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Who Has The Key?

by: Todd Breland

Some say, it's all about timing. Starting a new business or expanding an existing one - is the economy right? Will the market support it?

A million factors run through our heads when entrepreneurs take a leap of faith. Is the door cracked, or do we open it ourselves? The decision is never easy because success or failure looms in our minds. Risk is ever-present.

We ask ourselves, is it a product or service customers need or want. How much will be the overhead? What should be the price points? Is there room for competition? Laying out short-term and long-term plans with a fluid business model must be created.

Adrenaline junkies live for the high - taking a vision or concept and turning it into a successful company. Entrepreneurs are risk takers, and know very well the costs. Startup capital may necessitate life savings, and the costs only start there. Operational, maintenance and personnel investments plus

blood, sweat and tears will pour into a brand new or expanded business.

A funding source or sources are considered for future endeavors. Rainy day monies will be needed so taking on at least one partner is considered. One has to also decide if that possible partnership will be active or silent.

Entrepreneurs know to truly be successful, it is necessary to hire quality personnel who are talented in specific areas of expertise. A one-man show is extremely difficult in most cases. Knowing the exact number of co-workers is usually an art, not a science. Trial and error play a major part.

So who will create the next great Rio Grande Valley business, product or service? Starting a company will inevitably get some doors slammed, but with a quality idea, the right model, successful leadership and truck loads of perseverance, Valley entrepreneurs will win. A man or woman who ever had a chance, took a chance.

Maybe it's time to find the right key and open the door to countless opportunities. Generations of success could be as close as the next room.



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Museum Chronicles Conjunto's History

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Reynaldo Avila was nothing if persistent and so was his cause to find a proper home for a vast collection of conjunto music memorabilia.

Avila toiled for over two decades to locate a permanent home for the Conjunto Music Hall of Fame & Museum. In the 2010s, the museum was shoehorned into a 650-square-foot space in a San Benito city-owned building shared with other historical collections. Avila was promised that he could move into a much larger space at the next-door San Benito Cultural Heritage Museum that was under construction in 2017.

City officials would renege on that promise. It was a continuation of broken promises made by the city as to where Avila's collection could be housed. The memorabilia chronicles the birth and history of conjunto music in San Benito and the South Texas region. At the end of his life in 2019, as he lay ill, Avila told his daughter, Patricia, "we're done."

Avila didn't want his grown children to take up his years-long quest.

"He didn't want to put that burden on us," Patricia said.

Her brother, Peter, recalled the "hard questions" the family asked after their father's passing. What would they do with all of the records, posters, equipment and other material highlighting the history of an American genre of music? Avila's widow, Aurora, and her children decided to "push forward," Peter said, refusing to give up on their father's dream.

Home By The Resaca

In the summer of 2023, the dream of Reynaldo Avila was fulfilled.

The story of conjunto music starring its historical figures and featuring replicas of recording studios and radio booths is now at San Benito's Aztec Building on Robertson Street. It's history inside history given the iconic status the 1930s-era Azteca has in San Benito. And the conjunto hall of fame is now situated on the banks of the city's signature resaca that

runs through the heart of San Benito.

"It's what my dad always wanted," Peter Avila said. "He wanted the museum on the resaca."

The multi-floor Aztec Building in its nine-decade existence has housed City Hall, the chamber of commerce and most recently Head Start administrative offices. The building, which some have described as looking like a battleship by the resaca, was renowned during its first few decades for having Saturday night bails on its rooftop.

The Feb. 18 grand opening of the Texas Conjunto Music Hall Of Fame & Museum brought back the glory days' swagger to the Aztec. The Avilas signed a Nov. 22, 2022 agreement with the city to move the museum into the historic structure. It took nearly three months to arrange and stage some of the best pictures, records and other items from Rey Avila's extensive collection. Going room to room, it's all there, the story of the South Texas



A walk through the Conjunto Music Hall of Fame and Museum takes a look at the eras that launched the music. (VBR)

music from Narciso “El Huracan del Valle” Martinez, the father of conjunto, to Freddy Fender, a hometown boy, and beyond to other legends like Ramon Ayala and Flaco Jimenez.

“My dad would be so happy and so proud,” Patricia Avila said.

A Place In History

Entering the museum, in the first room to the immediate right, black lettering on a big glass window says, “Ideal Records.”

It’s a centerpiece exhibit and for good reason. In the post-World War II era, the San Benito-based record company became one of the Southwest’s biggest producers and distributors of a new American music that became to be known as “conjunto.” Its origins go back to the mid-1930s when a San Benito-area accordionist named Narciso Martinez teamed up with bajo sexto guitarist Santiago Alemeida to figure out a new way to blend their instruments to create a sound and beat never heard before.

The sound made its way across Mexican-American communities in Texas and across the Southwest and all the way up to Washington, where farm-working families congregated to



Ideal Records was based in San Benito and for many years was one of the country’s leading distributors and producers of conjunto recordings. (VBR)

Narciso Martinez is considered one of the co-founders of conjunto music and resided in the San Benito area. (VBR)



After many years of searching, the extensive collection of Rey Avila’s conjunto music history has a home at the iconic Aztec Building in San Benito. (VBR)



harvest crops. The birth of conjunto music resonated in these communities and inspired a new generation of musicians. Among them was Baldemar Huerta, who became known to the world as Freddy Fender, a San Benito boy who made early recordings in his hometown.

The history of it all fascinated Rey Avila and set him off on a 30-year effort to collect and curate records, posters, equipment and materials of all sorts that chronicle the birth and establishment of conjunto music. His work and collection have come alive in a museum that he envisioned and has been set up by his children to honor their father.

"All together, we don't equal one of him," Peter Avila said.

"I can, I can, I will, I will," Joe Avila said, recalling his father's spirit and attitude.

Now they have in their father's memory, pushing forward.

The Texas Conjunto Music Hall of Fame & Museum is located at 402 W. Robertson Street in San Benito. Visit <http://www.texasconjuntomusic.org> for more information.

San Benito's history in helping to give birth to the rise of conjunto music is highlighted at the local museum. (VBR)



Reynaldo Avila and Freddy Fender look over old records in a photo on display at the conjunto music museum in San Benito. (VBR)



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Gym Owner Connects To Fitness & Community

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Jason Martinez's career in retailing was taking off in the early 2000s as the Mercedes native returned to the Rio Grande Valley with the recent opening of a Foley's department store at La Plaza Mall.

The McAllen mall went into another gear in that era after landing a big department store from a renowned regional chain with Houston roots. It was in those years that Martinez graduated with a business finance degree from the University of Texas San Antonio. He caught the attention of Foley's managers who hired him and set him on a track to management after successful years of floor sales.

There was another element in his life where he was finding enjoyment and fulfillment, and that began to feel like a calling. It's the world of fitness and body building and coaching others to be a better version of themselves. In 2004, he pursued that path, opening a gym in Weslaco with financial assistance from family to start the business. It would turn out to be a wise investment.

Building A Business

Over the next 12 years, his Weslaco gym became a Mid-Valley mainstay as his own career in bodybuilding competitions took off.

Martinez would become a recognized bodybuilder in the sport under the auspices of the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness. It's an international governing body that oversees many of the sport's major events.

Martinez has retired from those competitions. He's now focused on another Mid-Valley gym he owns and operates, The Grind RGV fitness center in Mercedes. He opened The Grind in 2015 and would close his Weslaco gym the following year as corporate gym chains began to aggressively enter the Valley market. Now back in his hometown, operating a successful 5,000-square-foot gym, Martinez relishes the connection he has with members as he continues his work as a personal trainer and coach.

"I've seen what it's done for me and how it has helped me," he said of being fit and keeping up the work to stay that way. "It's a fountain of youth. To hear members tell me

that they feel better, more energized and that they feel better about themselves, that's the satisfaction I get from helping people."

Coming Home

There wasn't much business activity to speak of on the intersection of Expressway 83 and Mile 2 E Road when Martinez opened his gym at the Mercedes East Plaza.

The Mercedes Economic Development Corporation recruited him in 2015 to open at the new plaza with some incentives to encourage him to return home. Growth on the eastern edge of the city seemed far off back then but today it's another story. The Gateway Travel Center has opened just down the access road from the plaza and is already proving to be a middle-of-the Valley



Jason Martinez traded a promising career in retail management for his true calling as a gym owner and fitness coach. (VBR)

hub for truckers and commuters.

A Chick-fil-A and Wendy's are part of the travel center development area as developers gravitate toward the Mid-Valley and its land availability along the expressway.

"There's a lot of opportunity here with all of the open land we have in Mercedes," Martinez said. "The city is growing more this way so hopefully that will bring more awareness."

Fit & Connected

Martinez's gym on a recent weekday

morning was brimming with activity.

Fitness enthusiasts from Harlingen to Mercedes, and some smaller towns in between, were moving from station to station, utilizing free weights, plate load and pin select weights. There's plenty of cardio equipment as well. There are as many women as men at The Grind, with Martinez commenting that "social media has opened the door that it's OK to work out and lift weights, it's not just a man thing anymore."

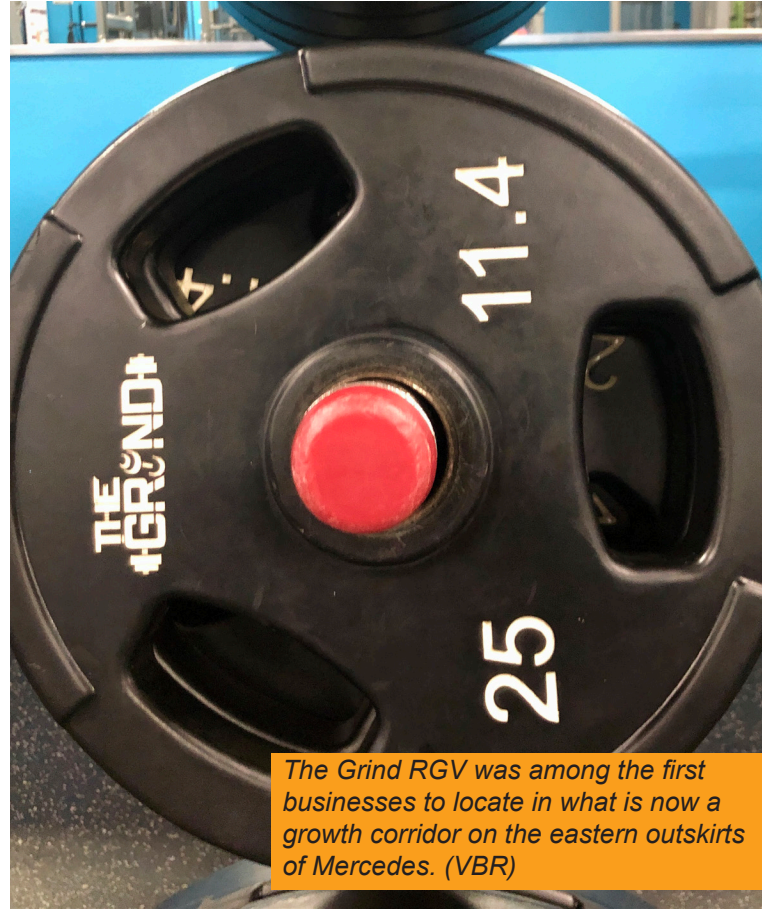
"It's not a luxury anymore," he said of being physically active and exercising. "It's now a necessity to better your life."

If fitness enthusiasts pump iron at The Grind, they're sure to get the attention and time of the gym owner and his staff. The connection to members is what makes the Mercedes gym feel like a great place to hang out and get busy working out with friends and staff they come to know well.

"I know my members," Martinez said. "You're not just a number here like at the corporate gyms. We build a bond with our clients."

The Grind RGV is located at 7013 E. Expressway 83, Suite E, in Mercedes and Martinez can be reached at 956-903-4168.

The Grind RGV of Mercedes is a popular fitness stop for members in the Mid-Valley and nearby communities in Cameron County. (VBR)



The Grind RGV was among the first businesses to locate in what is now a growth corridor on the eastern outskirts of Mercedes. (VBR)



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Platform Seeks To Boost Dialogue On Issues

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

William Steele imagined a better way of communication beyond the chatter and noise of social media that vents anger but leads nowhere when it comes to solutions and collaboration.

He began to form the outlines of a civic media platform that could link citizens to their elected officials in discussing and analyzing issues. Steele's wishes soared with ambition and with an idealism he wanted to apply to a new kind of online platform.

"I wanted to build this product for years but I didn't have the skill set to do it on my own," said Steele, who is a software and AI developer. "It was a pipedream."

Luckily for Steele, who lives in Harlingen, he would come to have willing partners in one of his former professors at Kansas State University and a fellow high-tech entrepreneur who resides in Austin. Jorge Valenzuela is the professor and Jack Sawyer, like Steele, had started work on a similar sort of civic media platform. From their first meeting in Austin, Steele and Sawyer knew they were like minded and shared the same ethics and values in creating a new kind of platform.

Add Valenzuela as a wise mentor to the younger partners and the three together would form Represent, a civic media platform company that for now is housed at the eBridge Center in Brownsville. The latter is a startup incubator and entrepreneurial resource center and is ideal for a company like Represent that is under formation and showing promise. On May 25, a launch party was held at eBridge that was open to the general public as well as local elected officials who wanted to take a first look at the Represent platform.

"We want something that allows for elected leaders to foster a better connection to citizens," Steele said.

Valenzuela describes it as "removing the noise" of social media and creating something purer that results in elected officials and their communities being more aligned and better informed.

Building A Pipeline

The concept is for Represent to be browser based versus being an application, or an app, to be downloaded as is the case with Facebook and Twitter.

After signing up on Represent, an account is created and the user can communicate with

others on the platform along with elected officials who are similarly registered. From there, the intent is to create an orderly and efficient discussion of shared issues instead of random chaos. The programming architecture being created by the Represent partners leads to "topics of address" being created.

If a topic is about the widening of a busy thoroughfare, for example, users can offer their thoughts on the topic via posts that are seen by all participants. Each post would be like an individual item on a petition and voted upon for clarity and quality. The post receiving the most votes would be delivered to an elected official, like a mayor who would have his or her own Represent account. There would be a flexibility to see all posts behind the one chosen as being the best articulation of an issue, but the emphasis is on summarizing

the issue effectively.

Sawyer calls it building "a pipeline" from citizens to elected officials without the insults and mean edge of what's commonly found on social media. Users would be anonymously verified as being humans and not bots that have plagued many social apps.

The goal is for a mayor and other local leaders to read quality posts from residents on important community issues and engage with them on those topics. The end result, hopefully, is more information shared and better policies and actions taken by a city commission or a county government board with the public's viewpoint in mind.

Steele believes Represent can work with municipal governments to provide this sort of dialogue and will be willing to pay for the services the platform can provide. It would be



William Steele, Jorge Valenzuela and Jack Sawyer are collaborating on a startup company in Brownsville that seeks to connect citizens to their elected officials. (VBR)

a primary method of generating revenues for the new company.

Lofty Goals

The goals of the Represent partners are lofty ones and they will start their project with Brownsville residents and their local governments.

Creating those partnerships with local governments is underway as Represent rolls out their platform. Beyond user comments and dialogue with elected officials, it is hoped the platform can lead to the creation of polls that can gauge the views and needs of local residents. The Represent partners are seeking to cut through the clutter of social media in doing their part to diminish misinformation and boost trust in democratic institutions. That's a tall order these days, but the three partners are determined and committed to their emerging product.

"It's not there for idle discussion," Steele said of the Represent platform. "We want to facilitate a good dialogue and ask better questions."

More information about the project can be found on www.respresent.dev.



The eBridge Center is a partnership headed by the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation and seeks to nurture and establish startup companies such as Represent, a civic media platform enterprise. (VBR)

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Program Revitalizing Heart Of Harlingen

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

A supply store's vintage red sign has been a Harrison Avenue mainstay for decades even as old retailers like Sears and classic H-E-B stores have come and gone from one of Harlingen's long-standing thoroughfares.

The white letters on a red backdrop that say "Valley Barber & Beauty Supply" had faded over the decades but they have recently received a new shine. The over 100-year-old business had seen its outdoor signage fade with the passing years, not to mention the unrelenting South Texas sun, but as it turned out, help was on the way.

The Harlingen Economic Development Corporation kicked off its Revitalize Harlingen program early this year. With an eye toward helping small businesses like the beauty supply store, the matching grant program focused on the city's downtown and adjacent areas. These include Harrison, Jackson, Van Buren and Tyler avenues, along with F Street.

James Lopez is Valley Beauty's fourth-generation family business owner. He knew when hearing of the program that it was something that would benefit his store. His \$10,000 investment in signage, shelving and flooring improvements was matched by the EDC. Lopez shows before and after photos of his signage facing Harrison. The vivid improvements have led to customers coming into Valley Beauty for the first time, he said.

"Our business has become more noticeable," Lopez said of the store's improvements. "It's great for the city to be doing this. It's going to help businesses like ours."

The revitalization program is proceeding as intended, said Beverly Loftus, the EDC's interim chief executive officer. Seventeen businesses have been approved thus far for participation. Helping small businesses in an older section of the city that have seen visual decline is the program's initial goal, Loftus said.

"The program can help restore a sense of vibrancy and community spirit," she said.

"This revitalization program can breathe new life into small businesses in this area by implementing site improvements."

South Texas from the Rio Grande Valley to Laredo to Corpus Christi.

The store supplies barber shops and beauty salons with the essential items they need to serve their customers. Styling tools, hair care and skin care products are neatly stocked, ready for delivery and for walk-in customers. The supply store has kept up with the times when it comes to maintaining its customer base, but the visual appearance needed major improvements, as did some of the basic infrastructure like shelving and flooring.

That's where the revitalization grants came in handy. The red lettering against a white

building facade looks brilliant after a recent paint job, with the iconic sign showing a new luster of its own. Inside the store, new shelving in a warehouse area shows another portion of the business where the revitalization grants are making a difference.

Lopez said the recent visual and infrastructure improvements at Valley Beauty Supply are the first ones made in decades at the business. It has provided a much-needed boost for a local legacy business.

"I knew we needed to jump on this," he said of the revitalization program. "It's a great move for the city."



James Lopez is a fourth-generation family business owner. He says a grant from the Harlingen Economic Development Corporation is boosting his business. (VBR)

Needed Boost

The Valley Beauty Supply store is an active business. Its customer base spans

Expanding Program

Two streets over on West Jackson Avenue, Lori Rogers says the same for her Rio Grande Valley Arts Studio.

Rogers' nearly 30-year-old business needed roof repairs and she is using a \$10,000 EDC grant to cover a portion of that expense. The multifaceted business that offers arts, dance and karate classes covers well over 10,000 square feet. Dreading possible leaks after a heavy rain is a thing of the past and Rogers is grateful for the city's support.

"To have Harlingen reach out of us is such a blessing," she said. "It means so much to have that support from your city."

Harlingen Mayor Norma Sepulveda said the improvement grant program that matches up to \$10,000 in project costs is a concept that can see expansion elsewhere.

"I look forward to seeing this program succeed and expanding it to other areas of Harlingen," the mayor said. "This initiative will revitalize small businesses in the city of Harlingen."

Go to harlingenedc.com/revitalize-harlingen for more information about the program.



The exterior signage of Valley Beauty Supply had a dramatic improvement thanks to a Harlingen EDC grant program. (VBR)



Valley Beauty Supply is utilizing a Harlingen grant program to improve its store appearance and infrastructure. (VBR)

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Trading Tech World For Wine & SPI

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Yolanda Feldstein's two decades-long career in the technology and computing industry largely met her career aspirations.

She had risen to management positions at a large San Antonio tech firm. There were no real reasons to look elsewhere for work opportunities other than the leisurely thoughts that drifted into her mind during visits to South Padre Island. The Island is where her husband Zack proposed to her. It has always been the couple's favorite beach, even after visiting better known resort areas like Key West, Fla.

In the latter part of 2022, Yolanda began to envision living on the Island. Could her husband, who's also in the tech field, work remotely from home if they relocated? The answer was yes. What could Feldstein do on the Island if she gave up her tech job in San Antonio?

The answer, after giving it much thought and scouting South Padre, landed on an intriguing possibility. The Feldsteins would open a wine bar.

Following A Dream

It's a late spring morning at the SPI Wine Bar and Yolanda Feldstein is getting her business ready to receive customers when it opens later that day.

A distributor has just left after a discussion about what wines are finding favor with customers and a look at other selections that might do the same. Feldstein aims for an interesting mix of wines from around the world that are not readily found at nearby competitors. She wants to stock more Texas-sourced wines and spoke of the challenges of getting them to her startup business.

It's hardly the only issue to be dealt with for a wine bar that opened in April. Feldstein says the level of marketing and promotions needed to get word out about a new business is more than she imagined. She also spoke of breaking into the core of loyalties that Island-based residents have for their favorite businesses.

Despite it all, Feldstein expressed few doubts about the path taken in relocating to South Padre and pursuing an endeavor unlike anything she has ever done.

"I wanted to do it and I'm doing it," Feldstein said. "I moved away from

everyone to follow this dream, I feel that it has to be successful."

Fitting Right In

The SPI Wine Bar is airy and artsy with an open concept at 2,500 square feet.

It's big enough to take up the equivalent of two suites on the 4000 block of Padre Boulevard. The Island is big on art these days and the wine bar fits right in. The work of seven SPI-area artists lines the walls of the business. Feldstein describes her wine bar as "a very chill type of place." The business is new enough that it has yet to go through the Island's full cycle of commerce that ranges from the busy

months of spring and summer before the slower months of fall and winter set in.

The wine bar did experience the tail end of the 2023 Winter Texan season and is now tapping into the busy summer tourist months. Bachelorette and birthday parties have already been hosted at the wine bar. An artist showcase in mid-June promoted Island art and the new business as well. Feldstein and her husband are all in as they determine if their observation of South Padre needing a wine bar rings true.

"We're figuring out where we fit into that space," she said of the Island's entertainment and bar landscape.

Some early reviews indicate the wine bar

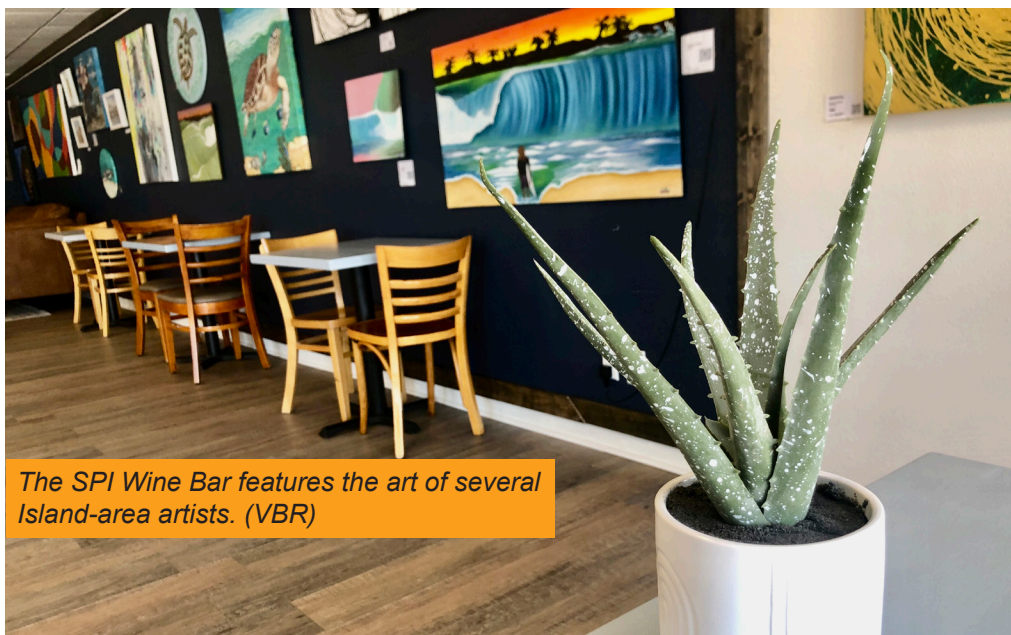


Yolanda Feldstein gave up a successful career in tech to pursue her small business dreams on South Padre Island. (VBR)

is fitting in quite well. Christina Salazar, in an online review, praised SPI Wine Bar for its “artistic atmosphere, unique wine selection,” adding she “will definitely make it my wine spot on South Padre Island.”

Feldstein is grateful for those kind words in feeling the positive vibes of what she calls “the tippy tip of the state and country.”

The SPI Wine Bar is located at 4000 Padre Boulevard and more information about the business can be found at www.spiwinebar.com



The SPI Wine Bar features the art of several Island-area artists. (VBR)



The SPI Wine Bar is a “chill type of place,” says its owner. (VBR)



The SPI Wine Bar features selections from around the world that are not easily found elsewhere on the local level. (VBR)

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National Vendor Finds Home In McAllen

By Chris Ardis

Bags checked? Done. Boarding pass and identification ready to show at the gate? Yep. Cell phone? Check. A good book to read on the flight? Got it. Then you get through security, find a seat near your gate, and take out that book, only to realize you left your reading glasses at home.

Airport concessions to the rescue.

Travelers at the McAllen International Airport can find an assortment of reading glasses at Explore McAllen. It's operated by Oakwells, which is based in Orlando, Fla., and formed in 2004 with an eye on travelers. Oakwells operates newsstands, specialty retail and food and beverage locations at airports, rail stations and hospitals throughout North America.

Brainstorming sessions led to the company's moniker.

"We wanted a name that has been around awhile and that has roots. We came up with Oakwells," said Michael Reilly, the company president.

Oakwells landed in McAllen after responding to a request for proposal in 2020 for a retail concession operator.

"We do not take a location just to have another one," Reilly said.

He traveled to McAllen and met with Elizabeth Suarez, McAllen's director of aviation.

"It just felt right," Reilly recalled after the meeting.

Once selected, the Oakwells management team readily agreed to use the city-branded name, Explore McAllen, rather than Oakwells.

"When we go into a community, we really want to feel we are part of that community rather than an outsider," Reilly said.

That desire to be a part of the community extends beyond agreeing to a name, he said. The company's two retail shops at the McAllen airport opened in November 2020. They hired local people for all sales and management positions and began networking with local vendors for many of the products they sell.

"Now we have our core group of vendors," Reilly said.

Local Flavor

Two of the most popular local vendors provide a variety of apparel and gifts handmade in Mexico.

Explore McAllen sources colorful, hand-embroidered blouses from Cielito Lindo,



Oakwells' Explore McAllen management team: Cynthia Olivarez, general manager; Lilly Rivera, assistant general manager; Stephanie Del Aguila, barista supervisor; and Josh Vargas, kitchen manager. (Courtesy)

a Mexican boutique in McAllen. Explore McAllen features pieces like the statuesque Catrin and Catrina figurines made of Mexican Talavera (pottery) and sourced locally from El Disco Super Center in Progreso Lakes.

Many of Explore McAllen’s souvenirs are far from ordinary and reflect the places where they do business.

“People want to take back a memento of where they’ve been,” Reilly said, “and these are locally sourced. We’re not cookie cutter. Our merchandise mix includes both standard and regional items.”

Big Hits

McAllen’s airport is the official South Texas airport of the Dallas Cowboys, so fans can find plenty of Cowboys merchandise at Explore McAllen during football season.

In the shops of the MFE, customers will also find travel bags, device chargers, snacks, magnets, and health and beauty items. Oakwells has added to its mix of products with a variety of foods and beverages. They include the company’s grab-and-go salads, tortilla and chicken soups, burrito bowls, with breakfast choices that include muffins, breakfast paninis



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and avocado toast.

The coffee offered has a local twist.

“We sell Jitterz coffee,” Reilly said, referring to the Mission-based coffee roasters. “It’s premium coffee, a taste of McAllen.”

Explore McAllen caters events of all sizes, offering boxed lunches, menu selections and customized orders. Although delivery is not an option, catered meals are ready for pick up at the specified time. The Oakwells app, Oak2Go, allows customers to place their retail or food and beverage orders before they arrive at the airport or even while in line at the ticket counter.

Explore McAllen has proven to be a big hit with travelers, as well as with MFE employees and airport guests dropping off or picking up travelers.

“We are proud to have strong concessionaire programs at the McAllen International Airport to support our growing traveler base,” said Jeremy Santoscoy, the McAllen airport’s deputy director.

Reilly’s first positive impressions of McAllen have proven to be true.

“We are thrilled to be in McAllen!” Reilly said.



The top seller at Explore McAllen inside the McAllen International Airport are these vibrant, hand-painted ornaments. (Courtesy)



Wraps, sandwiches, and freshly made muffins, cookies and cinnamon rolls entice airport travelers to make a stop at Explore McAllen. (Courtesy)

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