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Times Are A Changing

By Todd Breland

Who else had trouble adjusting to spring forward? It seems like the older I get, the 7:30 a.m. sunrise gets harder and harder. And staying daylight till at least 8:30 p.m. adds another level of roughness when the school kids need to be ready for bedtime.

Oh well. Change is always inevitable. We adjust our schedules to get in all a day's responsibilities hopefully maximizing efficiency, at home and work. Is it easy? Of course not. But we do what must be done.

A former employer gave a great tip to me over 30 years ago -- start your day an hour before others, and you'll be ahead of your competition. For many of us, we battle daylight. But if we rise early and do what Deep South Texans do, get 'er done, we can finish the work day proud of many checked off duties from our to-do list.

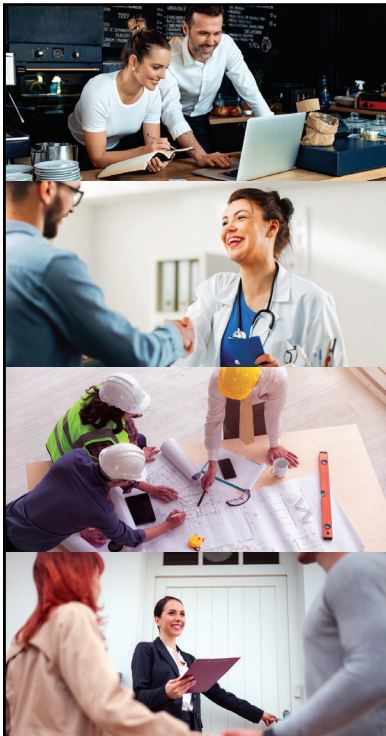
Especially since March 10th, I've started my work emails by 7 a.m.. This early jump on the work day helps with efficiency and results. Since our son's weightlifting regiment begins

at 6:30 a.m. and I'm up, kicking out some daily duties while the roosters are hitting their second chorus is my new schedule. By 10 a.m., a third of my daily to-do list is completed.

As small businesses owners and community leaders, we realize time can't be altered. We can't manage the clock, but we can manage what we plan, organize and execute within the universal law that we all have 24 hours to use or waste time. Balancing home life and occupation in the most peaceful and productive manner is a goal we all share. Success is when those two operate in harmony.

Fellow Valley warriors, we much allocate think time into our schedules and also time that we do absolutely nothing. A break from the grindstone is healthy for ourselves and all those around us. Work hard, play hard is a great lesson I was given by my parents. Enjoy the journey because health is wealth.

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Table Of Contents

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Executive Summary | 3 |
| A Walk In The Park | 5 |
| STEM “Sells” | 8 |
| Port Excitement | 10 |
| Planting Awareness | 12 |
| Space Commerce | 15 |
| An Untapped Niche | 17 |

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Park Brings Nature To City's Backyard

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Joey Lopez took office in 2019 as Cameron County's Precinct 2 commissioner.

He took office with \$500,000 for park development as made available from a successful 2012 bond vote. The funds, Lopez said, were just sitting there and not being utilized in his northwest county precinct.

Lopez began scouting for landowners who could donate tracts of land to the county for park development. The county commissioner set his focus on the Olmito area between Brownsville and Rancho Viejo. There was still plenty of open land there amid the development of a fast-growing county.

And Olmito had another advantage. A large and wide resaca runs through the unincorporated community. Lopez met with three family groups and the county commissioner laid out his plans for a county park. Each of the land donation offers were appreciated by the county commissioner but were fairly modest.

Then came the offer Lopez was hoping for in a nearly 40-acre tract that has a resaca waterfront. Frank McKinney and Jane McKinney in 2019 made a generous land donation of 39 acres that includes 3,240 linear feet of waterfront on Lake Olmito Resaca. From there, through various efforts to secure additional funding and the work needed to design and construct the park, it all came to fruition in mid-February with the opening of the Olmito Nature Park.

"The park is just outside of the city," Lopez said of the park's proximity to Brownsville. "It's like bringing a little piece of nature into your backyard."

State Park Quality

A recent walk through the park reveals the classic native terrain of the Rio Grande Valley.

There's the thorny brush made up of mesquite, ebony, huisache and prickly pear cactus. The variety of the native vegetation emits a sweet scent that's common when you visit a national wildlife refuge or a state park in South Texas. In many ways, the Olmito Nature Park mimics the feel of a Bentsen State Park near Mission with its



A pedestrian walkway makes its way through lush native flora at the Olmito Nature Park. (VBR)

deep green vegetation, waterfront views, access to fishing, and winding walking trails.

Picnic shelters are found throughout the park and embedded on the edges of brush lines. Other amenities include birdwatch overlooks, a nature scape playground, comfort stations, and wildlife friendly lighting. Thick stands of sabal palms line the resaca, a vivid highlight that visitors are

indeed in deep South Texas.

“It’s a quality-of-life feel of being outdoors and in a natural setting,” Lopez said. “This park gives you all of that and it’s close to home.”

More Phases Coming

The first phase of the park cost \$6.4 million to complete with funds derived from the county, Texas Parks & Wildlife,

the Valley Baptist Legacy Foundation, the American Rescue Plan Act – and the generous land donation from the McKinnys.

The next phase of the park is already under construction. It would include launching access areas to the resaca for kayaking. Educational pavilions with information about the wildlife and flora found at the park will be another added



The new Olmito Nature Park includes many walking trails, including this one named after a member of the family who donated land for the park. (VBR)

feature. Additional parking will be constructed on the southern end of the park. A third phase will develop an RV park area, with the goal being that fees from that addition to Olmito Nature will make the park self-sustaining in covering ongoing maintenance costs.

And another added element that's forthcoming is the extension of Brownsville's West Rail Hike & Bike Trail to the nature park. The Brownsville trail currently ends less than a mile from the park. Connecting it gives Olmito Nature access to the city's extensive network of hike and bike trails. In all, the park's full development will cost just over \$12 million.

There is no admission fee to enter the park and it's located at 9538 Hayes Road in Olmito and a short drive away from Expressway 77 as it heads to-and-from Brownsville. It's a little piece of nature in Brownsville's backyard



Native vegetation lines the walking trails at the Olmito Nature Park. (VBR)



Covered picnic areas can be found throughout the new Olmito Nature Park. (VBR)

Event Inspires Girls To Dream Big

By La Joya ISD & VBR

Educators and community leaders across the country are working to encourage young girls to explore opportunities in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematic fields.

The acronym for these fields is known as STEM and it is in these fields where women have historically been underrepresented. Nationally, women make up only about 28 percent of the STEM workforce. This underrepresentation is most pronounced in engineering and computer science and highlights the early education gaps where girls leave these fields due to a lack of support and encouragement.

The La Joya school district recently took on this challenge in hosting an event to celebrate Texas Girls in STEM Day. The school district designed the event to inspire the next generation of scientists, engineers and innovators and to have more of them come from young girls that are interested in those fields.

“Today was all about giving our students the chance to explore, ask questions, and see how exciting STEM can be,” said Brenda Garcia, the executive director of K-12 Mathematics & Science for the La Joya Independent School District. “When girls are given opportunities like this to experiment, collaborate and think critically, it helps build confidence and shows them that they belong in those spaces.”

Changing Pathways

The La Joya ISD event featured more than 20 interactive STEM stations where students engaged in activities designed to spark curiosity and introduce them to real-world applications of science and technology.

The early March event was part of the district’s strategic plan which focuses on its *Thriving Students* plan. One of the plan’s goals is to introduce STEM concepts at an early age. It is especially important for girls to do so. The

American Association of University Women says its research shows girls often do not see examples of female scientists and engineers in books, media and popular culture.

“Girls are less likely to be steered toward physics, calculus, and computer science courses that open doors to high-paying STEM fields,” the AAUW says on its web page. “In college, women are concentrated in health sciences while underrepresented in engineering and computing.”

State and local initiatives like the one in La Joya are seeking to change those pathways. It appeared that the La Joya ISD event was making that sort of impact.

Alexa Iglesias, a fifth grade La Joya student, said the event opened some new possibilities for her as she thinks about the future.

“It helped me learn about jobs that I didn’t really know about before,” Alexa said. “Now I think I might want to be a teacher or someone

Fifth grade girls in La Joya recently gathered to attend an event encouraging them to look into careers in STEM fields. (Courtesy)



who does science experiments and math when I grow up.”

Ideas & Inspiration

Alexa and other students at the La Joya event rotated through a variety of engaging experiences from engineering challenges to science demonstrations.

The youngsters learned about the many career pathways available in STEM-related fields. La Joya educators believe event participants left the event with new ideas and inspirations and a clear message that young girls should explore STEM fields if they are interested in doing so. Careers in innovation, technology, and science are available to everyone.

“Our goal is to spark that curiosity early and help them begin imagining themselves in careers that can shape the future,” Garcia said.



Girls from fifth grade classes recently celebrated Texas Girls in Stem Day in La Joya. (Courtesy)



The La Joya school district recently hosted an event to encourage girls to seek STEM careers. (Courtesy)



Fifth grade girls in La Joya recently enjoyed a STEM day in which they engaged in various activities involving science and technology. (Courtesy)



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New Refinery Puts Port 'On The Map'

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The first new refinery to be built in the United States in 50 years is coming to the Rio Grande Valley at the Port of Brownsville and local officials say it will make the region a hub for energy logistics and growth.

America First Refining with the financial backing of India-based Reliance Industries will construct the facility on the southside of port's shipping channel. It will take up to seven years to complete with the project's groundbreaking expected this month. When finished, the new refinery will produce light shale oil from the Permian Basin of West Texas.

The facility will use hydrogen-powered systems and utilize new technology in what port director William Dietrich says, "will be the cleanest refinery ever built on the planet."

"This is not yesterday's refinery where you're driving down the road and you see smokestacks up and down the highway," Dietrich said at a mid-March press conference. "This will be super clean and use the best technology." Port board chairman Steve Guerra knows environmental concerns will be raised by the refinery's operations. He urged America First to host town hall meetings to address those issues with local residents. Dietrich added, "absolutely none at all," when asked if South Padre Island and other coastal residents should fear negative environmental effects from the refinery.

"We will balance economic growth with environmental stewardship," Dietrich said.

'Eyes Of World On Brownsville'

Environmental concerns aside, there is little doubt that the new refinery will have a far-reaching industrial impact on Brownsville and the RGV.

"The Port of Brownsville is on the map," Dietrich said, a day after a social media post from President Trump announced the building of the new refinery. "The eyes of the world are on Brownsville and South Texas."

The refinery project announcement came after 12 years of planning and project possibilities long discussed by port leaders. The site for a potential refinery at the port was decided upon years before last month's announcement. In 2021, the site secured state permits for reduced nitrogen oxide emissions and enhanced pollution monitoring. Federal permitting was granted in 2024 and allowed for significant pre-construction work and site

preparation.

"Shovel ready," is how Dietrich described the America First refinery project.

The port director described the facility as a Texas project given that shale oil piped to Brownsville for refining will come from West Texas. The new refinery will produce 50 billion barrels of light shale oil per year and employ 500 permanent workers, Dietrich said. Thousands more will be employed during the construction phase of the project, which the port director says will cost \$4 billion to build.

The refinery is expected to produce gasoline, diesel, and jet fuel. Dietrich did not detail where the finished products will be shipped,

but industry reports predicted most of it will go to foreign markets. He lauded the infrastructure improvements done in previous years at the port, especially the deepening of the ship channel, and said America First's selection of Brownsville marks a significant milestone for the city and the region.

"There is no doubt when someone of this caliber comes to the Port of Brownsville that they see in Brownsville and the Rio Grande Valley a great place to do business," Dietrich said.

Trio Of Global Brands

The refinery will give the Brownsville area

America First with major financial backing from an energy company based in India will build a new refinery at the Port of Brownsville. (Courtesy)



a trio of global brands operating within a few miles of each other and in close proximity to the port

SpaceX's Starbase on Boca Chica is about 15 miles from the port. The growing number of rocket launches is clearly visible from the port as the Starbase program proceeds with its aims to develop fully reusable space transportation systems. Even closer to the refinery will be the Rio Grande LNG complex, which is currently under construction. The LNG plant will produce liquefied natural gas and export much of it to European markets.

The Port of Brownsville covers 40,000 acres of land and is the nation's largest land-owning port. The size-and-scope of the port enables it to house two huge facilities like Rio Grande LNG and America First Refining with relative ease. It's a fact Dietrich highlighted in speaking of what it means to have a major refinery join the industrial base of the port and surrounding areas.

"It's an exciting day for the port and for the Valley," he said at the mid-March press conference. "This announcement marks a major advancing chapter in our region's economic and industrial future."



The Port of Brownsville and its CEO William Dietrich announced in March the addition of a \$4 billion refinery at the port. (Courtesy)



The addition of a refinery at the Port of Brownsville will only stimulate more industrial development at the port. (Courtesy)

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A&M Trees Grant Plants Awareness

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Alan Williams works with cities and schools in developing native habitats and will cut to the chase and ask local leaders what they're willing to invest in green spaces.

"Something I've talked to city managers and parks directors about is to be honest with ourselves and look at the time public works departments spend on tree care," said Williams, who is the landscaping and gardening director for the Region One Education Service Center. "Why aren't our maintenance crews spending more time

on tree care? It takes some knowledge and training in knowing what to do with trees."

Williams is an energetic and passionate advocate for putting more native trees and plants into the ground at city parks, hike-and-bike trails, and school campuses in the Rio Grande Valley. He is often seen at city and school events offering his insights about the importance of trees and native habitats. Williams leads workshops and training sessions in sharing his knowledge on fostering sustainable and drought-tolerant green spaces in South Texas.

"Everyone, whether they know it or not, or will admit to it, feels better and more calm in an area with lots of trees," Williams said.

Spreading The Word

In late February, Williams was spreading the word about trees in Mercedes as the city celebrated being the recipient of a 600-trees grant from the Texas A&M Forest Service.

The grant is being administered by Williams and Region One, which is



Parents and children gather around Alan Williams of Region One as he prepares to plant a tree at a San Benito city park. (Courtesy)

Edinburg-based and acts as a liaison between the Texas Education Agency and area communities and school districts. Mercedes is one of seven Valley cities that are receiving trees from Texas A&M as part of the grant. In all, 5,000 native trees are being provided to Mercedes, Alton, Mission, Edinburg, Donna, Harlingen and San Benito.

Williams' role is to work with park directors like Armando Villela in Mercedes in ensuring the right kinds of trees are planted in the right places and are cared for properly. The issuance of trees from Texas A&M to RGV communities was done after cities demonstrated a commitment to maintain and nurture the trees to growth and good health.

"This is not a free tree grant that is being given out," Williams said. "If cities wanted to participate, they had to show an improvement in tree care and maintenance policies."



Mercedes city crews began planting 600 trees in late February as part of a grant from the Texas A&M Forest Service. (VBR)



A public works employee leads the way in Mercedes in planting one of 600 trees received in a Texas A&M Forest Service grant. (VBR)



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Mercedes, like many Valley cities, is considered to have an insufficient number of trees in its communities. Vilella said the grant of 600 trees to be planted at city parks and along walking trails and playgrounds will make his community greener and wiser in appreciating native habitat.

“We’re a little deficient when it comes to tree canopies,” Vilella said at an event held on the grounds of the Mercedes Dome Shelter. “We are trying to spread awareness on how to do proper tree care planting and care. It’s about beautification for our city, in planting these trees and what we can do for future generations.”

‘Going To Take A Few Years’

In San Benito, Williams was doing the same recently in providing guidance in the planting of trees at two parks, including along the walking trails lining the city’s main resaca.

He explained the intricacies of a tree’s roots system to a young child as a hole freshly dug awaited the sapling. Other children and their parents gathered around

as Williams talked about trees and what it will mean in the years ahead to have more trees at city parks.

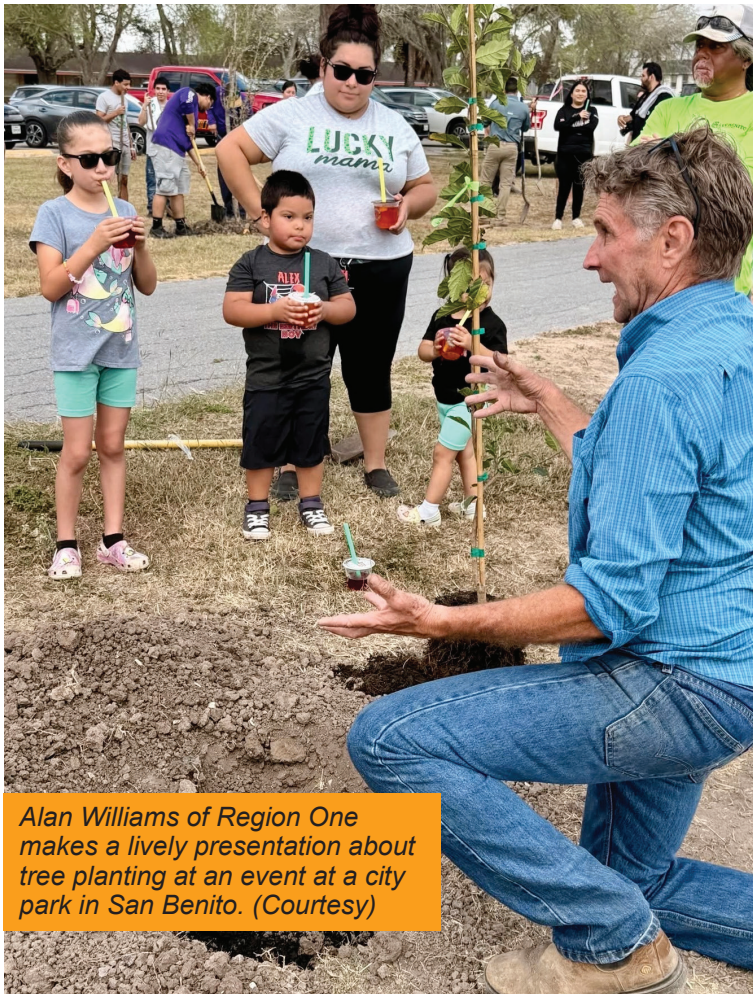
“We put an emphasis on areas where families are already congregating,” he said. “In the Valley, we have high heat indexes and low tree canopies. Our parks and schools need more shade, and we can do that by planting native trees that are more drought tolerant and can do well with natural rainfall.”

And so, 5,000 cedar elms, Texas ebonies and Texas Mountain Laurels are being planted across the Valley, with a promise and commitment by seven cities to make them grow and prosper with the proper care and maintenance given to the saplings. It will take diligence and commitment, “a return on investment,” as Williams puts it in seeing that the manhours invested by city staff pay off in tall trees.

“We’re not starting out with huge established trees,” Vilella said in Mercedes. “It’s going to take a few years. We know that, but what we’re doing now is going to benefit future generations.”



Alan Williams of the Region One Education Service Center helps a Mercedes city crew plant a native tree on the grounds of the Dome Shelter park. (VBR)



Alan Williams of Region One makes a lively presentation about tree planting at an event at a city park in San Benito. (Courtesy)

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Space & Commerce Take Flight In City

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Nathan Burkhart in his six-year tenure at the Brownsville Community Improvement Corporation was on the ground floor of the beginnings of the space industry coming to his hometown.

He served as the vice president of entrepreneurship and innovation at BCIC and became familiar with the leadership of SpaceX and its Starbase on Boca Chica Beach. It was during his BCIC tenure that he also met business owners and executives from space industry suppliers and vendors who are interested in Brownsville given its proximity to Starbase.

Putting it together, the city of Brownsville created an Office of Space Commerce and knew it had the ideal candidate in-house to lead it. Burkhart was named in early 2026 as the executive director of the Office of Space Commerce. He holds the same job title in a dual role of leading the city's Convention & Visitors Bureau.

For the CVB responsibilities, Burkhart can utilize experience gained as a marketing director of a large hotel company based in the Rio Grande Valley that has properties in McAllen and South Padre Island. The Brownsville native is also familiar with the city's signature events – Charro Days and Sombrero Festival – and how their drawing power brings visitors to the city.

“We want to showcase Brownsville as a unique bicultural city,” Burkhart said. “We have a great history with celebrations like Charro Days. We would like to provide additional means of celebrating these traditions and breathe new life into them.”

Third Leg Of Tripod

Burkhart says his top priority getting started is building out the Space Commerce office in “being the city's arm” in space development efforts.

The Office of Space Commerce, he says, will be “the third leg of the tripod” in working with the recently renamed Greater Brownsville EDC and the BCIC. The goal among the organizations is to avoid duplication and draw upon the strengths of each entity.

Greater Brownsville – which for years was known at the Greater Brownsville Incentives Corporation – focuses on larger companies in its recruitment and development efforts. The BCIC works with locally owned small

businesses. Its multi-story facility serves as an incubator for research and innovation.

Each of the EDC organizations are quasi-independent organizations from city government and have their own respective boards of directors. Burkhart as the Space Commerce office director will work in tandem with the EDCs to recruit the suppliers and vendors looking to relocate to Brownsville in doing business with SpaceX and its Starbase rocket manufacturing facility.

The companies being recruited provide key supplies and components involving satellites, rocket propulsion materials, chemicals, and precision machining that are vital to Starbase operations. There are many opportunities and possibilities ahead in growing Brownsville's space presence. There was a need, Burkhart said, for a more direct city involvement in these efforts.

“The city wanted a specific economic

development role in space commerce,”

Burkhart said. “We're providing assistance in (space) recruitment with the EDCs. There are several issues that involve intergovernmental regulations, permitting, and agreements. At the end of the day, the city needs to be part of the process.”

Highlighting Eco-Tourism

On the CVB side, Burkhart says he is evaluating existing programs and events and how funds provided by hotel occupancy taxes (HOT) are being utilized in promoting Brownsville.

The HOT taxes are imposed by state and local governments on tourists and visitors who use hotels, motels, and short-term rentals for stays of less than 30 consecutive days. These taxes are primary funding sources for visitors and convention bureaus like the one in Brownsville.



Nathan Burkhart was recently named to the dual leadership role of executive director of the Convention & Visitors Bureau and the new Office of Space Commerce. (Courtesy)

One move Burkhart made quickly was bringing back a birding festival to the city. The Brownsville Birding Festival is set for April 11-12 at the Gladys Porter Zoo. Burkhart intends to make it a signature event that features the city’s hospitality and access to premier birding sites in Brownsville and surrounding areas.

“I think eco-tourism has long been overlooked here,” Burkhart said. “We’re in the middle of major migratory flyways and one of the best birding spots in the country.”

He also plans to promote the extensive infrastructure of hike-and-bike trails that Brownsville has developed. The city is becoming a hotbed for cyclists who ride the network of trails that loop around the city and whose reach goes north to Los Fresnos and west to Olmito. Food tourism is another category Burkhart wants to promote as Brownsville restaurateurs and chefs have received state and national recognition for Tex-Mex, barbecue, and higher-end fine dining.

“Brownsville has so much to offer,” Burkhart said. “I think we can market what we have to a larger audience.”



Brownsville’s new executive director of Space Commerce hopes to build on efforts by local EDCs to attract new industry vendors and suppliers to the city. (Courtesy)



Brownsville’s Charro Days is one of the signature events that the Convention & Visitors Bureau will work to market to a wider audience. (Courtesy)

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Mother/Daughter Duo Find A Niche

By Chris Ardis

Sydney Salas graduated from Texas A&M University in 2025 and immediately headed down a road less traveled.

Her bachelor's degree was in public health, but she had another field in mind. Salas flew to Denver in May 2025 with her mother, Christina Lopez, who is a State Farm Insurance agent in McAllen. Lopez was yearning to saddle up and fill an untapped niche.

"I wear a lot of hats and I'd be wanting to do something creative," Lopez said.

The insurance agent had researched where she could learn to shape and brand hats and found just where to do it in Denver. Lopez asked her daughter to be her business partner. Salas agreed to the mother-daughter business partnership.

"As soon as she graduated, we went to

Denver," Lopez said. "By July, we had the location, but there was a lot to do to build it out and get the permits."

Salas and Lopez got started by working pop-up markets.

"People started asking us on social media if we were taking at-home appointments," Salas said.

They would schedule appointments at their home, allowing customers to buy and decorate western hats.

"It really took off," Lopez said.

They could hardly wait for their storefront to open.

Opening A Storefront

It was October 2025 when Lopez and Salas held a soft opening at Johnston's Hat Co., on

north 10th Street in McAllen. They opened to the public the following day.

Johnston is the maiden name of Lopez's mother, Janie Johnson Lopez. The plaza address is on 10th Street but faces Martin Avenue, which has been serendipitous since Janie Johnston Lopez's father was named Martin. His picture sits prominently on a shelf in the shop.

Johnston's offers a wide variety of western hats for men, women and children. There are also guayaberas and other men's shirts, and boutique-style apparel for women. Lopez and Salas are in the process of becoming official vendors for the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and the University of Texas. They plan to create custom UTRGV and UT shirts.

Their brands include Fraulein boots and hat



Christina Lopez, left, and her daughter, Sydney Salas, opened Johnston's Hat Co. in McAllen in October 2025. (Courtesy Johnston's Hat Co.)

brands that include Rodeo King, Twister, GiGi Pop, Gone Country, Laramie and American Hat Makers. Services include hat resizing, shaping, decorating and branding, and boot branding.

Johnston's custom hat bar includes a variety of ribbons, lace, brooches, feathers and beads.

"We have learned how to bring hats to life," Salas said. "I can paint on hats and I've learned how to stitch."

Meeting Challenges

Their trail has had some bumps.

Salas is a triplet and the only girl in the trio. Lopez had adjusted to her empty nest while all three were in college. Her sons are still in college, but Salas has moved back home. There have been challenges in living under the same roof again.

"We have to have our separate time to let things pass and then have a discussion and move forward," Lopez said. "It has brought us closer together too because we have to depend

on each other."

Salas takes care of Johnston's customers while her mother runs her insurance business. Salas also manages the shop's social media accounts.

"It has been a lot, but we've learned to navigate," Salas said. "My mom has a lot of experience in business. I am very hands-on and work a lot, but I need to understand there is a lot going on behind the scenes that my mom takes care of, like inventory and planning events."

Lopez and Salas take their hat bar on the road to parties, nonprofit fundraisers and other events throughout the Rio Grande Valley and beyond.

Customers have taught Salas the importance of being a good listener and how to be intentional with her creations. Lopez feels a sense of pride that she and her daughter are local ladies who have filled a niche and are doing it together.

Johnston's Hat Co. at 6500 N. 10th St. in McAllen actually faces Martin Avenue. The custom hat bar is open Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Courtesy)



Colorful beaver and wool hats for men, women, and children create a wall of art, while straw hats offer a mellow balance. (Courtesy)

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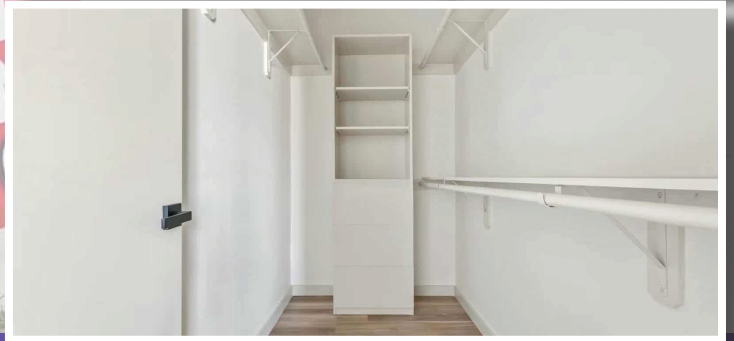
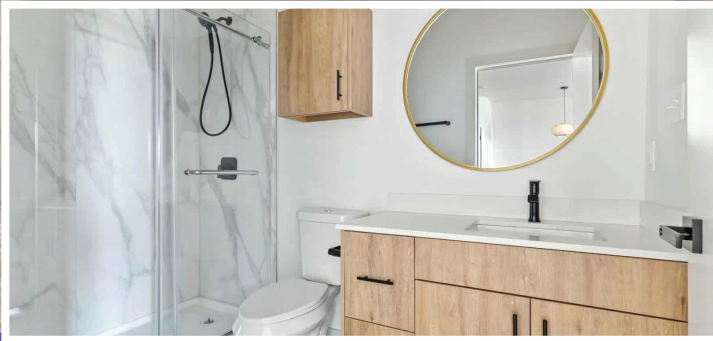
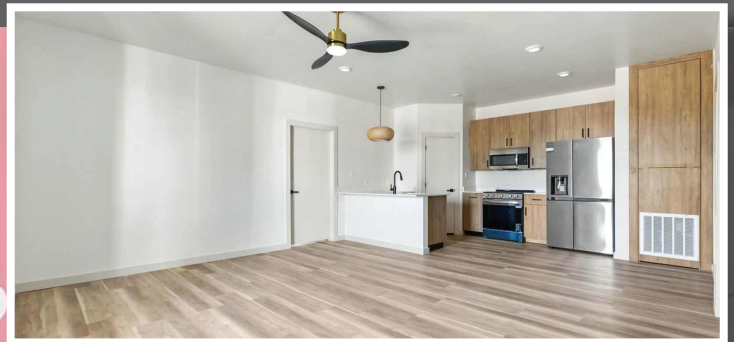
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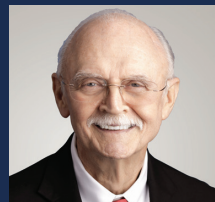
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