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# All Or Nothing

By Todd Breland

Entrepreneurs have a universal trait. Win or die trying. We push ourselves to win, no matter the cost. From our workplaces to our hobbies to activities with and for our children, we put our total beings into commitments.

Everything we have, everything we are goes into our companies and organizations. When we began the journey, we knew we signed up for a career, not a job. Our bodies, minds and souls are pushed to the limits. We fall, but we get back up to fight another day. We love that adrenaline rush because it's who we are.

I think our drive comes from birth and is fostered along the way. Through parents, coaching, successes and failures, that never-quit attitude becomes a lifestyle. Disappointments and stumbles happen, but we press forward and refuse to throw in the towel.

Entrepreneurs take punches but like the late George Foreman, quitting doesn't

happen. Big George delivered many more knockouts than he suffered. A lifetime record of 76 wins and only five losses certainly earned Foreman historic accolades. We RGV business leaders aim for those statistics.

Every day and throughout our four

counties, it's evident small business is the heartbeat of America. The resiliency and drive to press on is 100 percent us. We wake up early, work late, and go home tired. Deep South Texas business owners, administrators and managers are all in.

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# Table Of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Frozen Goodness	5
Small Town Boosts	8
Paid Advertorial	10
Tech Horsepower	12
Securing Capital	15
A Clear Path	17

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# La Pale Scales Up To Success

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

A big whiteboard in Daisy Alcazar’s back office at La Pale Frozen Bar in Brownsville tells the story of a small business making the leap to something much bigger.

“HEB COUNTDOWN 48 DAYS TILL PICKUP,” is written in big blue letters. The message was written in late 2024 before the first delivery truck would arrive in late February.

The pickup for H-E-B occurred at refrigerated space that Alcazar and her husband, Gerardo, lease in Harlingen. Seeing it off, 10 pallets with 120,000 frozen La Pale treats, the couple knew it was a first step in proving their product can compete with corporate-made goods.

“Now the real game begins,” Daisy Alcazar said of La Pale’s products going

out to over H-E-B stores. “Can we maintain capacity? Can we maintain the discipline?”

The answer would be yes if the last five years are any measure. This is a business that started from scratch in 2019 with a single store. It has done nothing but scale up since then. There is a well-earned confidence, but it’s tempered with a realization that proving yourself beyond a local market is a daunting task.

“H-E-B took us under their wing,” Alcazar said. “We are very grateful to them for their support. Now we have to do the work.”

## Getting Started

In the 2010s, Alcazar thought she and her husband were settling into years of a

lengthy tenure of living in the Houston area.

That was the plan with Daisy working as a schoolteacher and her young family looking at clear skies ahead. Then Hurricane Harvey happened in 2017.

“It took our house,” she said of the storm. “And then I got homesick.”

Back in Brownsville, the Alcazars decided to go into business. They purchased a storefront to try what was the family’s business from her husband’s roots in Mexico. Gerardo’s family had generations of being *paleteros* in Michoacan. The Mexican-inspired frozen dessert treats began appearing in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. The popularity of paletas spread mainly through family-to-family support due to the large Mexican and

Daisy and Gerardo Alcazar’s La Pale frozen treats finished fifth among hundreds of contestants in H-E-B’s 2024 Quest For Texas competition. (Courtesy)



Mexican-American population in the United States.

In the case of the Alcazars, there were longstanding recipes and systems of making paletas in Mexico that went back to the 1930s.

“I said, you guys are the pioneers in doing this,” Daisy Alcazar recalled telling her husband and father-in-law, Rafael.

The Alcazar family brought Mexican traditions and an authentic style of paletas to Brownville by opening multiple stores in that city and Los Fresnos as well.

“We started learning the business,” Daisy Alcazar said. “We began to see this is what we do and the more we saw, the more we thought of what we could do.”

**Quest For More**

There was a first wave of retailing for the Alcazar’s La Pale Frozen Fruit Bar.

Four stores opened in southern Cameron County. Their interests would shift to scaling up their business beyond local



*Gerardo Alcazar leads a crew producing La Pale products in Brownsville. (VBR)*



*Daisy Alcazar beams with pride in front of La Pale packaging that will be on the shelves of over 300 H-E-B stores in Texas. (VBR)*

markets and producing their paletas in greater volumes while maintaining quality. Daisy Alcazar would seek insights from entrepreneurs who started small and then were able to get their products on the shelves of large retailers.

She worked on the intricacies of pitching her family’s products and entered competitions like StartUp Texas, an accelerator program and seed fund from the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation. La Pale would finish third in the StartUp Texas of 2023. From there, it was a try for a bigger prize. La Pale would compete in H-E-B’s Quest For Texas competition in 2024 in joining hundreds of other small businesses seeking recognition from the state’s largest grocer.

La Pale would finish fifth and just out of the top four that received cash prizes. Perhaps more importantly, the Alcazars gained the attention of H-E-B’s top management and those contacts would lead to an agreement to produce paletas for the grocer.

“The logistics were hard but everyone on our journey has been helpful,” Daisy Alcazar said from La Pale’s remaining store in Brownsville on International Boulevard. “We have made the next jump but we know there are many more steps to be taken.

“We’re excited,” she said. “Now we have to deliver.”



La Pale’s store on International Boulevard in Brownsville is a vibrant ice cream shop featuring Mexican-style desserts. (VBR)



La Pale Frozen Fruit Bar in Brownsville is supplying over 300 H-E-B stores in Texas with its products. (VBR)



La Pale products from Brownsville are reaching markets across Texas, including livestock shows in Austin, Houston and San Antonio. (VBR)

# Active Chambers Boost Small Towns

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Elma Chavez was in the midst of a busy work day and reflecting on the one before as a self-described “one-man show” at the Raymondville Chamber of Commerce.

It has been about two years since Chavez was called back from the private sector to revive a chamber that had lay dormant since 2020. She knew what she had to do. A previous tenure as executive director of the Raymondville Chamber gave her the necessary base of knowledge as did personal and business connections in her hometown.

In early 2025, Chavez said of the chamber, “we’ve rebuilt it,” while acknowledging there is still much to do in gaining more membership and raising awareness.

“We have a product now,” she said of getting the necessary foundation down to better days ahead.

In Mercedes, Fred Gonzalez speaks of times when the existence of the chamber of commerce in the Mid-Valley community was

very much in doubt. Receiving no financial support from the city, the chamber in the early 2000s was told “to either tighten our belts or close it down,” said Gonzalez, who would serve as the organization’s board president.

The choice was to keep it afloat. Over time, the chamber was reinvigorated. The organization established a series of successful fundraisers while Mercedes was going through some lean times. Every little bit of encouragement can mean something in smaller towns with limited resources. For Mercedes, the chamber’s steady rebuild has contributed to the recent economic developments seen in the city.

“We have brought her back to life,” Gonzalez said of the chamber in a statement that might also apply to Mercedes as a whole.

## Willacy Comeback Stories

Chavez is seeing the same in

Raymondville.

The Willacy County community is on the northern edge of the Rio Grande Valley and away from the growth corridor of Expressway 77/83. The local economy still tends to be agriculturally based with farming and ranching and the operation of state prisons in the county adding some employment.

Having a chamber again provides a positivity that can boost the morale of a community that needs a helping hand. Chavez points with pride to the recent revival of Hidalgo Street, which is Raymondville’s main street. New businesses now fill the once empty downtown storefronts. Chavez describes it as a comeback for Hidalgo Street.

“I’m hoping that what we have been doing has been helping,” she said of the chamber’s efforts. “People are seeing that things are happening again.”

The Raymondville chamber will continue



*Executive Director Elma Chavez has seen busy since 2023 in reestablishing the Raymondville Chamber of Commerce, including supporting a promotion by the local Dairy Queen. (Courtesy)*



*The Raymondville Chamber of Commerce is active in celebrating local heritage and history. Executive Director Elma Chavez accepts a painting by local artist Cissie Watson that now hangs in the chamber’s offices. (Courtesy)*

to build its ranks of volunteer ambassadors to attend ribbon cuttings and other community events. Chavez is busy leading efforts to organize chamber fundraisers while supporting area activities like Wild In Willacy, a youth-oriented event that celebrates the RGV’s nature and heritage.

“We’re still building awareness,” Chavez said of the chamber’s own comeback. “It’s just good to see some great things happening in our community.”

### Blue Coats & Scholarships

Mercedes has a single staffer on payroll and it’s not Gonzalez, who is busy managing a store at the Rio Grande Valley Premium Outlets.

Volunteers power the Mercedes chamber, just like the one in Raymondville. They are the blue coats in Mercedes, attending ribbon cuttings and ground-breakings in the community. They are also busy in the midst of major fundraisers like the Texas Street Festival, which has become a major Labor Day weekend event in the Valley and features live music in downtown Mercedes.

The Mercedes chamber has also become active in establishing yearly scholarships funds for graduating seniors from area high schools. To date, \$35,000 in scholarships have been given out to seniors from six high schools that operate in Mercedes. It all dovetails to the economic growth Mercedes is now seeing after years of sluggish growth – and the revived chamber has been at the heart of it all.

“It’s not good for a community to be without a chamber,” Raymondville’s Chavez has said. “A lot of times you’re the only people see of our town.”

In Raymondville and Mercedes, the chambers are re-energized as are their communities in small towns, RGV style.



*Ribbon cuttings in Mercedes have been frequent in recent years and the chamber of commerce’s blue coats have been there to celebrate the events. (Courtesy)*



*The blue coats as led by the Mercedes Chamber of Commerce’s former president Fred Gonzalez, center, have been active at business openings such as this Starbucks celebration in 2024. (Courtesy)*



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# 'Fresh Look' Unifies Brand Of Clark Dealerships



Clark Chevrolet and Clark Knapp Honda were next-door neighbors for over 20 years on Business 83 in McAllen.

In the heart of McAllen, as Alex Clark, the dealer for both dealerships, describes it. Clark Chevrolet has had a presence in downtown McAllen since 1933. A partnership with another iconic Rio Grande Valley automotive family – the Knapps – created Clark Knapp Honda in 1992. The connection between the two dealerships was evident and it wasn't only because of their proximity. Both dealerships share the same values and commitment to superior customer service.

In 2014, the Honda dealership moved to a new location on north Sugar Road along Expressway 83 in Pharr. The business relationships remained intact, and the family ownership of the two dealerships was preserved. Over the years, Clark says, the Valley has grown greatly in population and its development across the region. Newcomers may not be aware of the Clark auto brand and its over nine decades of service to Valley communities.

Clark sees 2025 as the time to unveil a new unified brand identity for both of his dealerships. The focus is on creating a cohesive visual system that represents both Clark Chevrolet and Clark Knapp Honda as a group. The centerpiece of the Clark rebrand is a Swiss cross logo that was introduced

by Alex's father, Kirk Clark and his father, Charles Clark. The Swiss cross is the cornerstone of the Clark brand and honors the legacy and history of Alex's father and grandfather.

"Visually, we want people to recognize that it's the same family," Alex Clark said of the two dealerships. "We are honoring the heritage of the stores. We are also highlighting that both dealerships are committed to the same level of customer service while providing a great experience in the relationships we have with our customers."

The unified Swiss cross logo is the singular Clark logo that will serve both dealerships and Clark Insurance Plus in Pharr. Unique individual brand logos for the three businesses will derive from the group logo.

"We are the same family, the same team, and want to make sure that's clear for our customers in McAllen, Pharr and beyond,"

Clark said. "We had different visual languages. This an opportunity to have a fresh look."

Clark says his customers and the RGV market will be seeing enhancements in signage, dealership materials and on digital platforms representing the company's three businesses. A robust social media presence will boost the consistent brand iconography of a family business with 92 years of service to the Valley.

"We want to honor our past and history and do our part to carry it into the future," Clark said. "We want to continue to earn the trust of our customers. My brother Daniel and I and our business partners are real people with deep local roots. We are not an external corporation or investment group. We are dedicated to this community and every customer that honors us with an opportunity to serve them."



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# TSTC Meets Need For Auto Techs

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The open-air labs of the automotive technology program at Texas State Technical College feature lifts, computerized equipment, tools and students huddled around their instructors as they troubleshoot and diagnose scenarios.

Rosendo Rodriguez is one of the auto tech instructors at the TSTC campus in Harlingen. On a recent sunny morning, he pointed out what the different groups of students were doing. One instructor was going over a large engine placed in the midst of a handful of students. Another group had checklists before them as the students conferred with each other on what they were seeing underneath a car hood. There were also students from PSJA North High School as they got a tour of the facility.

“You know when you get into this field that you’re always going to get called,” said Rodriguez, who previously worked as an automotive technician for nearly 30 years for a major Rio Grande Valley dealership. “Someone has to diagnose and fix things. It’s sort of like doctors with people.”

The Harlingen TSTC campus is bolstering its auto tech program with an expanded curriculum and new resources. It’s doing so, in part, due to increasing demand in industries needing professionals in the automotive technology field. The field is getting more complex, Rodriguez said, because new vehicles are heavily computerized and utilize increasing levels of technology.

“There is more demand during a time when there are less technicians in the field,” he said. “It’s getting tougher because the electronics in today’s vehicles are very sophisticated.”

## Vets Skills Fit Program

Gavin Almeida is one of the 123 current students in the TSTC auto tech program.

He is an eight-year veteran of the U.S. Army and spent most of those years at Fort Cavazos in Killeen. Almeida had a specialty in the military that included automotive repair and service work. Military vehicles are often diesel and hydraulic-based, but it nonetheless provided a good gateway for Almeida to

study the more sophisticated systems he is seeing at TSTC.

“It’s much more in depth than what I did in the Army,” Almeida said of the 16-month program he is taking at TSTC. “There’s a lot more diagnostic and troubleshooting here than what I saw before.”

Rodriguez, the instructor, says many of

the older students in the auto tech program are vets like Almeida. They come ready made with a good foundation of experience and have demonstrated they possess the necessary motor and thinking skills to be auto technicians. Of the younger students, the instructor says that growing up with gaming and having exposure to IT



*TSTC instructor Rosendo Rodriguez helps students understand the higher level of sophistication required in today's auto tech world. (VBR)*

situations can serve them well in studying to be auto technicians. “The younger generation is used to building things virtually,” Rodriguez said. “That can be applied to auto tech work since so much of what is done is diagnosing problems on computer screens.”

**Someone To Fix Things**

The TSTC program offers a 16-month automotive technology program that offers an associate of applied sciences. There is also a 12-month certificate of completion program in automotive repair and light repair. Another program offered is a higher-level 16-month certificate program in the automotive technician field.

TSTC expects the need for qualified automotive service technicians to grow in the years ahead. The school cites one survey showing that Texas employs more than 55,000 technicians in the state. The forecast is that 61,000 technicians will be needed in Texas by 2030. The average salary for a technician in Texas is nearly \$47,000.

Some of the essential elements studied in the TSTC auto tech programs include electrical systems, engine repair, and automotive



Gavin Almeida is a U.S. Army veteran who is learning new skills at the auto technology program at TSTC in Harlingen. (Courtesy)



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# LiftFund Edinburg

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LiftFund has partnered with the Edinburg Economic Development Corporation for an interest buy down (IBD) program. The Interest Buy Down Program (IBDP) provides small business owners in Edinburg a reduced interest rate loan at 2.5% to solve two of the biggest challenges facing small businesses: capital and cash flow.

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electrical diagnosis and repair. All of those courses and more are needed to repair and service higher-end vehicles that can have over 50 computer systems in them, Rodriguez said. Even more inexpensive vehicles usually have at least 20 computer systems, he said.

Almeida, the student and vet, reaffirms his instructor's view of the durability he sees in the auto tech field.

"It's always going to be there in the years to come," Almeida said. "It's one of those necessities. You are always going to need someone to fix things."



*An instructor shows TSTC students in Harlingen the techniques of engine repair. (VBR)*

*Students from PSJA North High School receive insights from an TSTC instructor about the auto technology program offered by the Harlingen-based school. (VBR)*



# LiftFund Revitalizes Communities

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Rodrigo Cadena started his business life in the United States with a single pastry and cake shop in Mission.

As the CEO of Los Pasteleros Caseros de Gaby's, his goal from inception was to scale up with more locations in the Rio Grande Valley. The cake shop company has its roots in Mexico, where it has three locations in the Reynosa area. Cadena aimed for similar successes in the U.S. market. His company has worked to reach many of its goals over the last dozen years in expanding to five locations in the Valley.

The company's growth can be attributed to its quality products and solid customer base along with another key ally. Cadena has been the recipient of business loans from LiftFund, a national nonprofit organization that provides resources to small businesses. LiftFund is active in the Valley in offering a range of loans and tools to small businesses that often lack access to resources from commercial sources.

"It has been a great collaboration," Cadena said of his association with LiftFund. "It has been vital for us. LiftFund has allowed us to even think about having growth."

## Providing Capital

Growing a business, as Cadena points out, requires capital.

Securing that capital can be an insurmountable challenge for many small businesses when seeking a standard commercial bank loan. Marlene Rodriguez is the market director for LiftFund in the RGV. She says the region's rapid economic growth does not always reach entrepreneurs in smaller communities - and even those in bigger cities - who can struggle to get capital to grow their businesses.

LiftFund can step in and offer low interest loans with fewer barriers than those seen from banks. It offers technical support and educational services in preparing small businesses in applying for its loans. The access to loans through LiftFund has reached 2,183 Valley businesses since 1998. The total dollar loan disbursement has been \$36 million with 4,657 jobs created.

"We're helping to revitalize cities with new tax revenues," Rodriguez said of small business growth boosted by LiftFund.

"We still have a lot more to do in building awareness so people know that there are other resources available."

## Buying Down Interest

An example of LiftFund helping smaller communities is its recent partnership with the Elsa Economic Development Corporation. Together, they set up a zero-percent interest loan program, offering loans of up to \$50,000.

Elsa businesses qualifying for assistance get the added benefit of the local EDC buying down the interest on their loans. The resulting zero percent loans, when combined with injecting new capital into the city's small businesses, are sure to boost

economic growth in Elsa.

"For the first time, we have a tool that allows us to directly support small businesses with low-cost capital," said Daniel Rivera, the executive director of the Elsa EDC. "This program provides a direct path to funding, offering a real advantage for businesses looking to grow."

## Boosting Local Business

Elsa's partnership with LiftFund emulates similar arrangements the nonprofit organization enjoys with other Valley cities. LiftFund entered the RGV market through McAllen. Since 1998, it has provided over 2,000 small business loans in the city and created over 4,000 jobs. The loan maximum



in McAllen is \$250,000 and there is also a zero-percent interest loan component like the one in Elsa.

“To see how far we’ve come from our first meeting with LiftFund to where we are now is exciting,” said Michelle Quiroz of Reserva Coffee Roasters, which has gone from a single location to four stores in McAllen and Edinburg.

Edinburg is another city that has partnered with LiftFund. The city recently renewed an agreement with the nonprofit organization to continue a program that offers up to \$50,000 in small business loans and financial support to buy down interest on loans. Beyond the agreements with cities, LiftFund also works with individual businesses that are owned by veterans, first responders and professionals in the medical field in offering loan programs that fit their needs.

Cadena, who owns the upper Valley cake shops, offers his own accolades to the help provided by LiftFund.

“Thanks to them,” he said, “we have many more customers knowing about our products and noticing us in the U.S. market.”

Call 1-888-215-2373 for more information about LiftFund, or go to [liftfund.com](http://liftfund.com).

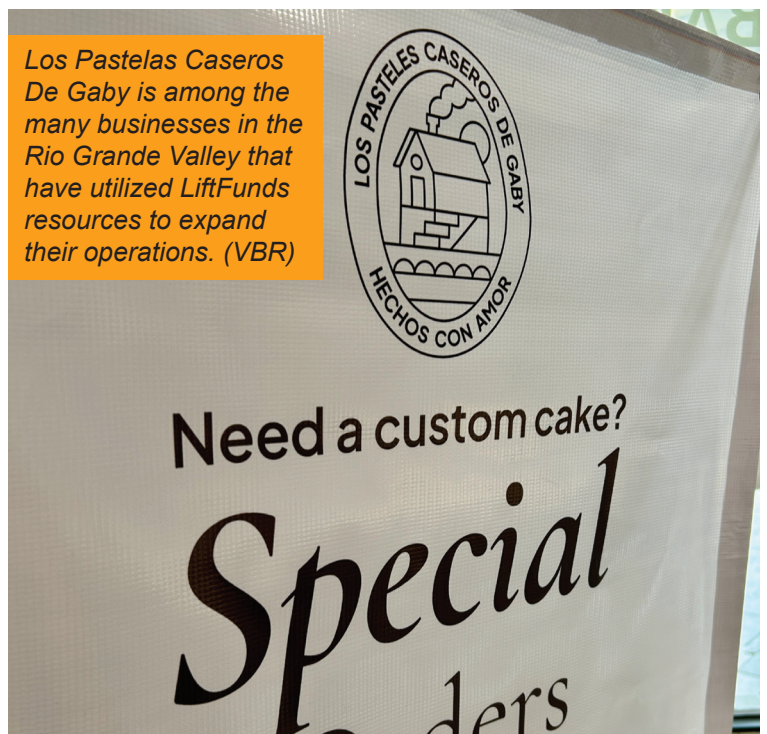


Los Pasteleros Caseros De Gaby have used zero-interest loans from LiftFund to expand their RGV locations from a single store to five today. (VBR)

Reserva Coffee Roasters credits LiftFund for being a vital factor in their expansion to new locations in McAllen and Edinburg. (Courtesy)



Los Pasteleros Caseros De Gaby is among the many businesses in the Rio Grande Valley that have utilized LiftFund's resources to expand their operations. (VBR)



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# McHi Graduate Finds Path At UT

By Chris Ardis

The McAllen school district in 2001 became the first school district in the Rio Grande Valley to offer the International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme.

The city's business community and the McAllen Chamber of Commerce played a pivotal role in the process. They recognized it as a way to attract businesses and families to the region. The district's IB students have a home campus where they participate in UIL activities.

In 2021, Grace Kelly graduated from McAllen High School and the IB Diploma Programme. She graced the theatre stage while in high school in the manner of a legendary princess and actress of the same name. Kelly also protected the net as the Lady Bulldogs goalkeeper and served as Lamar Academy Student Council president.

Kelly left her mark at Lamar in a more tangible way. A core component of IB is CAS (Creativity, Activity and Service), which requires a long-term project.

"I combined my passion for neurology and art to create Cope with Hope," Kelly said. "My own struggles with mental health in high school - and realizing art is a form of stress relief - led to my personal project."

Kelly designed and sold colorful decals. Money raised paid for a vendor to transform her designs into stair decals. Grace Kelly-designed decals are on the stairs leading to the second floor at Lamar Academy.

## Change Of Plans

Kelly had it all figured out. She would go to an Ivy League university, play soccer and become a physician. Fate had other plans. Kelly enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin's Plan II Honors Program.

She jumped right in her freshman year, hosting an art therapy session and joining the Plan II Pre-Med Society. By her junior year, Kelly felt pulled to a different career path but initially resisted.

"If I'm not pre-med, does that mean I'm not smart?" she asked herself. "I love science but realized I could pursue behavioral sciences without being pre-med."

It took mentors like Stephen Sonnenberg, an M.D. and a professor for Excellence in Undergraduate Studies, to help her get to this point.

"Grace is very good at reaching out and

being open," Sonnenberg said. "Open to mentorship, open to sharing ideas and open to listening to people."

Aspiring Plan II graduates are required to complete a thesis.

"At IB, I had to do so much writing," she said. "The extended essay in high school prepared me for writing my thesis. A lot of my friends are just learning this in college."

## Clear Path

Then last year, Kelly ran for UT Student Government president.

"Learning about suicides on campus really hit me," she said. "I felt a call to action; I wasn't doing enough."

Kelly chose Elle Grinnell as her running mate and developed a policy platform, focusing on student awareness of mental-health issues and how to get help before

a crisis arises. In March 2024, Kelly and Grinnell learned they had won the election. Their policy work began.

They worked extensively with Chris Brownson, Ph.D., director of the UT Counseling and Mental Health Center, and the vendor to customize modules on a wide range of mental-health topics and available resources. These modules are now mandatory for all incoming UT students. Funding has recently come through to make the customizable modules mandatory at most UT-system campuses for the next three years.

Kelly, Grinnell and their executive board host monthly town hall sessions, present at numerous events and meet with the UT president.

"Elle and I still have a strong connection with (former) President (Jay) Hartzell and

*Grace Kelly speaks as part of a Longhorn Family Partners Panel. (Photo courtesy: Grace Kelly)*



with Interim President (Jim) Davis,” Kelly said.

They were on Davis’ agenda on his first day in the president’s seat.

“Grace is a dynamic and compassionate champion for her fellow students and UT Austin,” Davis said. “She followed through on her commitments to tackle big issues. She masterfully navigated the university and student government process to build consensus and deliver results.

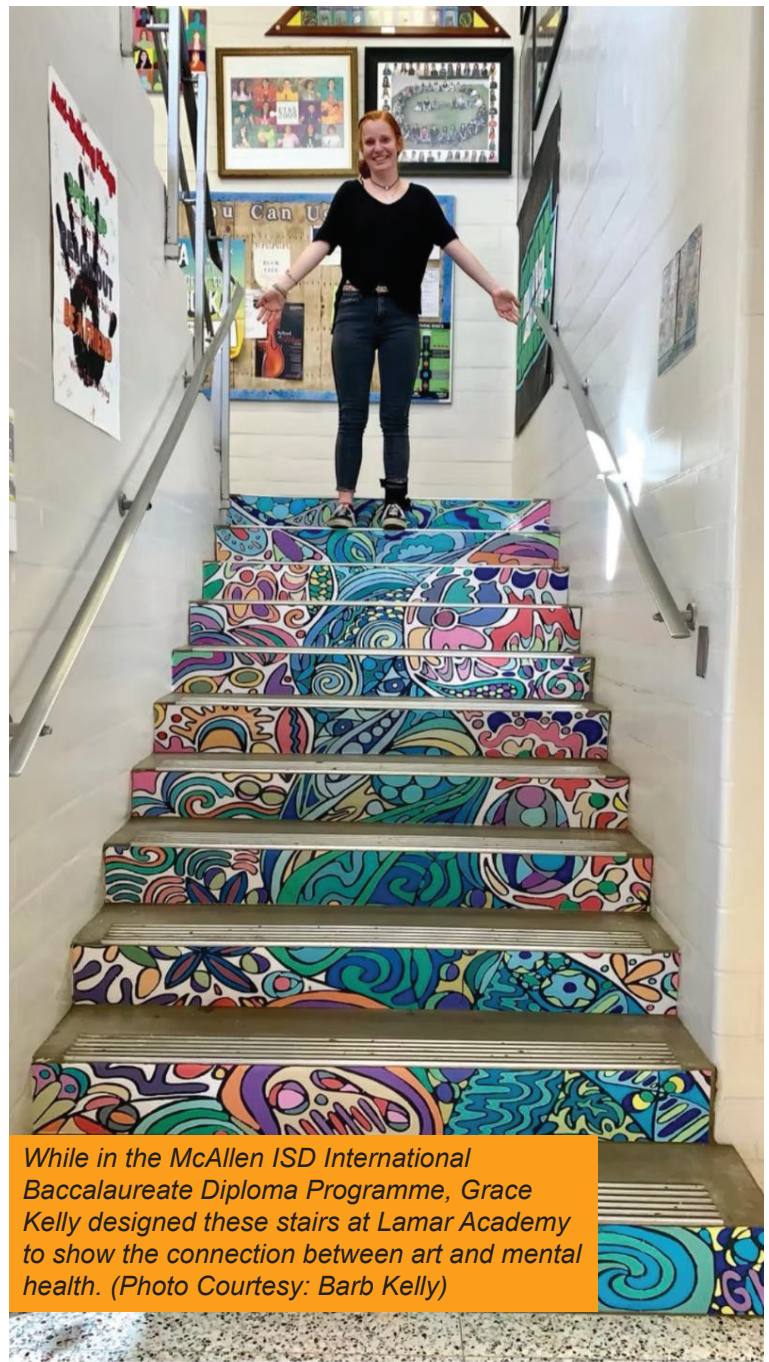
“At the same time, she brought her upbeat personality and enthusiasm for events to lift the student community and grow the value and interest in student government,” the UT president said. “Her impact on our campus will last well beyond her time as a student.”

As Kelly looks back on her year in office, she acknowledges that balancing coursework, time with friends and her own well-being has been challenging yet worth it.

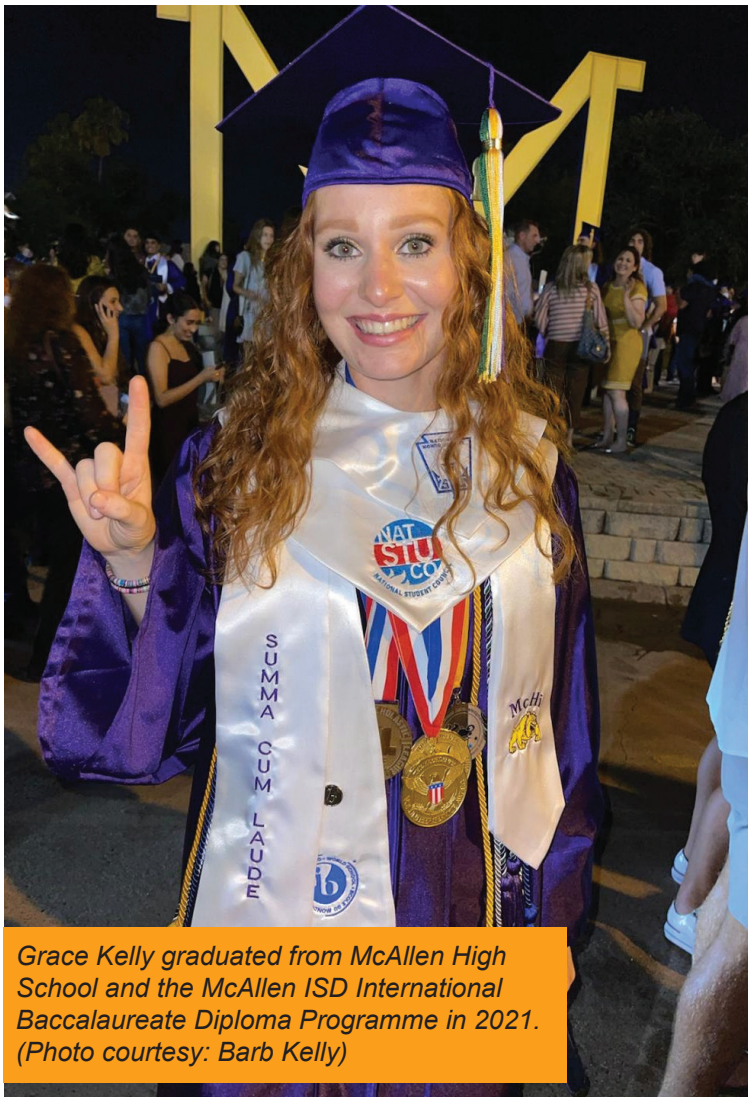
“This has been an opportunity of a lifetime,” she said. “Seeing my executive board work within their niches is the most rewarding thing. Our voices are genuinely heard.”

On May 10, Kelly will graduate with a Bachelor of Science and Arts in Human Development and Family Sciences and a Bachelor of Arts in Plan II Honors. Her path is now clear.

“I have a passion for structural change in public policy,” Kelly said. “I am now seeking a job in public health policy and plan to embrace the leadership opportunities.”



While in the McAllen ISD International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme, Grace Kelly designed these stairs at Lamar Academy to show the connection between art and mental health. (Photo Courtesy: Barb Kelly)



Grace Kelly graduated from McAllen High School and the McAllen ISD International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme in 2021. (Photo courtesy: Barb Kelly)

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