

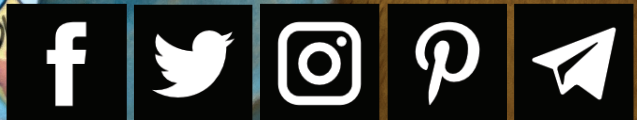
February 2025

# VBR

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# Full Speed Ahead

By Todd Breland

What a wild last 60 days. Holidays, fun family get togethers and real cold weather. Whew!

Now it's throttle time. All teams are prepped -- we're pushing the pedal to the medal. Production departments are rolling, sales personnel are on the streets and administrative executives are planning the next project while keeping tabs on existing numbers.

Spring will be here before we know it, and then it's peak season for South Padre Island. Summer vacationers are checking work and school schedules, and local businesses who cater to tourists are hiring and getting ready for the rush.

April through September offers, budgeting, message and creative content, plus other elements all factor into very upcoming

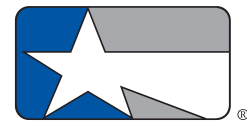
decisions. Owners and managers will soon fine tune staffing, hours of operation, products and/or services and more, all aimed to attract customers and maximize profits.

Our regional tourism days are almost here so now it's go time. Full speed ahead to capitalize on what some call summer "Christmas season."

Get ready, SPI! You're in it to win it!



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The advertisement features a vibrant background of a tropical beach with turquoise water, white sand, and several thatched-roof huts. A large yellow and blue graphic element frames the text on the left. The bottom of the ad is a dark blue banner containing the airport logo and partner airlines.

# Artist Finds Fit In Brownsville

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Annelise Rosas' growing-up years in Monterrey and Austin left a yearning for another city of her youth.

Brownsville is the place where Rosas feels the most comfortable. The Rio Grande Valley's largest city is the best fit for the interchange of languages she speaks. In Monterrey, Rosas was seen as an American and a bit of an outcast despite being the daughter of Mexican-born parents. The view of her in Austin was the opposite, a "Mexican kid" living in Texas, she said.

"I didn't feel like I belonged there," Rosas said of Austin, where she graduated from high school. "I never felt like I was part of the community."

In time, after getting married and experiencing other parts of the United States, she settled in Brownsville. It is where her artistic ambitions and cultural identity have found the perfect match.

"I have the best of both worlds here," Rosas said at her pottery studio in Brownsville. "It has become my place. I have a great fondness for Brownsville."

## Adding Artistic Element

The space of art in Brownsville that is the Annebrije Pottery Studio reflects Rosas'

Mexican and American influences.

It's where she gets to practice and teach her craft and host resident artists. Her background and training include attending a pottery school in Guadalajara and having artistic residencies at studios in Las Vegas and Springfield, MO. The latter city is where Rosas learned the mechanics of managing a business and picked up basics such as where to purchase supplies.

Returning to the Valley in 2023, she set out to apply what she had learned and start the process of launching a new business. Rosas took the last half of 2023 to convert a storage building into an open-air studio with display space for pottery products she and her students create. Her main mission, however, is to teach the craft and provide Brownsville with an added artistic element.

"I felt like there wasn't a place to do



*Students at Annebrije Pottery Studio in Brownsville create a range of different products that are available for purchase. (VBR)*



*Pottery artist Annelise Rosas says Brownsville is the community that has welcomed her art and bicultural upbringing. (VBR)*

pottery in Brownsville,” Rosas said. “My goal was to bring pottery to Brownsville for people here to try it out.”

### **‘So Much Here’**

And that they are.

A busy month at Annebrije will include four classes a week to go with resident artists busy at work with their projects. Two resident artists at Annebrije – Melissa Cortes and Marlon Rocael – recently held the studio’s first art exhibition. Thus far, the majority of Rosas’ students are female and in their 20s and 30s. She hopes as Annebrije gets further settled after opening in early 2024 that the studio can attract a wider array of students.

Monthly memberships are also available. The students with memberships have 24-hour access to the studio and receive ongoing instruction from Rosas. There

*Students at Annebrije Pottery Studio receive expert instruction and the opportunity to create products from scratch. (VBR)*



*Annebrije Pottery Studio in Brownsville offers classes on the craft in addition to selling handmade products. (VBR)*



is a kiln onsite to fire clay and porcelain into pottery, with many of the products requiring multiple burns.

Her path to doing what she loves comes after an initial foray into the medical field and following the footsteps of her parents, who are doctors.

Rosas is delighted in having a pottery-based business in the community that has welcomed her.

“I feel there is so much here,” Rosas said. “The mix of languages where you can speak English or Spanish and be accepted. I like that people here have worked their way up. There’s very little entitlement here. I feel like these are my people.”

Annebrije Pottery Studio is located at 704 Paredes Line Road, Suite G5 in Brownsville. Visit [annebrijestudio.com](http://annebrijestudio.com) for more information.

*Annebrije Pottery Studio features a wide variety of handmade pottery products that are created by local artists. (VBR)*



*Annelise Rosas opened her pottery studio in early 2024 and has found a welcoming market in Brownsville. (VBR)*



# VIDA Seeks To Serve More Students

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Felida Villarreal worked in the private sector as an accountant and financial analyst and developed an interest in the work of non-profit organizations focused on community service.

In the early 2020s, that interest led to a job as the director of finance for VIDA, the acronym for Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement. The Mercedes-based organization was founded in 1995 and serves residents in the four-county Rio Grande Valley. The focus is on serving first-generation college students and those working who are underemployed and seeking to improve their income.

VIDA provides an array of support services to its students while partnering with area colleges and universities in connecting its participants to the needed training and education to becoming more employable. In 2024, VIDA served 750 students. Villarreal – who has risen in the organization to become its chief executive officer – says VIDA’s goal in 2025 is to serve at least 1000 participants as it looks to broaden its appeal and demographic reach.

“I’ve become so inspired by the work we do,” she said. “We work to break down the barriers for our students so they can succeed in their fields of study.”

## Success Stories

VIDA’s start 30 years ago began when private sector leaders and Valley Interfaith joined forces to address the region’s then double-digit unemployment rate and the large numbers of underemployed residents.

Its revenue sources come from local and county governments, federal and state grants, and private foundations. VIDA’s operating revenues have grown from about \$2 million before 2020 to nearly \$5 million in the new year. The added revenues are being directed, in part, to target the 18-to-24-year-old demographic and the older adult learner population. In the middle of those groups is the current average 27-year-old student VIDA currently serves.

“We’re trying to serve more of our community in need,” Villarreal said.

That community includes what she calls “justice-impacted youth.” They are considered an at-risk population who may have not completed high school or fallen into past troubles with the justice system. This segment of the regional population shares some traits

with other VIDA participants in needing more education and training to become more employable in earning a higher wage.

## Growing Employment Opportunities

VIDA has had some of its greatest successes in the following fields:

- Health care, especially in nursing programs.
- Skill trades such as welding, plumbing and electrical.
- Science and engineering and new opportunities with SpaceX and the liquefied natural gas plants coming to Brownsville.

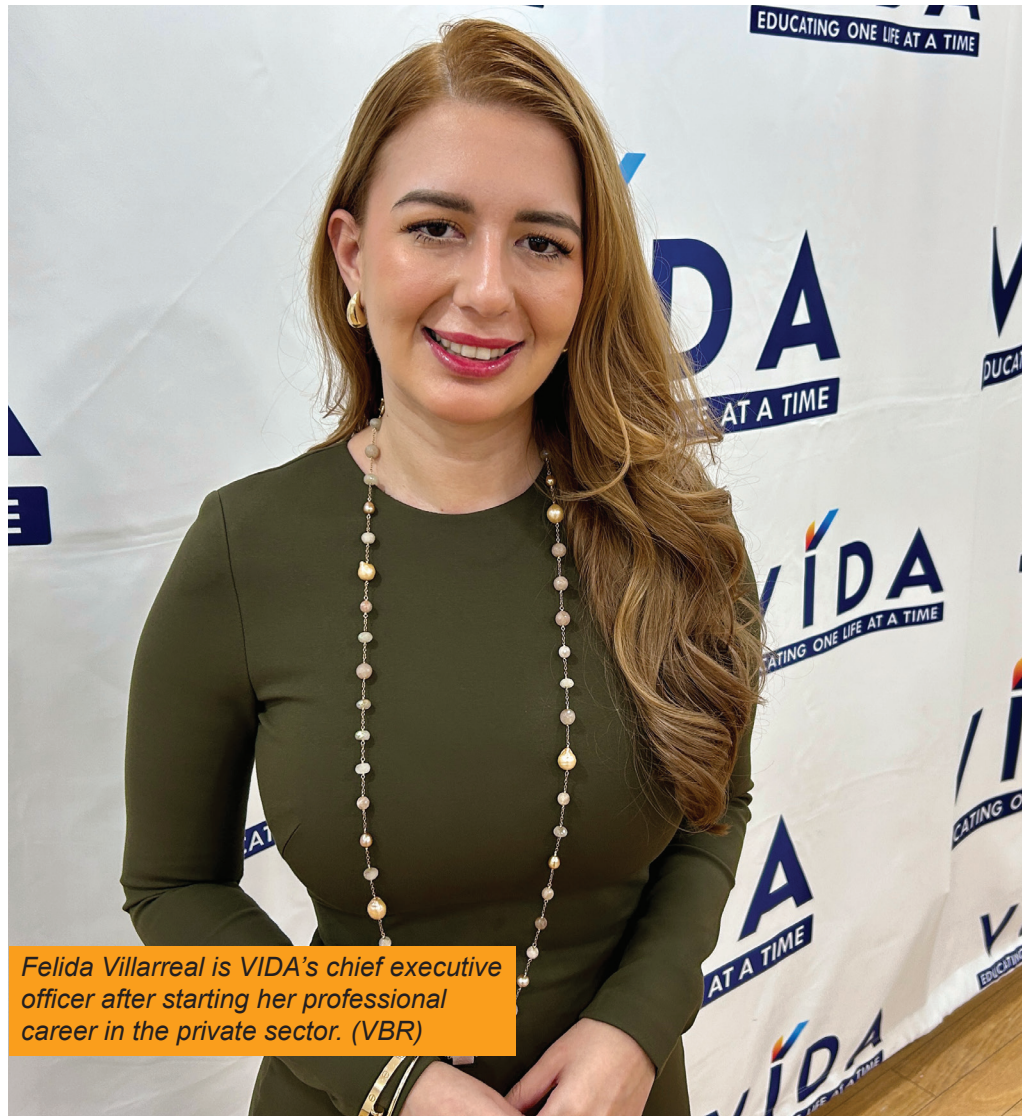
VIDA works closely with UT-Rio Grande Valley, South Texas College and Texas State Technical College in connecting its students to higher education courses. There is just as

much emphasis on the skill trades, Villarreal said, in assisting students wanting shorter-term programs that provide certifications and job opportunities after a year or two of study.

One example is VIDA’s partnership with the Joint Apprenticeship and Training Committee, a national organization with a RGV chapter that works with the private sector in training and employment opportunities in the skilled trades. In the Valley, electricians who have gone through VIDA programs have benefitted greatly from this partnership.

## Wrap-Around Services

Villarreal points to graduation rates of above 80 percent for VIDA participants and what she calls a “persistence rate” of over 90 percent, meaning once in the organization’s programs, few drop out.



*Felida Villarreal is VIDA's chief executive officer after starting her professional career in the private sector. (VBR)*

This is possible due to VIDA’s “wrap-around services,” Villarreal said. These services include career counselors, child care and transportation assistance, and frequent meetings with students in Mercedes and the campuses where the students attend classes. There are also partnerships with employers like South Texas Hospital Systems, which has medical facilities throughout the Valley. The company has its professionals speak with students in the health care field and offers them workshops and mentors to help them learn more about medical careers.

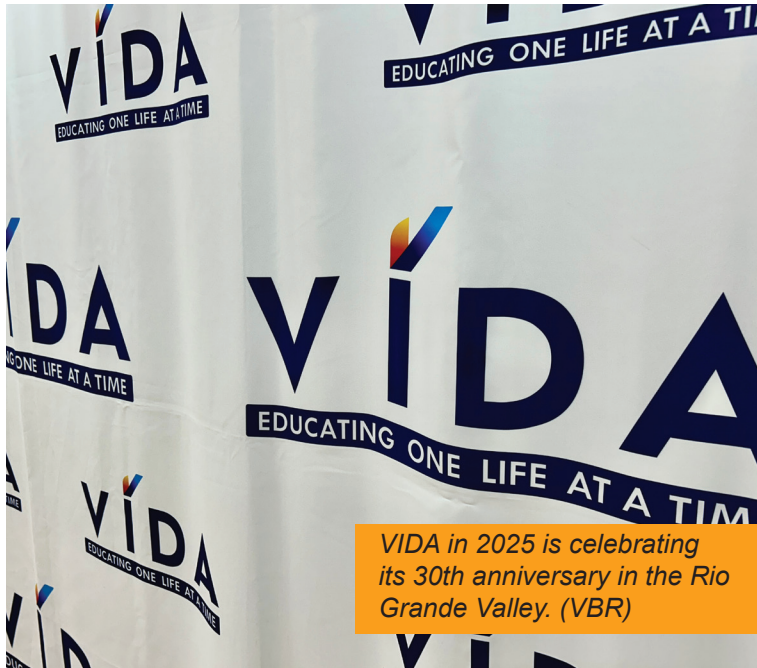
“It inspires our students and it’s a good recruiting tool for South Texas,” Villarreal said of VIDA’s partnership with the company.

Serving more participants is VIDA’s topline goal for 2025. That goal seems attainable in building on 30 years of successes.

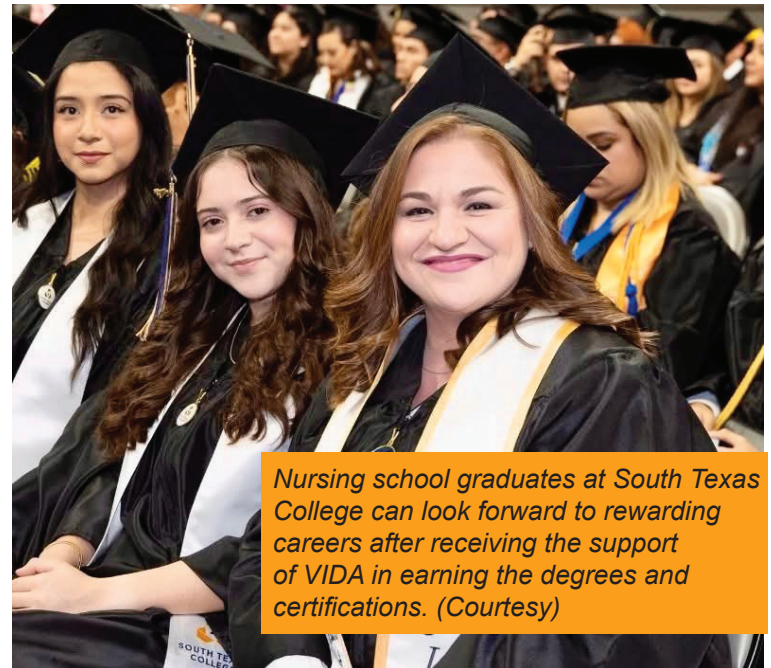
“We love our students and we want to help them to remove roadblocks in achieving their goals,” Villarreal said.



*Nursing and the health care field represent some of the many careers VIDA supports for its participants. (Courtesy)*



*VIDA in 2025 is celebrating its 30th anniversary in the Rio Grande Valley. (VBR)*



*Nursing school graduates at South Texas College can look forward to rewarding careers after receiving the support of VIDA in earning the degrees and certifications. (Courtesy)*

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# Dallas Cowboys Expand Presence in RGV

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The Dallas Cowboys recently concluded another disappointing season but the lack of success will hardly lessen the devout following the NFL franchise enjoys in the Rio Grande Valley.

George Dunn, a senior retail manager for the Cowboys, says the RGV ranks third in Texas for sale of team merchandise, T-shirts, caps and all manner of gear with the familiar blue star. The third-best market ranking (only Dallas-Fort Worth and San Antonio are above the RGV) helped to convince the Cowboys retail operations that it needed a third store in the region.

There were existing stores at La Plaza Mall in McAllen and Sunrise Mall in Brownsville. Dunn led a team of Cowboys retail executives on an early-2024 tour of the Valley to begin determining where to place its third local store. The obvious need was a location between Brownsville and McAllen. The initial thought, Dunn said, was to go with a Harlingen store before further study and analysis determined otherwise.

“We had a 60-mile gap between our stores in McAllen and Brownsville,” said Dunn, who is based in Frisco. “We decided Mercedes was a better fit for our footprint in the Valley. We’re right there in the middle.”

## Mexican Shopper Impact

The new Dallas Cowboys Pro Shop in Mercedes opened during the week of Black Friday in November 2024 at the Rio Grande Valley Premium Outlets.

In true Cowboys devotion fashion, there were nearly 100 fans standing in line before the store’s first opening. The store is located in the southeast corner of the outlet mall in Mercedes. It has the distinction of being the Cowboys’ first factory pro shop. This means that on occasion the Mercedes store may be the first shop to debut new products as the Cowboys gauge fan tastes and preferences.

An added element for the outlet mall store location is the influential consumer presence of Mexican nationals. The Cowboys command a strong following in Mexico City – and much closer to the Valley – a base of support in Monterrey in Nuevo Leon. The Cowboys in their

history have played four preseason games in Mexico. Three of those games were in Mexico City and one was in Monterrey. Since 2022, the Cowboys have partnered with Televisa/Univision to broadcast preseason games in Mexico.

“Our (RGV) managers gave us that insight,” Dunn said of the Mexican shopper demographic. “It was definitely a factor in advocating for a new location there.”

Combine the always-loyal Dallas Cowboy sports demographic in the Valley to the team’s popularity in Mexico and it all adds up to the NFL franchise seeing deep South Texas as an important market.

“The RGV has been very important to us

for many years,” Dunn said.

## Fast Turnaround

The turnaround from an early-2024 market reconnaissance visit to deciding on a third RGV location and then opening a new store in the same year represents a fast turnaround, Dunn said.

The Cowboys methodology on such matters is usually more deliberate, but contributing to a faster process was knowing the Valley is such a solid market. The third store in the heart of the region reaffirms the franchise’s connection to the RGV. A recent walk around the store shows fashions and styles of all types with jerseys

*The new Dallas Cowboys Pro Shop in Mercedes includes merchandise sure to appeal to all ages and genders. (VBR)*



of current players mixed with Cowboy icons of yesteryear like Roger Staubach and Troy Aikman.

“We’re really pleased with our new Mercedes store and how well it has been received,” Dunn said. “We have definitely grown our sales and presence in the RGV.”

The silver and blue colors are prominent throughout the Dallas Cowboys Pro Shop at the Rio Grande Valley Premium Outlets. (VBR)



A throwback Dallas Cowboys logo is among the images and merchandising at the franchise’s pro shop in Mercedes. (VBR)



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# Festival Celebrates Island Kites

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Flying kites on the beach can bring a sense of wonderment in looking up and seeing your handmade craft sway with the gusty seaside winds.

Susie and Bill Doan are Ohio natives and kite aficionados who during visits to the South Padre Island became smitten with the beach. In their late 40s, the couple moved to the Island and turned a hobby into a business. B&S Kites opened in 1998. It's still open over 25 years later on Padre Boulevard in giving insights on how to

navigate the gusty Island winds.

"We bought a kite and had no idea what we were doing to stake a kite on the beach," said Amy Turek in an online review of B&S Kites. "The owner was really helpful in telling us how to do it and helped us get the right spike."

"It all started with a love to fly kites on the Island," said Susie Doan of moving from the Midwest to South Texas.

From there, in getting to know the community and their customers, an idea

developed over the years that would promote beach-side kite flying at South Padre.

## An Idea Takes Flight

"We started thinking about making a festival out here and seeing how many people would come out," Doan said.

Many did for the first event the Doans organized and in the years that followed. An outdoor kite festival became an Island staple for over 15 years. It became an event



*The SPI Indoor Kite Festival concludes with a special effects finale featuring all of its performers on the floor. (Courtesy)*

enjoyed by all ages and groups, including Winter Texans. Eventually, the Doans moved on to another idea in keeping the love of kites going in a festival kind of way.

“We started outdoors and then thought, how about an indoor kite show?”

**Create Their Own Wind**

Susie Doan described the first indoor shows, which were in Port Isabel, as successful ones that would outgrow the venue.

The SPI Indoor Kite Festival would make its way to the Island and to the larger confines of the South Padre Island Convention Center. It is where this year’s edition will take place – on Feb. 3 and Feb. 4 – with show times going from 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. Indoor kite flying is not for novices and the performers coming to the Island for this year’s shows are in Dunn’s words, “the best of the best.”

“We are bringing people from all over the country to the festival,” she said.

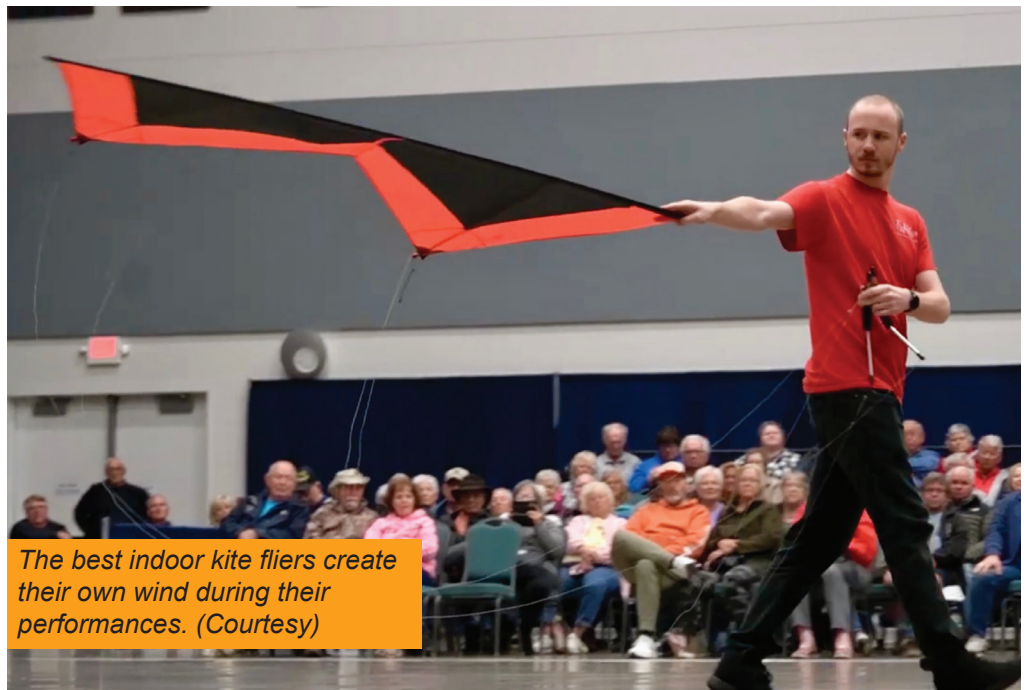
The outdoor festivals were more free-flowing and larger in the number of participants. An indoor event is much more selective and features performers who are skilled at their craft. Choreographed dance routines set to lively musical selections capture the attention of onlookers as the performers maneuver their kites.

“Not everyone has the skill to create their own wind,” Doan said of the indoor kite fliers. “With their movements, they create wind as they swish their kites in the air.”

**Big Shows**

Some of the featured performers at the festival will include national champion John Barresi and fan favorite Paul LaMasters, who is from Germantown, Md.

This year’s event will feature two different



*The best indoor kite fliers create their own wind during their performances. (Courtesy)*



*Kite flying on the Island has grown in popularity over the years, in part thanks to the efforts of Susie and Bill Doan of B&S Kites. (Courtesy)*



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themes. The Feb. 3 event is titled, “A Tribute to the Big Screen,” with music from some classic movies. On Feb. 4, performances will be set to “Texas Skies & Island Vibes” music with a Hispanic flair, Doan said. There will be a special effects finale with the lights going off at the convention center, and the kites and performers being highlighted for a spectacular conclusion to the two-day festival.

Advance tickets are required for attending the festival. Tickets are \$15 per person and \$25 for both nights. Call B&S Kites for reservations at 956-761-1248. Doan is grateful to the city of South Padre Island for its support of the event in making it a popular Winter Texan-oriented festival.

“It has grown more than we anticipated,” she said of the indoor shows. “We are pleasantly surprised by the reception.”



*The SPI Indoor Kite Festival attracts some of the best performers in the country. (Courtesy)*



*Susie and Bill Doan for many years organized an outdoors kite festival on South Padre Island. (Courtesy)*



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# Weslaco Reaches \$1 Billion Milestone

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

One of Steve Valdez's primary goals in leading the Weslaco Economic Development Corporation was to make it "a data-driven organization."

Valdez took the EDC's helm in 2021. In the years since, Weslaco has continued its steady and sure growth in reaching higher levels of growth. The data Valdez speaks of shows the recording of some new high-water marks in 2024. Weslaco generated over \$1 billion in taxable sales for the fiscal year 2023-2024. It was a first in Weslaco's history.

The \$1 billion figure represents what the city netted after sending the lion's share of local sales tax revenues to the state. It's a key indicator of how much Weslaco has expanded its economic base and retail influence in the Mid-Valley area.

"That's money circulating in the economy of Weslaco and that's money in the pockets of business owners," Valdez said.

## Retail Surge

Having data at the ready is important in giving business prospects an overview of local economic activity.

"Retailers want to see where the growth in rooftops is occurring," Valdez said.

For Weslaco, there has been plenty of that happening. Residential market values in the city have seen substantial growth over the last four years. Those values have increased by nearly 82 percent since 2020 and grew to \$1.1 billion in 2024. Single-family homes dominate the housing market in Weslaco. Growth in that housing segment is evident in different parts of the

city from new subdivisions on North Texas Boulevard to emerging neighborhoods on the southern end of Westgate Drive.

It's all part of the over 300 acres in residential development that Weslaco has seen in recent years.

"The growth has been evenly spread," Valdez said of residential development north and south of Expressway 83. "Property values have gone up but so has the value of new homes and that means more property taxes coming to Weslaco."

In retail, growth has been led by the development of the 10-acre Shops at N Bridge along Expressway 83. Ground was broken on the project in mid-2022 and today its retail spaces have largely been filled. Texas Roadhouse opened a new location at N Bridge in 2024. In all,



The Eatery in downtown Weslaco offers outdoor dining among the growing number of restaurant/dining out options in the city. (Courtesy)

Weslaco saw 18 new businesses open last year in the retail sector.

“Our retailers don’t rely just on Weslaco,” Valdez said. “Because of our Mid-Valley location, we have shoppers from all around the area and neighboring communities.”

**FM 105 Emergence**

Going into 2025, the next growth corridor Valdez sees emerging is FM 1015 heading northward toward the Mid-Valley International Industrial Park.

It is at the northside Weslaco park where Glazer’s Beer & Beverages opened a 255,000-square-foot distribution facility in 2024. It was a major get for Valdez and the EDC staff in recruiting Glazer’s away from its former location in McAllen. With Glazer as its anchor, Valdez has a mainstay piece that can be utilized to bring additional companies to the 122-acre industrial park.

Beyond industry, Valdez sees 1015 as developing into McAllen’s Ware Road with surging retail growth that will likely include major announcements of new store openings in 2025. FM 105 going north still has open spaces and the roadway is currently undergoing a major expansion as overseen by the Texas Department of Transportation. He says the open spaces along 1015 represents “a blank space to work with” in crafting a new growth corridor in Weslaco.

Weslaco, Valdez says, is developing into “a little big city with a small-town atmosphere.” The data indicates that perhaps the city has jelled into fitting that description.

“For a city the size of Weslaco, with just over 42,000 residents, reaching the billion-dollar mark (in taxable sales) is a sign that we have arrived,” said Jerry Gonzalez, the president of Weslaco’s EDC board.



*Glazer’s Beer & Beverages relocation to Weslaco in 2024 was a major addition for the city’s international industrial park. (Courtesy)*



*Susana’s Cakery with its second store in Weslaco is among the new businesses that expanded operations in the city in 2024. (VBR)*



*Texas Roadhouse opened a new location in Weslaco in 2024 in adding yet another dining option for Mid-Valley residents. (VBR)*

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# Grant Sparks Smart Learning

By Chris Ardis

It was the second week in January and the first day for second graders at St. John's Episcopal School in McAllen to visit the school's new SmartLab.

A second grader, Lily, said she wasn't sure she wanted to return after the first half hour of instruction.

"It's kind of confusing," she said. "This is your left, but it's not the robot's left."

Lily's SmartLab partner for the day, Juliet, saw things differently in saying, "It's fun. The robot can do anything you want."

## Beginning Opportunities

St. John's is a private school and normally ineligible to apply for government grants.

New funding opportunities opened up for private schools in addressing academic challenges following the COVID-19 years of the early 2020s. Sharon Flores, the head of school at St. John's, said she took full advantage of the GEER Assistance to Private Schools Grant Program offered through the Texas Education Agency.

"I applied for everything, the sun and the moon," she said.

The school eventually received \$500,000 in GAPS funding. St. John's shut down classes for two months in April and May of 2020, when the pandemic began. St. John's welcomed students back to school in the summer of that year. With the GAPS funding,

Flores first purchased mandatory cleaning and disinfecting supplies.

Then St. John's learning-loss grant wish list kicked in and allowed school leaders to update the school's computer lab and to replace old Macintosh computers with state-of-the-art Macs. Teachers at St. John's also received new Macs, upping their technology game.

## Introducing SmartLab

Flores attended a meeting where SmartLab was mentioned in getting introduced to the program.

The concept was pioneered in 1987 by Creative Learning Systems. SmartLab



Facilitators Elsa Rodriguez, Luke Wooldridge and Merrick Flores stand with head of school Sharon Flores in the new St. John's Episcopal School SmartLab. (Courtesy)

transforms learning from lectures and seatwork to cutting-edge technology and student-led project-based learning.

“Learning is different here,” says the SmartLab motto, and the ADA-compliant labs are customized. They include island tables with mounted computers, allowing students to work collaboratively. There are pylons within each island that deliver data and electricity. Shelves of kits are at the ready for SmartLab projects. Smartboards are available for student and facilitator demonstrations. St. John’s added a 3D printer and a laser engraver.

Teamwork, creativity, relevance and critical thinking are expertly built into the research-based K-12 curriculum and consists of hundreds of projects. SmartLab instruction is based on the constructivist theory of education, with students developing knowledge through experience and introspection. The adults in the room are referred to as “facilitators” and there to offer support, not to lead the way.

### Creative On Their Own Terms

Flores discovered that St. James Episcopal School in Corpus Christi had the only SmartLab south of San Antonio.

While visiting the school, she learned they consider their lab a “STREAM,” rather than a traditional STEAM (science technology engineering arts mathematics) lab. She asked what the “R” in STREAM represented.

“Religion,” they told her and Flores loved the idea as it fit in with St. John’s spiritual teachings.

“We are able to do this through God’s love,” she said.

School leaders used the remaining \$184,000 in GAPS funding, along with \$70,000 in fundraising monies, to purchase a SmartLab. A Creative Learning team visited the school to create a custom design. Facilitators Elsa Rodriguez, Luke Wooldridge and Merrick Flores underwent three full days of training with a trainer who has first-hand experience with SmartLab.

“She taught us how to ask probing questions and showed us how to get our students to think in a different way,” Wooldridge said of the trainer.

### Learning New Lessons

Facilitators Wooldridge and Flores both attended St. John’s.

“What I’m most excited about is giving children something I didn’t



Resting atop the SmartLab project shelving are samples of projects students will design throughout the school year. (Courtesy)



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have as a student here,” Flores said.

“It’s not about finishing a worksheet,” Wooldridge chimed in. “I want them to be able to finish a project, start to finish, without my help. I want to let them be creative on their own terms.”

The conversation went back to Flores.

“Here’s the idea,” Flores said. “Figure out how to get to it.”

Teachers at St. John’s will visit the SmartLab regularly, taking with them the constructivist strategies being used there. Students will take lessons in leadership and collaboration with them. On this first day in the St. John’s SmartLab, second graders attempted to move their human robots from a starting point on a floor grid to a finish line. They quickly learned language matters (turn right is not the same as step right). Directions must be based on the robot’s perspective and there are many ways to reach the goal.

Lily, the young who was initially unsure if she wanted to return to the SmartLab, soon had a change of heart.

“Maybe one day, we’ll build a robot,” she said, eyes sparkling as she and Juliet rushed over to the grid to finalize their robot’s code.



Second-grade students in the SmartLab at St. John’s Episcopal School in McAllen perform a trial run of their coding plan while facilitator Luke Wooldridge observes and poses questions. (Courtesy)

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