

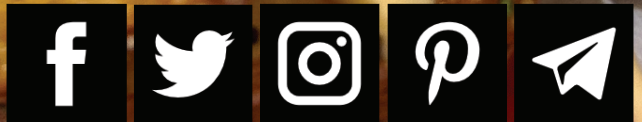
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# Staying Fit

By Todd Breland

Are we sticking with our new year resolutions to exercise? Ouch. I stepped on my own toes.

I know. We're busy, work and family schedules are crazy; there are not enough hours in the day. More necessary things have to get done. While that is a valid point, our physical and emotional health are also very necessary.

How are we doing with keeping our company or organization fit? What's our plan to stay on top of industry tips, professional development, increased sales and revenue, maybe completing required courses for certifications and more? Have we registered ourselves and/or our team members for advancement training?

We all have areas that need improvement. "If we stop learning, we stop growing." How many times have we heard or read that? To climb the ladder, we have to take the next step. And there is always a next step. Taking ourselves and staff to the next level first takes awareness of where we are. Next, we make a plan to advance. Then, action is required.

If we're honest with ourselves, none of us have reached the top. We keep reaching, and part of that process means we invest in us-time to get better. From refining time management to enhancing leadership skills, we can all find areas that need sharpening and strengthening.

Perhaps it's time to expand our horizons by exploring new ways of playing old songs. While change may get us out of our comfort

zone, learning new tricks could improve our game. Challenging our comfort zones is exactly how we and our supporting casts grow. There are only directions -- forward or backward. Idling doesn't exist.

Now is a great time to invest in ourselves and our team members. We are the Rio Grande Valley. Forward is our direction and together we win.

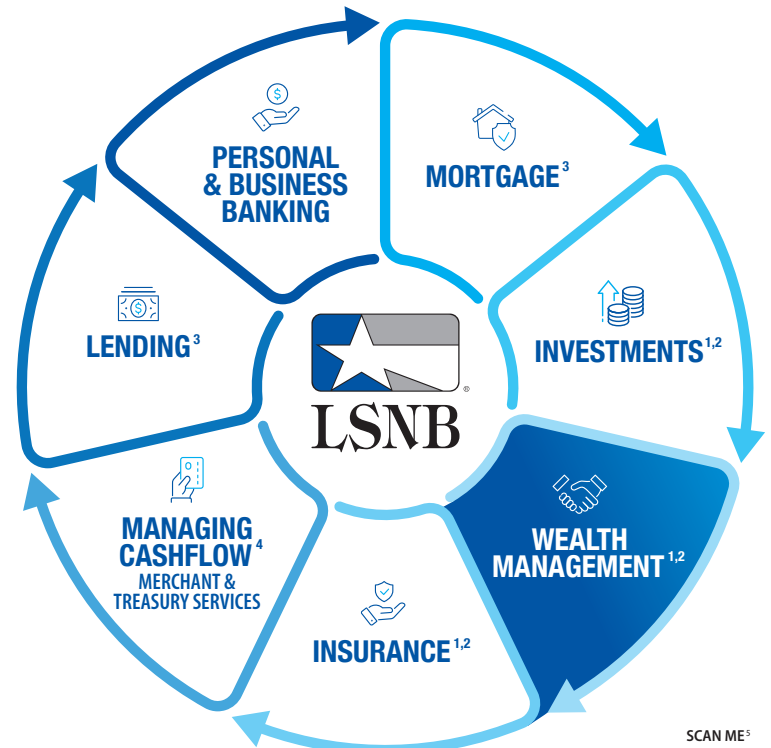


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The advertisement features a vibrant background of a tropical beach with turquoise water, white sand, and several thatched-roof huts. A large yellow and blue graphic element frames the text on the left. The bottom of the ad is a dark blue banner with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

# Uncle Chops: Weslaco's 'Home Away From Home'

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

A battle-worn firefighter's helmet rests on a shelf over the bar at Chris Cuellar's restaurant in Weslaco.

The rigors of the job he held for over 10 years in service to his community would take a physical toll. Injury problems would compel him to leave the Weslaco Police Department and bring a need to reinvent himself while still being a young man. Being a restaurateur is a thought that had long intrigued him. Cuellar was handy in the kitchen and was inspired by an uncle's home-style smoked hamburgers.

After a stint at a culinary school in Austin, Cuellar returned to the Valley, working at some higher-end McAllen restaurants. The goal to return to his hometown with his own business would manifest itself after working for others. It led him to ask a cousin, A.C. Cuellar III, a pertinent question.

"Why don't we start our own deal at home?" he asked his future business partner.

It would spark the start of what would become the Uncle Chops Food Court at 200 S. Border in Weslaco. It's a family-oriented restaurant operating in a converted 104-year-old home. It features a lineup of signature hearty burgers while also delving into higher-end cuisine when the occasion – and the holiday – requires.

"Weslaco is due to become more of a destination for food," Cuellar said. "We feel like Weslaco is ready to make the next jump."

## Down Home

Uncle Chops is located just south of Business 83. It is at about a halfway point between the two busiest Weslaco thoroughfares – Texas Boulevard and Westgate Drive.

It's a location Cuellar and his cousin settled on in 2019. Beginning with food trucks, they built up their customer base with signature burgers billed on Chops' menu as being "100 percent house ground brisket smoked to perfection and finished on the griddle." The meat patties also include family-secret ingredients mixed in as passed down by one of Chris' uncles.

The conversion from food trailer to a more permanent physical location would

take about three years. During that time, the Cuellars worked on reconfiguring the historic home. It was then a wait for the local economy to settle in the early 2020s. Opening in early 2022, Uncle Chops at its present location is a relaxed setting with plenty of room outside for live music nights and plenty of room for children to

play on AstroTurf grounds.

"We want it to be like a home-away-from-home," Cuellar said of his restaurant. "We're not uppity. We enjoy talking to our customers and making them feel welcome."

The feelings are apparently mutual. One customer, Chaille Thomas, on a Google review called Uncle Chops "a true gem"



*Chris Cuellar prepares a handmade pizza at his Uncle Chops restaurant in Weslaco. (VBR)*

with “personable customer service ... and showcasing the love and care they put into every dish.”

### **Elegant Dining**

Uncle Chops does feature what Cuellar calls a “base menu” of signature burgers with sweet sourdough buns.

The burger choices range from the “To The Point” that’s topped with cheddar cheese to a “Quieres Chorizo?” that includes San Manuel chorizo, queso panela and chili piquin, a real RGV culture-infused selection. Then there is the “elevated menu,” as Cuellar described it, and is utilized for holidays like Valentine’s Day. For this year’s Feb. 14, Uncle Chops will have a menu featuring the likes of



*Uncle Chops features a signature line of burgers with sweet sourdough buns. (VBR)*

*Chris Cuellar proudly served his hometown as a firefighter before becoming a restaurateur in Weslaco. (VBR)*



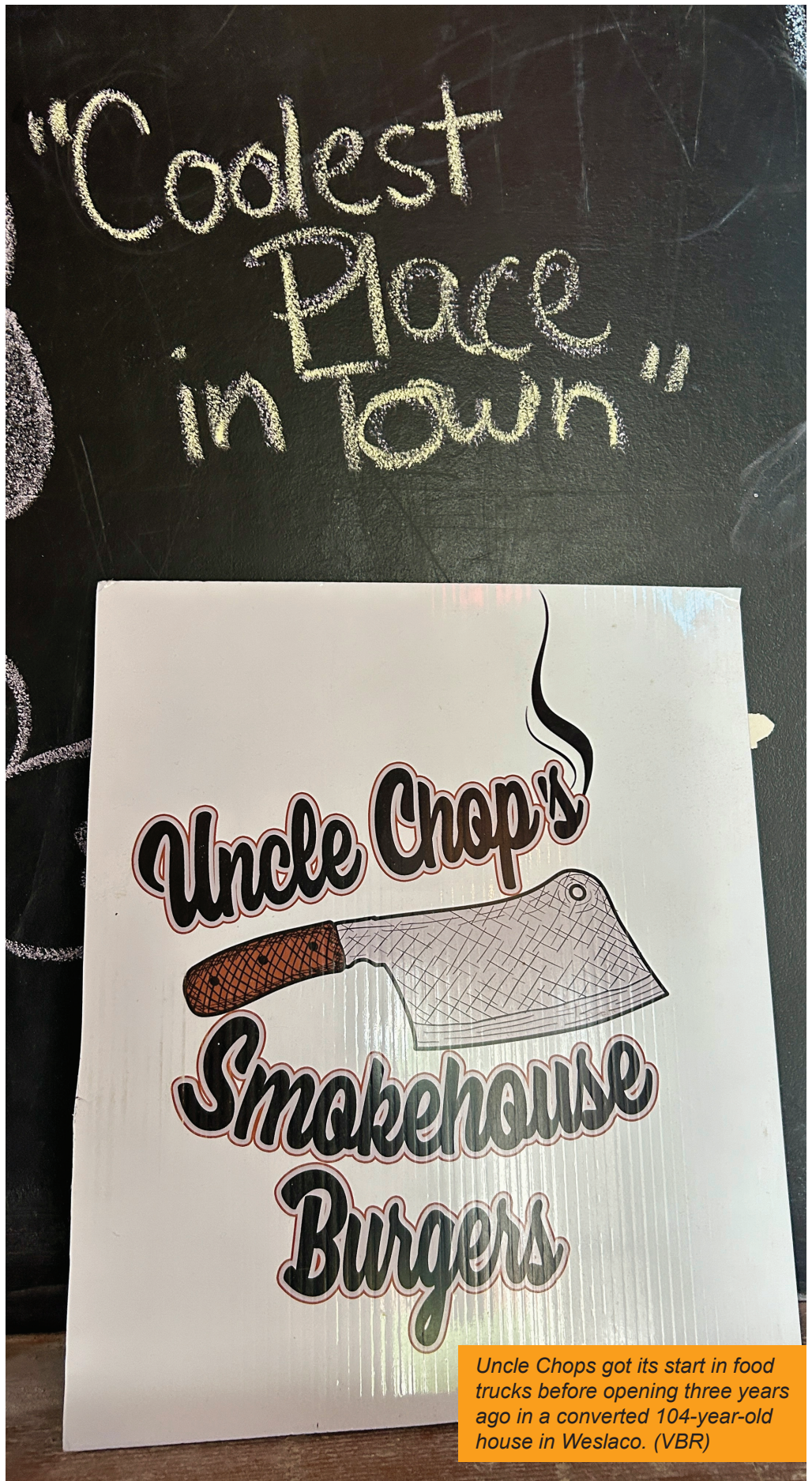
beausoleil oysters and prime ribeye, lobster tail and sparkling white wine.

It's the type of fine dining Cuellar would like to expand upon as he sees Weslaco and the Mid-Valley develop into a larger metro area that can support higher-end restaurant options.

"It's the next step up," he said. "Something more elegant that people will say, 'Is this Weslaco?' I think, business wise, we're in a great location as a halfway point between McAllen and Brownsville and Harlingen."



Uncle Chops has a relaxed setting with play space on AstroTurf for children. (VBR)



Uncle Chops got its start in food trucks before opening three years ago in a converted 104-year-old house in Weslaco. (VBR)

# Libraries Evolve To Serve Communities

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The local library as cornerstones for books in the classic sense and e-books in the digital age are reinventing themselves to remain vibrant forces in their communities.

McAllen boasts the largest single-floor library in the country, the McAllen Main Library. Here, events are plentiful throughout the year and include art shows and digital literacy courses. This month, the library is hosting AARP tax volunteers to help local residents file their federal taxes.

McAllen's library director Kate Horan has commented in the past that libraries do more than check out books. She referred to the job fairs hosted at the main library that draw in hundreds of people. There is also the responsibility the staff feels in serving several smaller Rio Grande Valley area communities.

Mercedes is a RGV community that does not have the size and resources of a bigger city like McAllen, but its library is an active place that goes beyond books. The role of libraries is evolving, said Marisol Vidales, the director of the Dr. Hector P. Garcia Memorial Library in Mercedes. A recent month-long session of meetings in providing insights on speech, hearing and language for young children is proof positive of that assessment.

The Mercedes library hosted parent/caregiver workshops in February and March that were part of the network of Family Place Libraries. The sessions were funded by state and national grants, as were the sort of digital literacy courses the McAllen library has hosted. More recently, the Mercedes library kicked off a Thinking Money for Kids program that teaches children about personal finance.

## 'Serving in Different Ways'

Vidales calls it "serving Mercedes in different ways."

"We want to have something to offer different groups in seeing that adults, teens and children are served by the library," she said.

One of those groups is parents with young children. On a recent Friday, speech pathologist Ann Marie Reza stood before a handful of parents with toddler-aged children as she shared insights on developing speech and language skills. The parents listened attentively as Reza spoke. She gave them a checklist of what to watch for as their children advance in age. As infants, they should

be babbling and at 1, children should be approximating words. At age 3, a youngster should have "many words in their library," she said.

Reza also advised parents to not "make it too easy" for their children when it comes to speech development.

"Ask them to say something they want," she said. "They need to make requests such as they want to eat lunch. Prepare them to say hello to everyone when you visit somewhere, and reward them when they do."

After a recent session, Reza praised the Mercedes library for hosting sessions such

as the one where she spoke and making such information more readily accessible.

"Sometimes as parents, we keep problems in our households," Reza said, alluding to the issue of speech development of very young children. "What I tell parents is don't wait for someone to tell you something is wrong. Having early intervention to address a problem or issue is very important."

## 'People Need Help'

Having such words of advice at a public library demonstrates the growing reach and role libraries are having in their communities.



*Speech pathologist Ann Marie Reza was the featured speaker at a recent Families Place Libraries event in Mercedes. (VBR)*

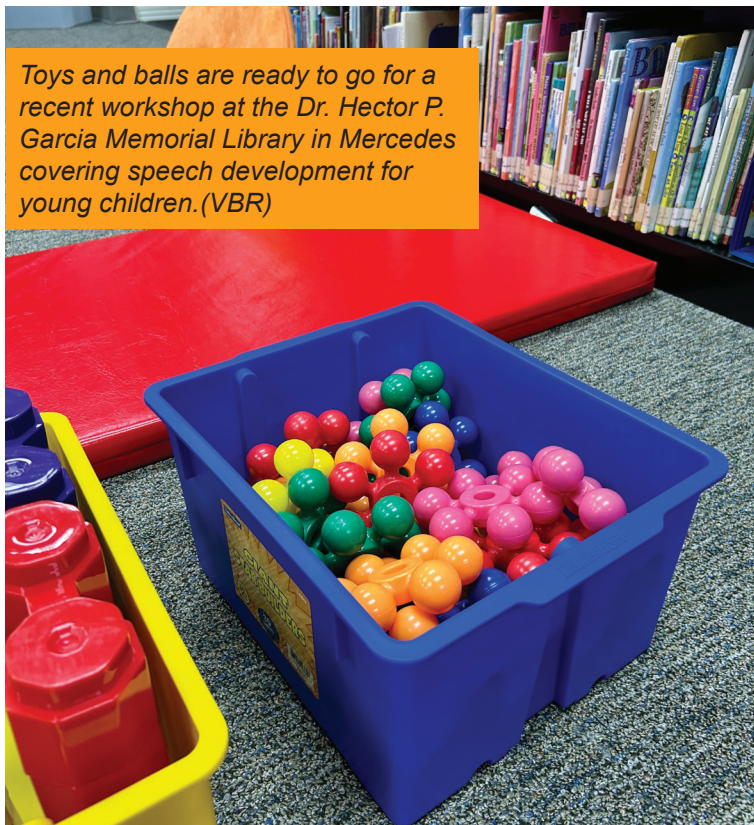
“People still think we’re just books,” said Vidales, the Mercedes library director. “That remains very important to what we do, but we want to bring people to the library for the different services we offer.”

Vidales’ assistant director at the library, Michelle Muniz, recently received her master’s degree in library sciences. She said what is taught in the classroom does not always match real life in small town communities.

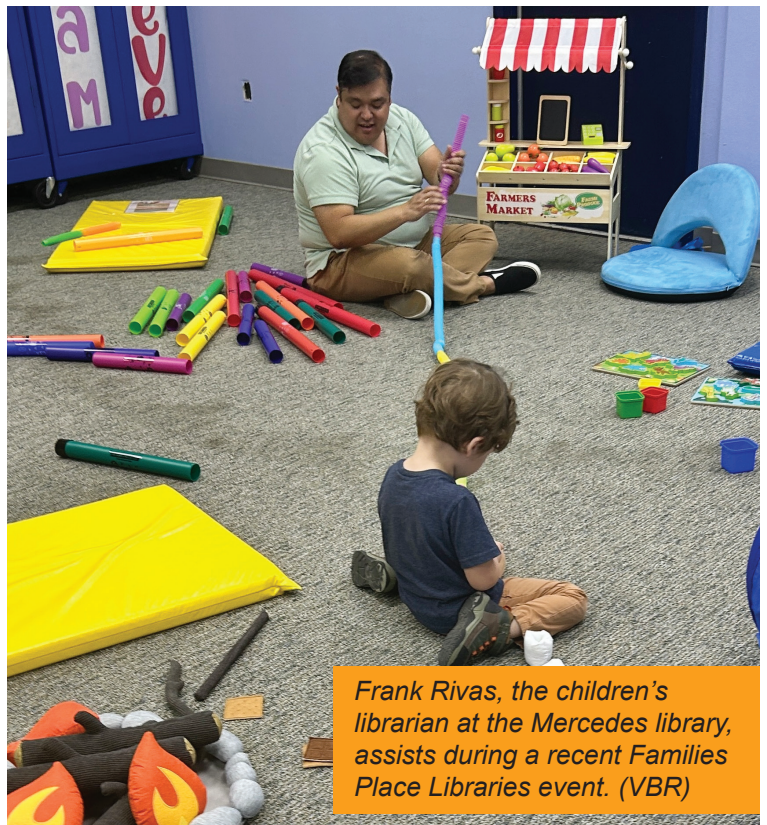
“It’s important to get out there and ask our community what they need,” Muniz said. “People need help, be it digital literacy with computer classes and how to create emails and telehealth accounts. We’re here to meet the needs of our communities.”



Teaching skills on how to instruct children to play was a topic at a recent workshop at the Dr. Hector P. Garcia Memorial Library in Mercedes.. (VBR)



Toys and balls are ready to go for a recent workshop at the Dr. Hector P. Garcia Memorial Library in Mercedes covering speech development for young children.(VBR)



Frank Rivas, the children’s librarian at the Mercedes library, assists during a recent Families Place Libraries event. (VBR)



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# Suarez Takes On Dual Role In McAllen

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Elizabeth Suarez's deep years of experience in city government and community affairs made her the ideal and perhaps only candidate for a newly formed leadership position in the city of McAllen.

In mid-January, Suarez became the president and chief executive officer of the McAllen Economic Development Corporation. It's the same title she was holding in leading the McAllen Chamber of Commerce. To put two vital legacy organizations under one leader represents a huge leap for a city known for its traditionalist business community.

"It's transformational for McAllen," Suarez said of her new dual roles. "The idea of having something like this had been talked about for a few years but it wasn't the right time. Then all of the pieces fell into place at the right time."

The first piece occurred with the retirement of Keith Patridge, the EDC's longtime chief executive, in late 2024. Before taking the chamber's helm in October 2023, Suarez had worked closely with the EDC as the city's director of aviation for nearly 10 years. Preceding that position was a lengthy tenure as the city's transit director. Suarez's 25-year track record of working with and leading key departments and organizations in McAllen made her more than a known quantity to local business and political leaders.

"I'm leaning into both of these teams," she said of leading the chamber and CEO. "It all feels like a dream."

## 'Changing Of The Guard'

The two organizations are now working under the same roof at the chamber's offices in downtown McAllen.

They have not, however, merged. The EDC and chamber continue to operate under separate boards. There are functions separate to each organization's specialties while there are also some identifiable commonalities. Suarez says both organizations have managers who are involved in workforce development and working with local colleges on apprenticeship programs. Those responsibilities can be streamlined and improved.

Combining obvious functions like accounting and finance teams can serve both organizations. There will be savings in office

supplies and furniture and not paying leasing costs for the EDC's former offices on the Military Highway.

"How do we improve efficiencies and align how we're promoting business?" Suarez said of some of her key challenges. "We're working to eliminate duplications and aligning our messaging in how we market and promote our city."

The lack of agreed-upon strategies to promote the city and foster economic duplication had long frustrated some McAllen leaders. Former Mayor Jim Darling often spoke of these deficiencies as he viewed

them in too many local entities doing the same things with little coordination. Suarez noted that larger cities like Houston have long operated with one joint CEO for both chamber and EDC organizations. Getting something like that done can be challenging in cities where there are competing political interests and constituencies.

In McAllen, Suarez says, it became possible with a "changing of the guard" with retirements and her late 2023 move from the airport to the chamber, where longtime CEO Steve Ahlenius had recently departed.

"We're bringing teams together," she said.



*Elizabeth Suarez as the chief executive officer of the McAllen Chamber of Commerce and Economic Development Corporation recently led a team in representing the city at a meeting in Austin. (Courtesy)*

“We’re excited about the opportunities we see ahead.”

**‘Little Grain Of Salt’**

Suarez has been a manager long enough to know that such a dramatic change like the one she’s in the midst of can bring staff worries and concerns.

“It’s such a huge change so there is going to be apprehension,” she said. “Having a new boss can be tough, but honestly, I’m seeing creative brainstorming sessions and the ideas that are flowing are amazing. I’m hoping that we will be able to showcase the talents and experience of our teams and staff.”

Suarez came up in teams like the ones she now oversees. Recalling her start in 2000, after her hiring by Derald Lary, the city’s airport director at the time, she well knows the importance of mentors and offering opportunities to capitalize upon.

“Sometimes, people see more in you than you can see yourself,” she said, reflecting on the role Lary had in her development. “I know I’m still attached to him and other mentors I’ve had. They’ve all put their little grain of salt in me.”



*Elizabeth Suarez, far right, has actively led the McAllen Chamber of Commerce since late 2023 in celebrating new business openings such as the new Panera Bread. (Courtesy)*

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# Love For Flying Lifts Airplane Club

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

As a boy growing up in Harlingen, Pat Reilly was enchanted by the sights and sounds of the Confederate Air Force show featured annually at the city's airport.

Reilly's home was located just a few miles away from the airport. Looking up to the skies, he could see the vintage World War II airplanes fly overhead during the CAF's hey days at the Harlingen airport in the 1960s and 1970s. He would go on to be a pilot in his own right, and while he hasn't flown in years,

Reilly has never lost his love for airplanes.

He is today the president of the Small Model Aircraft Society of Harlingen. The organization of aviation enthusiasts got its start in 1985 and is described on its website as one to "enjoy the fellowship of others who share our love for the sport of model aviation." The sport may not have a wide following nationally, but with the development of new technologies and electric power systems, it is more accessible than

years past.

"It's a big hobby," Reilly said. "The sky is the limit when you get into it."

## 'Anyone Can Do It'

Reilly started out in the old days of the sport when the models were built from balsa wood kits.

The really old-school planes were hand-launched and glided without a power source. Remote-controlled balsa wood planes would



*SMASH brings together model aviation aficionados "who enjoy the fellowship" of their hobby. (Courtesy)*

come along later. The old wooden planes were prone to crash given their lightweight construction and vulnerabilities to wind gusts. Reilly looks back on those days fondly. It was trail and error, and going back to start from scratch to assemble a new model.

It's far different today. Model aircraft

clubs such as SMASH, the acronym for the Harlingen organization, use what Reilly calls "foamies," which are electronic-powered model planes made of foam. They are purchased largely ready to fly with radio equipment built in. The technical skill and knowledge to fly the foamies are not as challenging as keeping the old wooden

planes in the air.

"Now anyone can do it," Reilly said.

Still, he adds, learning to fly the foamed model planes is not a simple task.

"It's not like learning to ride a bicycle," Reilly said. "These foamies have electronics that help you keep the wings level. It's something you have to work at."



Many of today's model flying airplanes are made of foam and electrically powered. (Courtesy)



Model airplanes come in all shapes and sizes at the Small Model Aircraft Society of Harlingen. (Courtesy)

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**'Love Of Airplanes'**

SMASH utilizes two main air fields for its flying space.

One is in Rio Hondo on South Arroyo Boulevard, in close proximity to the Arroyo Lift Bridge. The S.M.A.S.H Airpark in Rio Hondo features an 800-foot runway and lots of open space at a large green space nearby the Arroyo Colorado. The other flying space goes back to Reilly's roots of loving airplanes via the CAF at the site of its original headquarters on Mile 2 E Road in Mercedes.

Events open to the public include picnics hosted by SMASH in Rio Hondo as the models take to the skies. The organization meets monthly in Harlingen and members discuss event planning, field improvements and tech tips. The meetings are also a good time "to bring your latest creation" and share it with other members during a "model of the month" segment.

It's all good fellowship and camaraderie in sharing a common interest and love of flying.

"They come in all shapes and sizes," Reilly said of the models flown. "It keeps things interesting and what we all share is a love of airplanes and flying."

Visit [smashrc.com](http://smashrc.com) for more information.



*Father-and-son time is well spent at events hosted by the Small Model Aircraft Society of Harlingen. (Courtesy)*

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# Firms' Founders Return To Make RGV Impact

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The OrigoWorks portfolio is an extensive one.

The Brownsville-based company got its start as a design-oriented firm. Origo today has the capabilities to offer turnkey projects to its clients. The firm over the years has expanded to include construction, sales and marketing, and property and asset management to the services it offers.

Origo headquarter offices are housed in what was once an Edelstein's Furniture warehouse along railroad tracks that are now a part of Brownsville's network of hike-and-bike trails. The stylish conversion of an old warehouse fits nicely into the Origo story. The company's founders – Javier Huerta and Carlos Varela – are Brownsville natives who left their hometown to attend college and start their professional careers elsewhere.

In the early 2000s, Varela pitched Huerta with the vision of returning home to start a new company that could utilize what they had learned in Austin and San Antonio.

"Let's start something in Brownsville," Huerta said of the proposal he heard over 20 years ago. "The idea was to come back and have a community impact in our region."

## Introducing New Ideas

Huerta is an architect by training and work experience.

His career in architecture flourished in working for a large San Antonio-based firm after graduating from the University of Texas at Austin. Returning home to help start a company from scratch meant designing custom homes and office buildings. Huerta was influenced by projects that he did in San Antonio and Central Texas whose designs were "industrial with the hint of modern."

The goal was to build new buildings and homes that had a timeless look to them and didn't look recently developed. Origo's designs are distinctive in how they utilize stone, metal and windows and at times feature the gable roof style where two sides slope down to form triangles at each end.

"We brought down some new ideas and tried to apply them here in fitting them to the Valley's culture," Huerta said. "People would tell us, 'you guys are doing the kind

of work and designs we see in San Antonio and Austin."

With its expanded portfolio, Origo began developing real estate projects with an emphasis on retail and restaurants. One of its early significant projects was Morrison Plaza on Pablo Kisel Boulevard in Brownsville. It would feature a design look that would be largely replicated in

other Valley projects such as Stuart Place Crossing in Harlingen. These two projects feature well-known restaurant brands like Johnny Rockets and Tropical Smoothie Café.

Both the Morrison and Stuart Place developments successfully tapped into the growth corridors of Brownsville and Harlingen, and demonstrated that Origo's



*Javier Huerta is one of the founders of OrigoWorks and returned to Brownsville to start a successful architectural and development firm. (Courtesy)*

real estate instincts and market studies were on the mark.

“You can get a gut feeling about a piece of land,” Huerta said of scouting development possibilities. “The most important thing to determine is ‘would I want to live here? Would I want to work here?’ ”

**Making An Impact**

The growth and successes of Origo has extended the firm’s reach to projects in Houston, Dallas, San Antonio and to Boerne in the Texas Hill Country.

One of its major projects came to completion in early 2019 when the Origo-designed corporate headquarters of Texas Regional Bank opened in Harlingen. The bank tower is located on the western end of the Stuart Place Crossing project that Origo designed and still manages. Huerta says his company’s ongoing association with Texas Regional is an example of “making sure you’re with the right partners.”

Those partnerships have served Origo well in developing projects across the Valley, including retail and restaurant plazas in Edinburg, Pharr, San Benito and South Padre Island. It is also on the Island where Origo helped to design and develop The Shores Villas, which are upscale homes on SPI’s bayside.

In its hometown, Origo is heavily invested in historical sites like its design and development of the El Jardin Hotel in downtown Brownsville and its revival of Palm Village, which was one of the city’s first shopping centers in the 1960s. It all adds up to the wise decision by Origo’s founders to return home and make a difference.

“We can look back and see what we’ve done and the impact we have made in our



*OrigoWorks main offices are in Brownsville at the redeveloped site of a former Edelstein Furniture warehouse along Expressway 77. (VBR)*

community and the market,” Huerta said.



*The corporate headquarters of Texas Regional Bank in Harlingen is one of OrigoWorks’ signature design projects. (VBR)*



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# The District Adds To North McAllen's Rise

By Chris Ardis

Tenants have started moving into Building A, part of Phase One of a new Domain Development project along North 10th Street and Auburn Avenue in McAllen.

McAllen's commercial corridor did not stretch much further north than Dove Avenue in the early 1980s.

Flash forward to the present and the city's north-bound landscape has been transformed. What was once far north McAllen is now a restaurant and shopping mecca. Developer Shavi Mahtani's plans will add to making the area north of 10th Street and Trenton Road a place where families and friends will meet to shop and eat.

Mahtani, the president of Domain Development, is promoting one of his company's newest developments, The District. This four-phase project along north 10th Street and Auburn Avenue will include restaurants, retail, office space, high-end apartments, a high-rise condominium complex and luxury townhomes.

"The back is where the meat, the heart, of the development is," Mahtani said of Auburn Avenue.

## Reaching North McAllen & Edinburg

What excites him most is the planned greenspace and water pad that will draw people of all ages outdoors.

The newest section of Phase One, a strip center on north 10th immediately south of Auburn, has already begun welcoming

tenants. Domain Development refers to this section as Building A.

The first tenant to move into building A at The District, Nothing Bundt Cakes, opened in October 2024. This location, the fourth for owners Lisa and Michael Amaya, brings delectable baked-fresh-daily bundt cakes to north McAllen.

"It's been fantastic," Michael Amaya said of the newest shop. "Once we opened our doors, the community was excited."

The District location gives easy access to Amaya's customers in north McAllen and Edinburg, as well as those coming from medical, university and county government communities. Another tenant, Kiwami Ramen, snatched up the south end cap of building A. Kiwami Ramen serves made-from-scratch ramen, a technique its owners learned in Japan. The company website highlights how the restaurant "bridges the expertise of Japan with the diverse palates of America."

## Brunching Away

Meanwhile, brunch lovers can hardly wait for the opening of Another Broken Egg Café inside the north end cap of Building A. It's scheduled to open this spring and fills a specific niche for Mahtani.

"One request we constantly receive is a brunch concept," he said. "This will really fill that void."

Al Treviño, the founder of CRUSH

Enterprises, is the developer bringing Another Broken Egg Café to north McAllen.

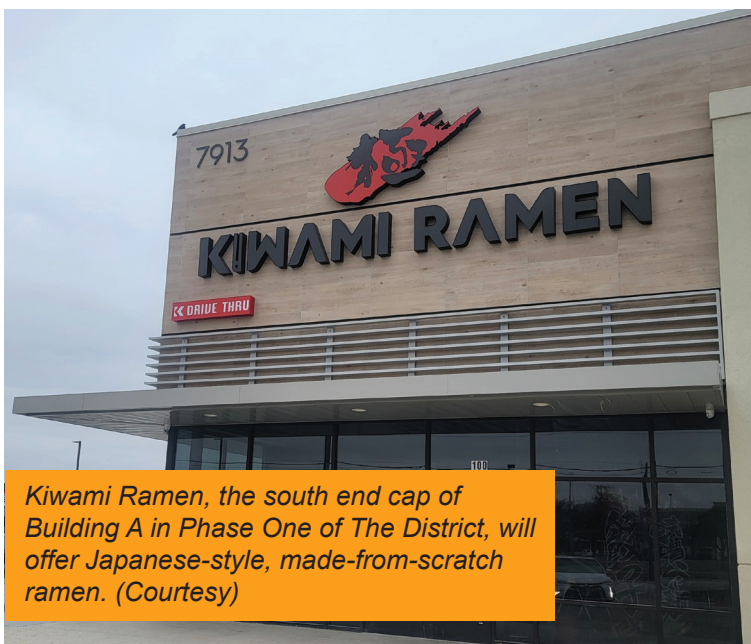
"I'm really ecstatic to bring Another Broken Egg Café to the Rio Grande Valley, with its chef-inspired brunch and bar experience," Treviño said. "I think the Valley's energetic north McAllen food scene makes it the perfect place for such a vibrant concept."

## Ever Expanding

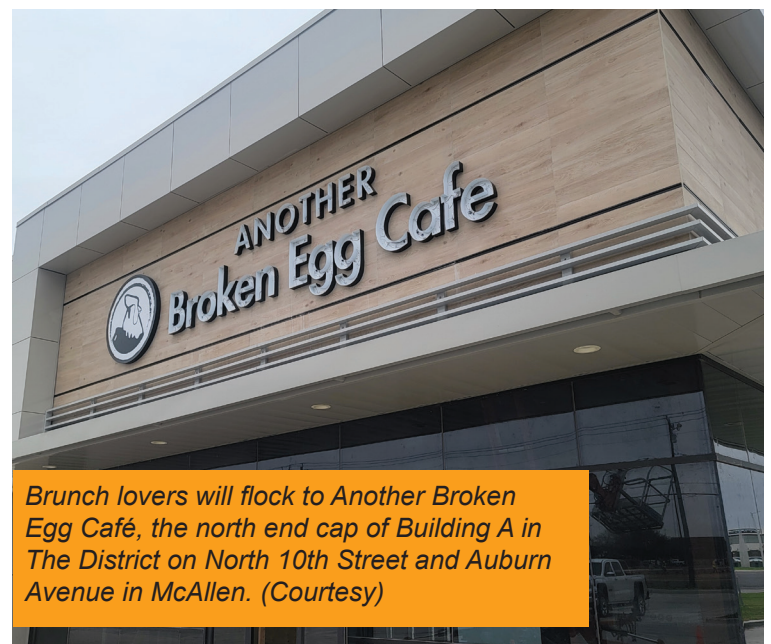
Other District tenants expected to open this year include Gen Korean BBQ House, Great Clips and The Baked Bear, which features custom ice-cream sandwiches made with a variety of baked-from-scratch cookies. Additional tenants are pending. Phase One stretches from The District's building A to the pad site north of Red Lobster. That pad site will be home to the newest Cheddar's in McAllen.

An available pad site sits between the future Cheddar's and what will be Starbucks' newest north McAllen location. Taco Palenque opened between the future Starbucks and building A to the delight of its large fan base.

Next up for The District is phase two. This phase includes convertible outdoor restaurants, a term used to describe eateries with retractable roofs or other attachments that can be extended or retracted, depending on the weather. Multi-story units for retail and professional and business offices will add



*Kiwami Ramen, the south end cap of Building A in Phase One of The District, will offer Japanese-style, made-from-scratch ramen. (Courtesy)*



*Brunch lovers will flock to Another Broken Egg Café, the north end cap of Building A in The District on North 10th Street and Auburn Avenue in McAllen. (Courtesy)*

to the overall vibe.

Phase Two is where the greenspace magic will be found. It will be ideal for community events, markets and other outdoor activities. Mahtani said to look for Phase Two to begin during the fourth quarter of this year.

Restaurants, retail, office space, architecturally controlled living space and mindfully designed greenspace is what Domain refers to as its “lifestyle-focused” development.



Customers can satisfy their sweet tooth at The Baked Bear with custom, mix-and-match ice-cream sandwiches. (Courtesy)



Nothing Bundt Cakes opened Oct. 4, 2024, making it the first tenant in Building A of The District, the newest mixed-use development in McAllen for Domain Development. (Courtesy)



In addition to its popular variety of bundt cakes, customers can find gift items and party supplies at Nothing Bundt Cake. (Courtesy)



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