

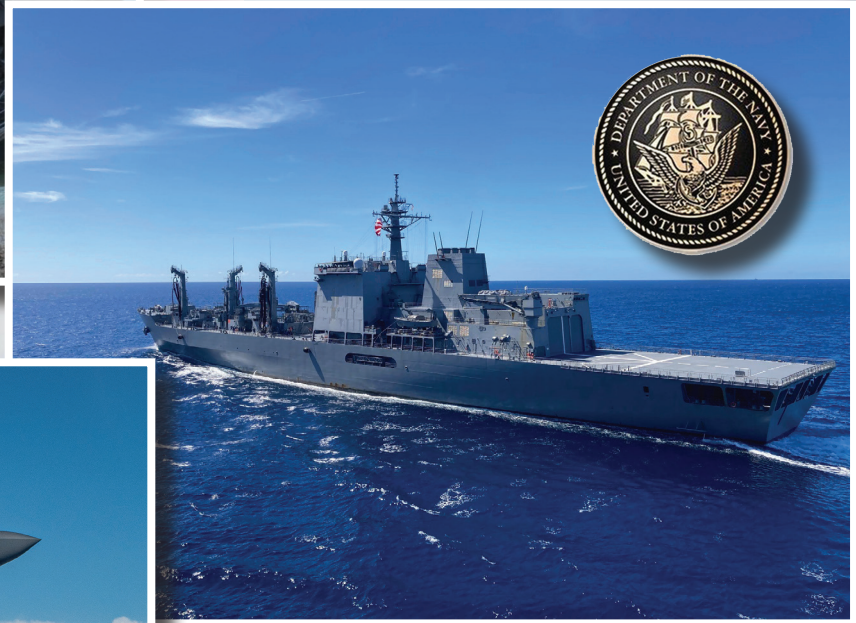
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By Todd Breland

Running a business is like raising kids. When we think we've accomplished one stage of our development, things change. A major shift happens, and then again. The cycle continues.

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never a reality.

Our home family and our work family are very similar in many ways also. We win together; we lose together. But collectively, methodically and strategically, we determine corrective plans with possible new and improved outcomes. When our babies grow and mature, we celebrate. The cuts, bumps and bruises affect us especially hard. We pour our love and attention into our children/companies with endless measure, all aimed with one goal -- succeed.

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Veteran Helps Businesses Find ‘Roadmaps’

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Cristina Solis Wilson’s 26 years in the military have imbued her with the values of the U.S. Army and ones that serve as the foundations of coaching business owners to success.

Purpose, motivation and direction are the principles learned in a military life that have seen her rise to the ranks of being a command sergeant major and representing the pinnacle of enlisted ranks in the Army. Only a small fraction of soldiers ever achieves this rank and signifies extensive leadership and expertise. It is a command sergeant major who is the final authority on discipline and standards for enlisted soldiers.

Wilson has earned several “first female Latina” command designations, she said of her Army years, which continue to the present as a reservist. In her civilian life, Wilson has been a police officer, a state trooper, a criminal investigator for federal public defenders, and today, co-owns the Entrepreneur Power Network with her husband Michael, who is an Army veteran.

“We’re business coaches,” Wilson said of the work she and her husband do. “We help to develop a strategy on where they want to go and set them up on that path. We provide the tools for them to be successful.”

The majority of the clientele that Entrepreneur Power advises are Rio Grande Valley-based businesses, as are the coaches, who office and live in McAllen. Those clients are sure to receive counseling services that lean heavily on the values and leadership traits learned while serving in the military.

“In the military you determine early in mission planning what the end goal is,” said Wilson, who is a Harlingen native. “Then you bring it up front. You focus on impact, not just talking.”

One client, Heather Segovia of St. Michael’s Ambulance of McAllen, says Wilson has provided the sort of disciplined strategy and guidance her company needed.

“She has not only held me accountable but also instilled in me a sense of confidence and resilience,” Segovia said in a testimonial on Wilson’s webpage. “Her unwavering commitment to nurturing potential has been a cornerstone of my development.”



Cristina Wilson, a Harlingen native, rose in the enlisted ranks to become a command sergeant major. (Courtesy)

Sense Of Duty

The entire span of Wilson’s military service has been spent as an U.S. Army reservist.

She is currently on her sixth activation, a mission that’s related to border security operations. Three other activations came overseas, beginning with Iraq in 2005 and 2006. Kuwait came next from 2011 through 2012, and then Afghanistan in 2019 and 2020. Her responsibilities in those three deployments were all considerable ones and included being a convoy commander and serving on the staff of a three-star general.

Now at 55 years of age, Wilson says

her current activation “may be my last go-around,” as she contemplates military retirement. It is something Wilson has long thought of, but it’s hard to depart due to a strong sense of duty to those she leads.

“I hear it from my soldiers, ‘don’t retire, we need you,’ and I get to feeling that I don’t want to let them down,” she said.

For a reservist, the transitions back to civilian life from military duty are constant, be it from one weekend-a-month training or returning from a longer stint of duty. Wilson has learned how to manage those adjustments by accepting “no one will have pity for you” as part of a volunteer

Army where you chose the transitory life of civilian-and-military life.

“I’ve learned to think of my Army values and the lessons they teach,” she said. “You bring everything you’ve learned and translate it to civilian life.”

Providing Focus

As a business coach, Wilson advises entrepreneurs on how to set employee expectations and being consistent in providing that feedback.

“How do you know your people are doing a good job?” she will ask a client. “You can’t get mad at employees if you don’t



Cristina Wilson’s 26 years in the military have seen her rise to command positions and highest levels of leadership among enlisted ranks. (Courtesy)

evaluate them.”

Wilson’s Entrepreneur Power Network offers a variety of services, including workshops that can be customized to a specific client, with sessions that can last a few hours to several days. There are also online courses that encourage personal and professional growth. A key feature of the Power Network’s offerings is called Mastermind. It pairs a client with experts in a field they are seeking help – such as how to use social media – and how mastering those skills can boost their business.

“We help them focus,” Wilson said of her clients. “Businesses can get inundated with information overload. We do a discovery of their business and help them focus and create roadmaps to being successful.”

Bringing the end goal to the front and setting clear objectives with a focus on impact. The mission mindset brought to civilian life. For more insights and information, go to entrepreneurpowernetwork.com and criswilson.com.



Cristina Wilson, center, who has held high leadership ranks in the U.S. Army, receives an award from the Rio Grande Valley Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. (Courtesy)



Cristina Wilson, center, has held many leadership roles over her 26-year military career in the U.S. Army. (Courtesy)

Vet Finds Mission In Training Dogs

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Daniel Villarreal's exit from the U.S. Army came in 2006 and he knew the next mission ahead.

He wanted to train dogs for law enforcement and detection work and to help fellow veterans who need service dogs. Villarreal had gotten an introduction to the world of dogs and how they are trained before enlisting in the Army. He was eager to do that work full time in his post-military life while drawing upon the experiences gained during his years of service.

"Building a business from the ground up is like going on a mission," said Villarreal, who earned the rank of sergeant during his Army tenure. "You learn the leadership skills and drive needed to succeed. And you learn how to build from your failures."

The One Percenters

Fajo leaps from Villarreal's pickup truck and is ready to go – and work.

The black German Shepherd is high energy and uber intelligent. He relishes having a job to do. Fajo is one of those dogs utilized by Villarreal's Pharr-based Valley K9 Detection Services in going to schools to find drugs, guns and tobacco. This dog, Villarreal says, is "a one percenter." Fajo is among those elite dogs who have the drive and necessary talents to do detection work.

"Just one out of 10 will have that drive," he said of scouting puppies and determining which ones have the potential to be detection or service dogs. "Once we determine that (potential), we build from there."

Villarreal had plenty to build in his post-military life. He served in the Army for six years, joining at the age of 24 after completing a police academy at then-UT Brownsville. All of his military years were spent as a military policeman and his duties took him all over the world. The Afghan and Iraqi war veteran returned to the Rio Grande Valley in 2006 with a plan to get a college education and start a K9 business.

His military years did not include any time spent working with dogs since that work was restricted to those who had re-enlisted. Villarreal did get exposure to the K9 world during his police academy years prior to joining the Army and his interest in that type of work never abated during his military years.

"I was hooked," Villarreal said of when he first got exposed to K9 dog training work.



Daniel Villarreal is a Pharr native who served for six years as a military police officer in the U.S. Army. (Courtesy)

“Dogs became my passion.”

We're Always Learning'

The beginning of Villarreal’s K9 business dates back to the late aughts when he was also going about earning a degree in criminal justice from UTPA.

Fifteen years later, his K9 business is in part focused on law enforcement clients. It includes providing and training dogs for police departments as well as training law enforcement personnel. Villarreal also contracts with school districts to use his dogs to search campuses for prohibited substances and objects. A third service is one where Valley K9 provides service dogs for veterans who are afflicted with post-traumatic stress disorder.

Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers are top choices for service dogs while German Shepherds and Belgian Malinois are highly valued for their capabilities for police work. The Malinois are a particular favorite in Villarreal’s dog training world due to their high intelligence, athleticism, agility and work ethic. It’s a breed that resembles the German Shepherd in appearance but has a sleeker athletic build.

Villarreal favors German Shepherds for school inspection work because they are more social dogs as compared to Malinois, who are strictly focused on work when there’s job to do. In any case, when training handlers, his sage advice is, “the dog does 85 percent of the work, you do the rest.”

Taking a page from his military life, Villarreal talks about the need to continue acquiring knowledge in working to complete new goals – and missions.

“There’s no such thing as a master trainer,” he said when dismissing the use of such a term. “We’re always learning and evolving.”



Daniel Villarreal knew his post-military life would be one of having a business specializing in the training of dogs and working to improve the work of handlers. (VBR)



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Attention To Detail Spices Up Vet's Salsa

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

David Carter grew up a Kansas kid experiencing some of the more extreme weather fluctuations seen in the United States.

There are severe winter storms and blizzards to go with severe thunderstorms over the Midwest plains. Then there are the tornadoes. Kansas averages over 80 tornadoes a year and the big storms of the state became immortalized in "The Wizard of Oz."

"I grew up in southwest Kansas and I know about blizzards and tornadoes," Carter said. "I wanted out of there."

For Carter, that meant joining the U.S. Army at 23 years of age and wanting "to see more." He didn't go that far, as it turned out, in that he would be stationed for four years at Fort Hood in Central Texas. His Kansas roots came in handy when he was assigned to being a meteorologist in analyzing weather data in support of military operations and air, land and sea missions.

Being in the military gave Carter a grounding that he has carried on to post-Army life. Being in the military, he says, "breaks you down and then builds up your confidence" in instilling discipline and focus to the challenge at hand.

"You have to have that kind of focus in the military," Carter said. "Every little detail is important to completing that mission. If you miss something, it can lead to casualties and catastrophes."

These days, living in Harlingen, Carter works for a large government contractor that provides security services for federal facilities, networks and data. A military background is helpful in those endeavors and has influenced an entirely different sort of product he has created with strong cultural connections to his adopted hometown region.

'A Breakthrough'

Carter was making his case in 2024 to the judges of the Harlingen RISE Up Harlingen Business Pitch when questioned about his bonafides to make the product he was selling.

The judge, in describing herself as a Latina, questioned why someone from Kansas thought he could make a salsa that someone like her would buy. Carter, with a deprecating style of humor, had the ready comeback.

"Don't I look like the kind of guy who enjoys good food?" he responded, making light of his tall and sturdy frame.

The presentation made its mark as did Carter's

SGT. SALSA brands. They're handmade at this point in Carter's home. He has ambitions to go bigger in contracting the manufacturing of his salsas to expand sales beyond street markets and a base of core customers he has cultivated in recent years. The Harlingen pitch competition gave SGT. SALSA wider exposure. Carter's salsa brands finished second in the competition and earned him a generous \$20,000

prize.

"It was a breakthrough," he said of doing so well in a pitch competition organized by the Harlingen Economic Development Corporation.

Tasting All Ingredients

Carter draws upon military imagery and symbols in designating the potency of his salsas.



David Carter is a Kansas transplant to the Rio Grande Valley and has created a winning product in SGT. SALSA, which placed second in a recent pitch competition in Harlingen. (VBR)

The mildest salsa has the single strip of a private on the top of its lid. From there, there are three other levels of SGT. SALSA products and each has an Army sergeant's Chevron with three bars pointing down. There's the medium hot salsa of a regular sergeant. Then comes the hot salsa of a first sergeant and the extra hot of command sergeant at the top level of spiciness.

"The more people have heard about it, the more the demand has grown," Carter said of his salsas. "The feedback I've always gotten is, 'this is really good, you need to sell it.'"

Salsa making is a longtime hobby for Carter that started because store-bought products weren't doing it for him.

They didn't have enough flavor and spice and what you could taste was dominated by one or two ingredients. Carter envisioned a salsa product where when you taste it, all of the ingredients can make their presence known to a customer's palate.

"When you take a bite of a chip with our salsa on it, I want you to taste the full variety of flavors in it," he said. "I want you to taste the lime, cilantro and garlic in it, not just the tomato or onion, but the full blend of everything in it."

Carter's next step is securing an agreement with a manufacturer who can make his products in greater quantities but still in smaller batches. He would like to go beyond street markets and begin getting into meat markets and smaller area stores with the longer-term goal of getting SGT. SALSA on grocery store shelves.

"I want to grow but I'm not going to put my family's livelihood at stake," he said, speaking of his wife, whose family has Rio Grande Valley roots, and his teenage son.

The mission is defined and so is passion for a classic Mexican product made by a Midwesterner that's appealing to an RGV clientele. For more information, go to the SGT. SALSA page on Facebook or sgt_salsa on Instagram.

David Carter stacks up his array of salsa products at a Rio Grande Valley street market. (Courtesy)



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Vet Finds Purpose Abroad & New Mission In RGV

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Sixto Garza Jr. joined the U.S. Army four days after graduating from Edinburg High School in 1982.

Like many youngsters reaching adulthood, Garza knew he wanted to do something beyond the confines of his hometown. He just didn't know what or where.

"I didn't really have a sense of direction," Garza said. "The military gave me that structure. It gave me a career."

He would become immersed and trained to work in Army evacuation hospitals. These "evac" medical facilities are mobile or semi-mobile and provide extensive medical care for casualties evacuated from the front lines. Garza's responsibilities in such mobile hospitals were in the X-ray radiographic technology field. As an X-ray tech, he operated equipment to create diagnostic images of a soldier's internal body structures such as bones, organs and tissues.

The intensity and urgency of treating the wounded and injured was subsumed within a larger mission of meeting your responsibilities for the greater good.

"In the military, the main focus is getting the job done," said Garza, who spent 21 years in the Army. "You are taught and trained to accomplish the mission. Somehow, somehow, you get the job done."

Many Travels & Returning Home

His years of service were spent in part in Iraq in support of U.S. military operations. Medical facilities were set up quickly and expanded to three times their original size to accommodate the buildup of combat operations.

"A lot of times in the military you start small and then adjust," Garza said. "You adapt to changing situations and then you get it done."

That firmness of mission would eventually take him to Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Germany and then back to the United States. Garza would become an instructor in the Army medical field and worked at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and served at Fort Sam Houston in the same city. The medical knowledge he amassed during his military years were considerable and upon retiring from the military in 2003 he stayed in the health care field.



Sixto Garza Jr. served 21 years in the U.S. Army and retired as a master sergeant in 2003. (Courtesy)

Returning home, he worked as the director of radiology for the South Texas Health Systems and at the South Texas Children’s Hospital in Edinburg. Working in the private sector for 13 years after his military tenure got Garza to thinking of what came next after his healthcare career would eventually end.

“I always wanted to have my own business,” he said. “I had no idea what that could be.”

Finding A New Mission

It came out of happenstance.



Six Shooter Softwash has gone beyond its core mission to branch out to doing Christmas lighting for special events and community celebrations. (Courtesy)



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A roofer was doing work on Garza’s home and mentioned the idea of the Rio Grande Valley needing more soft wash operators. The work involves cleaning roofs, exterior surfaces and anything that has algae, mold and mildew but without using a pressure washer. The idea intrigued Garza. He did research on the field and attended a training course in Florida.

Garza came to the conclusion that he could do it and gave his 30-day notice at the hospital. He was ready for his next mission. Playing off his first name, Garza launched Six Shooter Softwash in 2016 and based it in Pharr to serve the Valley from east to west. He started small, as he experienced in the Army, small houses and structures and then bigger homes before moving on to large commercial buildings.

“We got some of those first jobs done and did them well and it was like reaching a goal, accomplishing a mission,” Garza said. “We looked at our work and what we had done and it was, ‘yep, we got it done, let’s keep going.’”

From there, it was on bigger projects like projects cleaning hospitals, school buildings and facilities at SpaceX. Garza has branched out to doing Christmas holiday lighting with clients like the cities of Brownsville and Edinburg as well as large holiday gatherings. It has been a full life since being that 18-year-old kid with no idea where he was headed and it’s still active. Garza and his employees work every day to accomplish goals and missions of a vastly different sort from what he faced in military life, but important nonetheless.

“After we finish a job, it looks like a brand-new place,” Garza said of soft washing a home or building. “To see a customer smile at the work we’ve done is special. I love seeing that reaction.”



Sixto Garza’s Six Shooter Softwash cleans homes and buildings across the Rio Grande Valley. (Courtesy)



An employee for Six Shooter Softwash reaches high to clean a commercial building at a worksite in the Valley. (Courtesy)



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STC Supports Vets Making Transition

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Going from active military service with its intensity of duties to normal civilian life can be jarring.

“It’s a radical overnight change,” said Javier Cardenas, a VA certifying official at South Texas College in McAllen. “It has the potential to be catastrophic.”

Cardenas would know. The McAllen native joined the Marines two weeks after graduating from high school. He would serve four years in the Marines and admits to feeling aimless in re-entering civilian life.

“In the military, you’re moving high speed from sun up to sundown,” Cardenas said. “Then all of a sudden, it’s over. What now?”

Ricardo Olivares served as a medic and in administrative duties in a 20-plus year tenure in the U.S. Army. He has been at STC for two decades since leaving the military. Olivares has served as an instructor and in leadership positions in the human resources program at STC. He has seen students in his classrooms who are veterans and can spot their characteristics and challenges in making the transition to civilian life.

“I tell them that they need to remember they’re not in the military anymore,” said Olivares, an Alamo native, who like Cardenas, comes from a military family. “They’re in McAllen, Texas, in a classroom and everyone has free will.”

Coming from “the atmosphere and flavor” of military life and moving to the civilian world can lead to veterans “needing mental health help,” Olivares said. He spoke of a younger family member who was perhaps leaning back too much on a past military life.

“I said, ‘I get it, you’ll be a Marine for life,’” said Olivares, who earned two Master’s degrees while in the military in preparing for civilian life. “Now you have to get a good job in civilian life so you can help your family here.”

Getting Vet Benefits

The STC Office of Student Veterans Affairs helps vets make that transition.

It’s where the 33-year-old Cardenas works in informing veterans of the benefits they’ve earned. Among them are benefit

programs associated with the GI Bill and what it can do to help vets cover college costs. Cardenas was one of those veterans who knew little of what the GI Bill does in financially assisting students with education and training benefits. Its coverage includes

helping to pay for tuition, books and housing while attending colleges and vocational schools.

“I had heard of it,” Cardenas said of the original landmark law passed during World War II. “I didn’t realize how comprehensive



Javier Cardenas served in the Marines and now works at South Texas College in helping fellow vets make the transition to civilian and college life. (Courtesy)

it is.”

Cardenas utilized those benefits to earn an associate’s degree from STC. His next step was achieving an STC undergraduate degree in operations management. He is now part of a team at STC that helps veterans enroll at the school and guides them through the process of determining benefits from the Veterans Administration as it pertains to education and training.

The VA makes all decisions regarding eligibility and benefits. Once those matters are settled, the Student Veterans Affairs office helps veterans through the enrollment process in receiving their benefits.

Reaching Out

In recent years, STC’s Veterans Affairs Office has extended its reach to inform vets about mental health issues and the resources that can help them.

A veterans resources fair took place on campus earlier this year. Representatives from local, state and federal organizations were on campus in McAllen to inform veterans of the services they provide. The event was a big success and was replicated

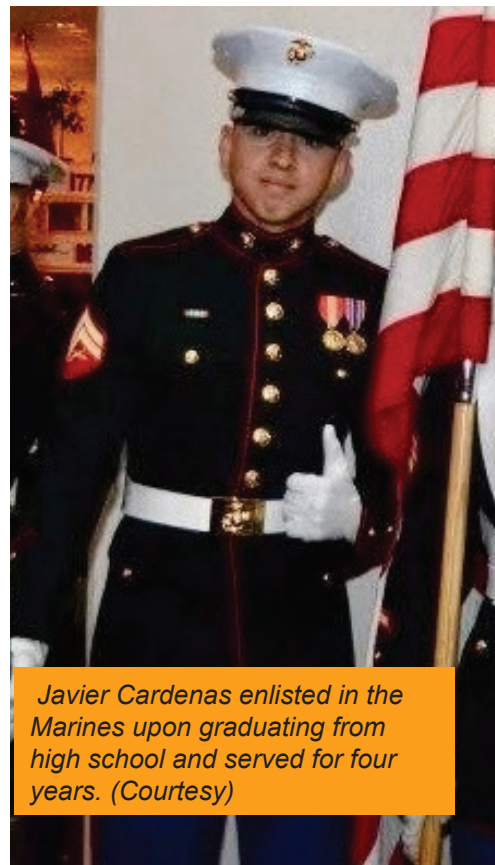
at STC’s Starr County campus with the support of a local industrial foundation. Next up are events and efforts to help vets at STC deal with mental health issues in their post-military life.

Vet peer groups are invaluable in helping veterans get through mental health challenges. Olivares, as an older vet who’s on campus, has provided some of that mentorship and guidance. Cardenas says the counsel of wise vets is much appreciated.

“It’s the rapport we have with each other,” Cardenas said. “There is the wisdom and experience of guys who were in for 20 years or more. I know I’ve learned a lot from those guys.”

Cardenas grew up the son of a Marine and a grandson of a U.S. Army veteran. Serving in a logistics platoon didn’t always lead the younger Cardenas to the life he envisioned as a Marine. Despite that, Cardenas knows he made the right decision to enlist as a fresh-faced high school graduate 15 years ago.

“Ultimately, at the end of the day, I’m grateful I did it,” he said.



Javier Cardenas enlisted in the Marines upon graduating from high school and served for four years. (Courtesy)

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'Veteran Way' Guides RGV Business

By Chris Ardis

Nelson Martinez and Joe Robledo met in fifth grade and from that point on seemed to live parallel lives.

They lived one mile apart in Las Milpas in southern Pharr. Both men graduated from Hidalgo High School and each went on to serve two combat tours in Iraq. Martinez served in the Army and Robledo is a Marine. They are each college-educated with bachelor's degrees in business administration.

Their friendship continues to the present as business partners in the ownership of a painting company that offers a wide range of services from commercial buildings to residential work. It's a veterans-owned business where its management style is influenced by lessons learned from military life.

"Just like combat, you have a mission," Martinez said. "There are no do-overs. And that's the way we see our clients' projects."

Discovering A Niche

Martinez became a paint expert through working for Sherwin Williams while Robledo was a construction supervisor on large commercial projects that included apartment complexes and restaurants.

They stayed in touch over the years. The two men developed a theory on how they could start a business in the Rio Grande Valley that drew upon their strengths and experiences.

"The perception was that there was no money in the Valley," Martinez said. "But then you see Land Rover, BMW and Audi dealerships coming down here."

With these dealerships come customers, and Martinez and Robledo figured those people come from higher-income households that need maintenance. They recognized the need for more top-tier residential and commercial painting companies and knew their experience allowed them to expand on those services. The two men identified this niche in the Valley, but their vision involved more than filling it.

"Yes, we saw the need but also, we grew up here," Robledo said. "We have always called the Valley 'The Diamond in the Rough.' There's so much room for expansion. There is still room for growth."

Martinez's career with Sherwin Williams took him to Laredo in 2020, but he felt the

pull to come home.

"We moved a lot, growing up, and I moved while I was in the military," Martinez said. "I wanted to settle in the Valley."

Martinez resigned and took money from his 401(k). Robledo kept his job, knowing it takes time for a new business to become profitable. They set up a limited liability company and established Armored Painting in March 2020.

"Five days before COVID, we did it. And then, wham, everything shut down," Robledo said.

Martinez's boss at Sherwin Williams called

and offered him his job back, but he and Robledo relied on the lessons learned while serving in the military. Being on a mission and finding ways to persevere.

"Because of the Marine Corps, I don't fold under pressure," Robledo said. "I don't break. I get it done."

Armored Painting offers services that include exterior and interior painting for commercial and residential buildings. Cabinet refinishing, pressure washing, and remodeling with specialties in bathrooms and kitchens are additional areas of expertise offered by Armored Painting. All services are



customized.

“Joe is really good at presenting options, so it’s tailored to what the customer wants,” Martinez said. “He has extensive knowledge in construction.”

Giving Back To Community

Armored Painting will host its sixth annual Operation Veteran Paint Project in November.

The company asks the community to nominate a veteran whose house needs a fresh coat of paint. Martinez and Robledo read the nominations and then drive by to see the homes to make assessments. From there, they round up a team of volunteers that includes other veterans to paint the home of the person selected.

The painting usually begins at the start of the week in which Veterans Day falls. This year, the special job of the Operation Veteran Paint Project starts a bit earlier and will take place the week of Nov. 3. Robledo is an adjunct professor at South Texas College where he teaches construction management. He finds plenty of helping hands among his students.

Several other sponsors help with this annual project, including Movement Mortgage and API Real Estate. EL Custom Wood Garage makes a large wooden American flag for the veteran. Custom Coolers gifts a cooler bearing the veteran’s military branch emblem.

“And Sherwin Williams, they come in the clutch every year,” Martinez said. “They donate all the paint and supplies for over 50 volunteers. And their store managers and sales reps in the Valley come out and volunteer.”

Martinez and Robledo call living the values they learned in the military “The Veteran Way.” They never forget others who have served as they did. It is the way of Armored Painting.

Armored Painting owners Nelson Martinez and Joe Robledo recognized the need for more top-tier painting companies when they established the company in March 2020. (Armored Painting)



Each Armored Painting project is tailored to the client’s lifestyle and preferences. (Armored Painting)



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