor. Rooftops are going up with emerging subdivisions in the area with the expressway only minutes away for commuters heading to McAllen or Harlingen.

In Mercedes, Perez, the city manager, talks of prospects that look promising for further development adjacent to the outlet mall.

"Business always attracts more business," Perez said. "We have more projects and announcements coming."





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Pluton Brews Success In Brownsville

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, Content Editor

Brownsville's band of brewery brothers is inching closer to opening the city's first soupto-nuts craft beer business.

The Pluton Brewery Company is nearing completion of its 5,280-square-foot building on 805 E. Elizabeth in the city's downtown. It's a long time coming for Daniel Arizpe and Joey Martinez along with their partners and team of employees. They are taking their dream from making beer in the garage of a west Brownsville home to a robust operation of interconnected kettles, tanks and fermenting equipment to make their products on a large scale and for individual pour overs on tap at bars and lounges.

"It's a passion," Arizpe said while giving a recent tour of the Pluton facility, which will open later this month. "What we do comes from the heart."

Making beer from scratch is a long and complicated process. Learning how to do it

right takes years of practice, trial and error. Having the right mentors to guide the process toward proficiency is essential as well. For Arizpe and Pluton, the big brothers in that regard are 5X5 Brewing of Mission. The veteran-owned craft brewery took the upstart Brownsville brewers under its wing.

The students are now ready to join their teachers in opening a brewery that will feature a continuous process of making Pluton-branded beers for large volume sales. Pluton also aims to be a place in downtown Brownsville where friends can gather barside to enjoy a cold one. Maybe a sports bar setting could provide a place to watch football games and boxing matches. There's room for all of that and more in a building that once housed grocery stores and furniture shops. It is now filled with everything needed to make a wide selection of craft beers.

"We're here because of how hard we've

worked and how we just kept at it, learning and adding to the knowledge of being in this business," Arizpe said. "And now it's all blossoming. We're here and ready to go."

Finding The Right Spot

It wasn't easy to find a building that could serve as a production facility while also being an inviting place to gather for drinks to watch a ballgame or just hang out.

Added to the search was that Arizpe and his team wanted a downtown location, a part of Brownsville that's on the upswing. Public and private investments are revitalizing historic buildings and repurposing them for retailing and trendy restaurants. The Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation has been a major player in these efforts. Its grants help small business owners with construction costs while BCIC also offers insights on budget planning and marketing.





Pluton is among the businesses that have benefitted from the BCIC's help. From the start, their search for a location to house their production and bar/lounge combo business focused on downtown. It took over a dozen building searches before they found the right one on try number 13. Their Elizabeth Street location is just a few blocks north of the iconic 1930s-era federal courthouse building. In the years to come, the annual Charro Days parades will make their way past the Pluton Brewery building.

"It felt fitting," Arizpe said of locating Pluton downtown. "It means a lot to us to be part of the revitalization of downtown. We love our city and we don't want downtown to be forgotten."

Long Road

Arizpe and Diego Garcia, an engineer and brewer for Pluton, gave an information-packed tour of the soon-to-open crafty brewery and did so with the gusto of the beer they will make on Elizabeth Street.

There is a network of silver kettles and tanks lined up in connecting form, with the brewers explaining that production of Pluton's beers will be a continuous process once everything gets going. This is where the grains and hops will be added and expertly mixed with a fermentation process that gives beer its alcohol content and carbonation. It takes about two weeks for beer to complete the fermentation process.

It's highly technical work but will make for good viewing for Pluton's patrons when looking through clear vinyl plastic walls and watching the brewers at work. The Pluton plan is to have in-house customers enjoying the variety of craft beers made onsite while also being a supplier of beers for area bars and lounges. Arizpe and his team also have ambitions to package beer at their site for retail sales at area grocers and stores.

It's all a long way from where they started as childhood friends in the neighborhoods of west Brownsville to growing up into adulthood and acquiring interests and hobbies, one of which they are now developing into one of their hometown's more unique businesses. Their brewery is named for one of the streets of their Galaxia neighborhood that's located by the Military Highway.

"It's a huge deal for us to be here," Arizpe said, anticipating Pluton's imminent opening. "It's a cool thing to see the impact we're having."





and is nearing opening of a production facility and pub

in the city's downtown. (Courtesy)

20 +/- ACRES DEVELOPMENT/FARMLAND



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 Price:
 \$320,000

 Lot Size:
 20 Acres

 Price per Acre:
 \$16,000

Highlights

Frontage on Mile 9 NorthIrrigated FarmlandA

Water/Electricity availableApprox. 660' of frontage

Overview:

20 +/- acres of development/farmland in Mercedes, Texas. Land sits 1.8 miles north of I-69 and the Rio Grande Valley Premium Outlets. The farmland is irrigated, and water/electricity is available. Property is currently being leased as farmland. Property can be combined with adjacent properties for sale to assemble a total of approximately 89 gross acres.

30 +/- ACRES DEVELOPMENT/FARMLAND



MILE 2 E RD, MERCEDES, TX 78570

Price: \$479,000
Lot Size: 30 Acres
Price per Acre: \$15,967

Highlights:

Frontage on Mile 2 East
 Irrigated Farmland

Irregular tract

Water/Electricity Available

Overview:

30 +/- acres of development/farmland in Mercedes, Texas. Land sits 2 miles north of I-69 and the Rio Grande Valley Premium Outlets. The farmland is irrigated, and water/electricity is available. Property is currently being leased as farmland. Property can be combined with adjacent properties for sale to assemble a total of approximately 89 gross acres.



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Llano Grande Stays Active In `Paradise'

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, Content Editor

The view from the levee separating the 200-acre Llano Grande Resort from its 18-hole golf course is worthy of stopping for a moment to take in. It's the expanse of what's essentially a small town within Mercedes' city limits.

The resort has over 1,100 spaces where its 2,000-plus residents reside in homes, cottages, apartments, mobile homes and RVs. Llano Grande recently celebrated its 50th anniversary in Mercedes and is nestled by a levee managed by the International Boundary and Water Commission. The federal agency's regional headquarters are in close proximity to the resort just south of Business 83 on Mile 2 W Road.

Winter Texan communities like the one at Llano Grande have their own sense of place. They are defined by long-standing friendships and shared generational and cultural experiences of being from the Midwest and Canada. The residents living in Llano Grande, like similar parks in the Rio Grande Valley, are in the midst of a great shift from World War II retirees to the burgeoning baby boomer generation reaching retirement ages.

Staying Active

Estimates are there are 10,000 baby boomers turning 65 per day, bringing with it huge changes in the U.S. workforce. Thousands of Americans are leaving behind work every day in seeking a life with more leisure. With another Winter Texan season ending, the tourist industry is seeing the generational change amongst the Valley's northern visitors.

"They're more active and younger," said Mary Lou Cantu, the events coordinator for Llano Grande.

The assessment is borne out in the number of fitness centers, swimming pools, tennis and pickleball courts, and a golf course that has seen \$1 million in improvements in recent months.

The activities at Llano Grande go beyond the traditional RV park offerings. They include a woodworking shop, an art studio and daily yoga classes. The 55-and-older residents at Llano Grande want things to do and they do them daily.

"It's fun to see," Cantu said of how active the resort's residents are.

Physical & Social Networks

Driving a golf cart on the levee in providing a tour is Kim Poyer, Llano Grande's community manager. She marvels at the size and life found at what she calls "our little piece of paradise."

"Llano is like a little city," she said.

Poyer's description of the resort as a small community is reinforced by the fact that it has its own fiber network with connected internet and cable systems.

The network covers the original Llano Grande site east of Mile 2 Road with decades-old oak trees and its canopies extending over carports and anchored mobile homes. The resort's original events and activities center is also located in the older section of Llano. A yoga class was underway in the center on a recent morning. Across the way, to the west of Mile 2, is where the majority of the resort's residents live. The area includes more traditional housing with well-kept lawns and two-story apartment buildings.

Llano Grande, like all RGV resort communities, includes a healthy contingent of temporary RV-vehicle residents who stay for a handful of winter months before heading back to Canada or the Midwest. More of its residents, however, are choosing to stay year-round, said Poyer. They are building an even stronger sense of community at the resort.

Local Connections

That connection is what Llano Grande is





trying to build outside of its boundaries. It's a point Poyer highlights during a recent tour of the resort she helps manage. Llano Grande was purchased by California-based BoaVida RV Parks & Resorts in 2021. Since then, and under the leadership of General Manager Mike Herrick, the resort has nurtured closer ties to Mercedes, Poyer said.

Llano Grande works closely with local first responders. The resort actively supports the Mercedes Fire Department's holiday toy drive. The city's police department is responsive to the resort's calls and Poyer praised officers for being diligent in looking out for the safety and well being of its residents. At Llano Grande's newer events center, high school proms take place at the 25,000-square-foot facility with community market days regularly in the facility's spacious parking lots.

"The residents have a big heart for Mercedes," Poyer said. "We feel like we're part of the community."





ART RESIDENCY

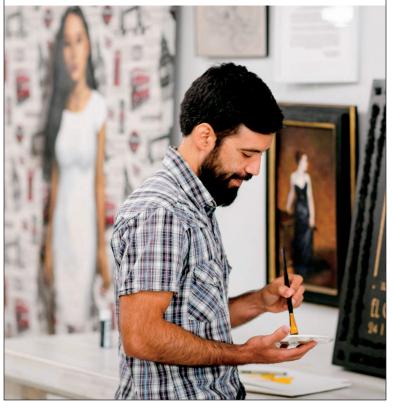
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Final Decision Looms In Building LNG Plant

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, Content Editor

Eduardo Campirano has been the chief executive officer at the Port of Brownsville for 16 years. For the majority of those years, one grand project has rattled around as a possibility during his administration.

He recalled that 12 years ago, the earliest discussions began of a liquefied natural gas plant at the port. What began as both a distant dream and remote possibility has evolved over the years to one that has arrived at the port's doorstep. The NextDecade is currently nearing an official announcement that it will build an \$11 billion-plus LNG plant at the port.

"You want to say we're confident because we've spent so much time on it," Campirano said recently at a NextDecade/ Rio Grande LNG open house in Port Isabel. "At the same time, I want to see it happen after so many years of discussions."

On The Right Path

The Rio Grande LNG would occupy nearly 1,000 acres on the northern side of the Port of Brownsville by state Highway 48 and just east of the port's fishing harbor. Building the massive project would require the employment of 5,000 construction workers. When completed, it would employ as many as 400 permanent workers.

The proposed Brownsville LNG has cleared nearly all of the environmental regulatory hurdles while also prevailing in various legal actions attempting to block its construction. The last challenge – and it's a major one – is NextDecade concluding that it has secured enough long-term deals and customer agreements to get the Brownsville LNG plant off to a rousing start. Seeking Alpha, a financial services company and publisher of market news, estimated in late March that NextDecade had signed agreements for 70 percent of Rio Grande LNG's phase 1 capacity.

The energy company NextDecade has already opened a Brownsville office and is meanwhile making local staffing hires. At its mid-April open house in Port Isabel, the company worked to nurture local community support while being guarded about making any grand pronouncements.

"We will have an announcement on a final investment decision by the end of June," said Susan Richardson, a senior director of communications for Rio Grande LNG. "We've been in collaborative discussions with stakeholders across the Valley and listening to their concerns."

Vetting Issues

Just days after the Port Isabel open house came the news that Rio Grande's proposed LNG export terminal was placed on the April meeting docket of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission.

In an April 20 meeting, the FERC board voted 3-1 to reaffirm its previous approval of the Brownsville LNG plant and its associated pipeline. Analysts say the FERC vote cleared a major obstacle for Rio Grande LNG and offers a clearer path to close pending agreements for June's final investment decision. The federal board's approval reaffirmed Campirano's confidence in NextDecade's capabilities to address every environmental issue put before it.

"All of these issues have been thoroughly vetted and revetted," he said. "A multiplicity of individuals has looked at all of these issues. Nobody has a higher bar to

reach than these LNGs."

At the Port Isabel open house, Richardson indicated that Rio Grande would move quickly to begin construction if the project were to receive an affirmative investment decision in June. No construction timetable was given at the open house. A Reuters story last year pegged Rio Grande's start of commercial operations beginning in 2026 if current plans were to proceed.

Overcoming Challenges

Environmental groups have a vastly different take on the proposed LNG plant at the Brownsville port.

The Sierra Club, Save RGV and the Shrimpers and Fishers of the RGV have contended the LNG and the pipeline that would bring natural gas to the facility from West Texas violates the Clean Water Act and is environmentally destructive. Many of the same claims these groups have made against the LNG were also lodged against the SpaceX project at nearby Boca Chica Beach.

The latter is today fully operational and it appears legal claims will likewise not





block the LNG from proceeding. However, lack of necessary capital and long-term customer agreements are what could sidetrack Rio Grande LNG. The initial \$11.4 billion investment for phase one of Rio Grande LNG would represent the largest single private sector announcement in Texas in 2023, Campirano said.

The port director said the project would catapult the Valley into being a major player in the energy sector and lead to vast infrastructure improvements in the region.

"We've never been in that discussion," Campirano said of the magnitude of the proposed LNG investment. "It's going to have a far-reaching impact on the community as a whole, not just the port. It will allow us to be with Corpus and everyone above us in terms of electrical infrastructure, load construction, all that drives this."

For now, Campirano patiently waits to see if the project that would change the face of the Port of Brownsville will receive the final approval it needs to go forward. The impression given at the open house is that the goal is well within reach.



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McAllen Program For Deaf Serves RGV Students

By Chris Ardis

The McAllen Independent School District is the home of the Regional Day School Program for The Deaf and has long played a key role in the education of hard-of-hearing students.

The McAllen program got its start in 1979 as the Regional School for the Deaf. An Easter Seals donation came to the program in the form of an audiometric booth for conducting student audiological examinations.

On March 24, McAllen's regional program for the deaf marked a new chapter in its services by holding a dedication and ribbon cutting of its new state-of-the art audiometric suite at Escandon Elementary School. It's the home campus for pre-K through fifth-grade students in the program.

The school district's program for the deaf currently educates nearly 325 students who live in Hidalgo and Starr counties. The district provides bus transportation from area cities to its facilities at Escandon. The program also offers academic and support services for students at Escandon, Brown Middle School and Memorial High School. Additional services are provided for students between the ages of 18 and 22, as well as assistance for infants diagnosed with a hearing loss.

The program also offers sign-language classes for parents, and training for Rio Grande Valley districts and teachers who have deaf and hard-of-hearing students in their classes.

Boost In Quality

Liza Lara, the director of McAllen's program for the deaf says getting the new facilities "was truly a labor of love."

Efforts to get the new equipment began in

2021 when McAllen school administrators asked department and program leaders throughout the district to identify their greatest needs. From there, it could be determined if those needs qualified for federal Elementary

and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds through the American Rescue Plan.

Lara and her team submitted a proposal for a new audiometric booth to replace the one donated to the program in the 1970s.







"The sound quality was one of the big struggles with the old booth," said Ayde Pena, an audiology assistant. "We shared this office and everyone outside the booth had to completely stop everything when a student was being tested."

Identifying the need and having district leaders approve it was the easy part. Precise results from students' audiological exams are critical for speech therapy, language development and listening skills.

"Deaf and hard-of-hearing students max out on their ability to hear," Lara said. "We want the hearing they have, what's called their residual hearing, to be as clear and as crisp as possible. In cases where they are still unable to understand speech, safety becomes a priority so they can identify the sound of a car or a bus, for example."



Tips On Financing Small Businesses

VBR is kicking off a series with SCORE, a nonprofit organization fostering vibrant small business communities through mentoring and educational workshops. The nation's largest network of volunteer, expert business mentors helps small businesses plan, launch, manage and grow.

In this SCORE Q&A, we speak to Pete Carvell, a SCORE mentor, leader and past district director.

Q: What are some options in financing a small business? A: There are several ways to get financing, including a loan, investor financing, crowdfunding, friends and family, and even yourself.

Q: How could one provide their own financing?

A: You could use the equity in your home via a home equity line of credit, but this is definitely risky.

Q: What about the traditional financing via loans? What are the variables to influence one's ability to borrow if they qualify?

A: Rates will depend on your personal FICO score and the amount of debt you already have.

Q: Crowdfunding seems to be a popular option these days, especially online and via social media, as well as among friends, family and acquaintances. What makes a business attractive to crowdfunding?

A: With crowdfunding, there is a lot of competition. The key is to be "sexy" and in demand, i.e. sustainable, eco-friendly, etc. With friends and family (another financing option), they know you and could help via a loan or percentage of ownership.

Q: Lastly, tell us a bit about investor financing.

A: Very few investors finance startups. There has to be a viable working model and you will give up a significant percentage of ownership.

For more information or assistance for your small business, contact SCORE Rio Grande Valley for free mentoring, workshops and webinars.

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Designed To Last

Finding vendors proved to be a challenge in setting up the new audiometric suite.

In fact, Lara said, only two vendors in the nation sell the type of audiometric booth they sought. One of those operates in Texas, which is e3 Diagnostics in Cedar Park. Their bid received district approval and the results are now part of the new facilities.

Instead of an audiometric booth, the program features an audiometric testing suite with two separate doors and one room for the audiologist and another for the student The old booth had only one room with a divider wall to separate the audiologist from the student.

Patricia Roldan is the chief audiologist at A+Audiology and Hearing Services in Mission and has also worked for the McAllen school district for more than 10 years. She works at Escandon once a week throughout the school year.

"The old booth was top-level at one time, but it had a lot of sound leakage inside and outside the booth and did not have enough outlets," Roldan said. "This one is as soundproof as it should be. When you close the door, there's no sound leakage."

Vanessa Salinas, a high school student in the program, recognizes the importance of the suite being soundproof.

"In the old one, it was hard for me to hear," she signed, as instructional strategist Robyn Ellis voiced for her. "I completed a practice test and I could hear the difference!"

Now, Roldan said, employees can maintain a good working environment outside of the suite while she is testing students inside. The suite is also wheelchair accessible. The more Roldan learns about the new audiometric suite, the more excited she feels about its possibilities.

"We appreciate all of the effort extended to get it," she said. "This will last 20, 30, maybe 40 years. It's a long-term investment!"





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