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CELEBRATE A CENTENNIAL

How would you handle the planning of a once in a lifetime event? People will remember what you did for years to come and they will be talking about it just as long. There aren't any guides. No one is around to tell you what happened when the event your community is celebrating took place. It is left up to a group of citizens to plan and

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Executive Summary

SEASON OF PROGRESS AND GROWTH

It happens every year. We glow in the arrival of spring - never more true than this year after an unseasonal wet and cold winter. From no freezes last winter to a few this season - we even wore winter coats for more than one brisk morning.

In last several weeks, you've walked outside and discovered newness - from the green grass to the blooming of fresh flowers and of course, the allergy season that goes along with it. Baseball season and pool time are here and are we ever so glad to welcome it.

We're also in another season of change. The soil is moist for growth and we as business leaders are at a pivotal point in the year. Second quarter of 2010 is here and the RGV has an abundance of unique benefits: international commerce, low cost of living, tax incentives, etc. When leaders in other markets investigate the Rio Grande Valley, many salivate at the economic climate we enjoy. We have so many resources literally in our back yards, it's okay to say "I'm not participating in this recession anymore."

This statement may be quite risky, but so was the starting of the Valley Business Report eight months ago. Planning for what was to come, not where things

were is why Kevin Knoch and I began this publication. We thank you for allowing us to connect you to your business neighbor since September. Sharing positive business news Valley wide is our goal and helping the Rio Grande Valley win against the recession opponent is our purpose.

It's here: a new season and sunlight of fresh economic times. Just as ice hockey is growing in the southern most region of Texas, and the Stanley Cup trophy in this photo is the one and only, we have a choice - to accept the continuation of a recession or proclaim non-participation. Farming is cyclical like business. We can plow our soil, fertilize the fields and if all the elements are right (both natural and self-generated), the fields can reap a profitable harvest. And better economic results is the real trophy, right.

Sincerely,
 Todd Breland
 General Manager
 Valley Business Report



At Valley Ice Center, Bill Anderson, a skating instructor, and rink owner Lonnie Geegenheimer pose with the original Stanley Cup, the sports worlds' oldest rotating trophy, which visited the McAllen rink in January 2010. (courtesy)

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Philosophy

We are a pro-business publication committed to reporting business news concerning the Rio Grande Valley's business community. We will strive to create a forum in which business leaders can exchange ideas and information; to providing in-depth perspectives on business trends affecting the community's economy. Our goal is to serve the interests of economic development in the Rio Grande Valley.

Our editorial philosophy is to cover local business news and to bring you relevant state, national, and international news that affects our region. Look for links on our Web Site at www.valleybusinessreport.com to business news and stories pertaining to the RGV from across the country, plus local everyday events and business news. Our print publication will present stories of interest about local business people, businesses, and issues of interest pertaining to our area.

Letters to the Editor

Valley Business Report welcomes letters to the editor. Letters should be e-mailed to editorial@valleybusinessreport.com with the subject line: Letter to the Editor. Letters endorsing or opposing political candidates will not be accepted. Please keep letters to 300 words or less and should include your full name and city of residence.

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Business News

BANK FORECASTS SLOW BUT STEADY ECONOMIC UPSWING

By Kevin Knoch

BBVA Compass Bank Chief Economist Nathaniel Karp paid a visit to McAllen Wednesday March 3, 2010. Karp spoke at a luncheon sponsored by the bank, held at the McAllen Convention Center. The Houston based economist, feels the United States economic recovery is on course, but it won't be the U.S. leading the way in the global recovery.

Karp looks to Asia, especially China when it comes to growth in the near future. "Asian economies will lead the global recovery. Economic activity is particularly strong in Asia. This will support global trade."

He related gross domestic product (GDP) growth in China is expected to top the nine percent mark in 2010. Asia excluding China growth should top the five percent mark in GDP growth. The emerging markets will be pulling the established advanced economies in the U.S and Europe along. "Already industrial production in Asian countries is higher than the pre-crisis levels. They have managed to recover."

He touched on fears expressed by some in the economic community about the U.S economic future. Rather than recover, the U.S. economy may take a step backward, rather than forward. "The probability of a double dip recession has plummeted."

Stimulus money has helped the U.S. avoid a deeper downturn. Karp added, "In the U.S. we expect sustainable, but slow economic growth. Inflation will remain low. The Fed (Federal Reserve) will maintain low interest rates for a prolonged period." Adding, "The U.S. has done a much better job of pulling out of the crisis than its European counterparts."

Karp touched on positives for the 2010 economic outlook. One of the main sectors is housing. The over abundance of housing, foreclosures, and a tight credit market have made the real estate market face one of its steepest declines in years. Karp declared, "The housing market has stabilized." The number of new homes and the months on the market is starting to shrink.

The economist did caution, "Although the economy will expand in the coming years, uncertainty is still elevated." One major area of concern is jobs. The Compass economic forecast doesn't see job creation to accelerate in the next calendar year. "We expect a slow pace for job creation."

Karp stressed the Texas economy was fairing better than the national financial system. The state's wealth expected to grow steadily in 2010.

The bank economist addressed issues relevant to the United States/Mexico border. He pointed out that

financial reforms in Mexico during the past two decades have prevented a financial crisis. Economic indicators are showing a stronger recovery than originally expected.

The recovery also could influence the peso exchange rate - always of interest on the border, especially among retailers. Karp felt for the foreseeable future the exchange rate would hover around 12 and half pesos to a dollar. Economic activity is slowly improving along the border. He used a chart to illustrate employment in the neighboring state of Tamaulipas is improving, especially during the second quarter of 2009.

Karp took head on the concern over violence in Mexico. Just before his visit the cities of Reynosa and Matamoros had experienced the most violence during a recent week, that many could remember. The fighting between government forces and drug gangs is well known, and has been devastating to the city of Juarez across from El Paso, Texas and was common in Nuevo Laredo until two years ago.

Karp, a native of Mexico, stressed what threatens the border economy is, "the risk perception of the violence in Mexico. How the problem is perceived



BBVA Compass Bank economist Nathaniel Karp makes point after luncheon in McAllen. (K. Knoch)

from the outside is the key. The bigger the problem the higher the risk investment in the border becomes." He further explained, "If the perception is the problems are contained, the more likely the foreign investment. But if the problem becomes spread out the risk factor will affect other parts of the economy."

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Cover Story

HARLINGEN CELEBRATED BY CENTENNIAL EVENT

By Kevin Knoch

How would you handle the planning of a once in a lifetime event? People will remember what you did for years to come and they will be talking about it just as long. There aren't any guides. No one is around to tell you what happened when the event your community is celebrating took place. It is left up to a group of citizens to plan and execute an occasion that won't be celebrated again for another century.

Those are the parameters that Harlingen citizens faced when they first started to talk about and meticulously diagram the city's first centennial celebration. Talk started about the 100 year centennial in 2004, the anniversary of railroad transportation reaching Harlingen and the Rio Grande Valley.

According to Kathy Preddy who serves as chairperson of the one of the key centennial committees the city commission got behind the project two and half years ago. That is also the recollection of Downtown Manager Cheryl LaBerge, who has been involved since the beginning of the planning. "Planning stalled when Hurricane Dolly hit, (July 23, 2008) but we were soon back on track," related LaBerge.



Logo designed for the Centennial celebration
(courtesy)

Mayor Chris Boswell picked the right person to take on the project appointing Commissioner Larry Galbreath to head up the centennial celebration planning. Only one word best describes his feelings for the centennial: ENTHUSIASTIC!

The official name of the committee he heads up is the Harlingen Centennial Celebration Committee. The commissioner related he started the planning work with a small group of ten people. He described the first get together as, "An idea advisory committee. At the first meeting, I told those attending to bring a friend or two to the next meeting." He stated things grew from that point. Galbreath felt he wanted to start small, stressing often with too many people a clear concept doesn't develop.

He emphasized as the committee grew, "everything was decided democratically." Decisions on expenditures were done by vote. The Harlingen Commission has allocated \$50,000 a year for the past two years for the Centennial Committee.



The book production team seated Alan Hollander, Cheryl LaBerge standing Wanda Greenhill, Eileen Mattei, Norman Rozeff, Charlotte Dahm, John Topp. (K. Knoch)

One central point, Galbreath, and others involved in the planning committed to early on, was to have as many events as possible free of charge. The main intent was not to burden families with costs, that may keep a family of four or five away. Most of the events for the four day celebration are free for Harlingen residents and visitors. The no charge policy includes concerts and music presentations. Two ancillary events, the Mexican Film Festival and Jazz Festival have modest admission fees.

Under the Centennial Celebration Committee umbrella other committees were formed and started to work on their assigned tasks. One committee had to get to work and complete their efforts well before anyone else. The committee decided to produce a book about Harlingen's first century. Appropriately named *At the Crossroads: Harlingen's First 100 Years*, The book chronicles the city's history throughout the first ten decades through text and pictures.

A book production team was soon formed. This committee would have to complete its work by mid July of 2009, a full nine months before the April 2010 centennial celebration dates. "The book team included John Topp, Alan Hollander, Eileen Mattei, Norman Rozeff, Charlotte Dahm, Wanda Greenhill and myself," enumerated LaBerge.

Local historian Rozeff related he worked with author Mattei on the research end of the work. "As a group we went through maybe 2,500 photographs, identifying what was in them. I helped with checking research with Eileen."

At the Crossroads author Mattei related working on the centennial book was an all encompassing job. "I started in-depth researching *At the Crossroads* in October 2008, establishing a timeline of events major and minor. By the time the book went to the printer in late July 2009, I had well over 600 hours in it, separating fact from fiction, writing narrative, rewriting, selecting photographs, writing captions, working with proofreaders, and fact checkers and rewriting again."

"The book is awesome," declared LaBerge. "Eileen did an excellent job." Galbreath is also impressed with the book stressing that sponsorships paid for production and printing costs. "We have books that will be available for sale now and in the future at the museum."

Deadlines were met and the book was available in early November of 2009. Many copies were bought as Christmas presents. Over 1,000 copies have already been sold and will be available during the centennial celebration for \$34.95.

While the book group had a deadline to get the centennial book out, another committee, the Events Committee, is still working and their deadline is the days of the celebration in April. Preddy took over the committee when a previous chairperson resigned over a year ago.

Preddy has the experience for the planning of the centennial, her day job is working with the Harlingen United Way. Preddy also helped organize Harlingen's annual RioFest for many years. "We have been trying to plan a variety of events that would celebrate the 100th birthday and take in the demographics of our community."

"The last year we have been putting it together; the first year we did a lot of discussion." Preddy estimates about 100 citizen volunteers have been working to help with the events. Even before the work got going the Events Committee held public forums where the public could express their ideas on what they would like to see at centennial. Preddy estimated 100 people attended the forums. She thinks the number of volunteer hours though is incalculable.

So after nearly three years of planning, close to \$50,000 in budget, producing a book, and thousands hours of effort by hundreds of people, on April 15 - 18, 2010, what can people look forward to in Harlingen?

Well for many, the majority, the first thing you will see is a blast from the past. You probably will hear it and see its smoke before it comes into view. The last of Union Pacific's steam locomotives will kick off the celebration arriving at 10:00 AM the morning of April 15th. It will be pulling a seven car train to the site of the old depot, replicating how the train would arrive from "up north" 100 years ago.

The steam engine is the real thing, the last operating one in the Union Pacific Railroad fleet. Engine 844 was manufactured during World War II, and ran the rails pulling freight until 1960. It was retired to ceremonial work for the company. The sight of the large locomotive is enough to send train buffs into ecstasy.

Galbreath gave a run down on how the steam engine's appearance came about. Both Harlingen and Brownsville have been in talks about rail relocation in their prospective cities for years. The commissioner said at the end of one of these meetings he started to tell Union Pacific employee and Brownsville native Ivan Jaime all about the coming centennial.

Before Jaime reached the door he turned to Galbreath and asked, "How would you like to have a steam engine as part of the event?" "I was just thrilled," Galbreath admitted. It took about a year to workout the details and to receive the final okay on the locomotive's appearance.

The train will be parked downtown at the former depot area for about six hours between Jackson and Harrison Streets. The train won't be the only attraction; the city plans to dedicate its newest park, Centennial Park, at that location the morning of the April 15th. The dedication includes the unveiling of the nine panel tile mural entitled, "The History of Mexico and Mankind" that is the center piece the new park.

Later in the day, the focus of the celebration will move to Fair Park and the Harlingen Municipal Auditorium. The Harlingen Rotary Club will unveil its centennial project, a Harlingen Walk of Fame. The walk recognizes 100 individuals for the city's history.

Following the walk of fame, Mayor Chris Boswell and city officials will open the capsule put in place in 1960, at the time of the city's 50th anniversary. No one knows what is inside, but a half century of speculation comes to an end in the early evening of April 15th.

Plan to stay after the capsule opening, Harlingen Hispanic Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Nat Lopez has a special event planned at the auditorium. Lopez and the chamber are bringing the world famous folkloric dance group from San



Jackson Street intersection as it looked one hundred years ago. (courtesy)

Luis Potosi, Mexico to perform. The dancers dressed in authentic costume will cap off a day Harlingen will long remember.

Lopez relates the Mexican State and city of San Luis Potosi in Central Mexico has a connection to South Texas and Rio Grande Valley history. "All of the Spanish land grants for South Texas were registered with the government there. It shows how our history is connected to Mexico."

While events will run almost non stop for four days, Galbreath named a number of them. One major attraction is a free concert at Fair Park by the music group CONTROL on Friday night. Saturday will feature a parade in downtown Harlingen, starting at 10:00 AM. At Fair Park, Saturday will be Family Day with food and games. While 10 bands will take the stage in the afternoon, a jazz festival takes place in the municipal au-

ditorium. The day ends with a fireworks display at 9:00 PM.

Sunday features a non denominational spiritual celebration starting at 1:00 PM at McKelvey Park. The event will feature religious themed bands and a short service of Thanksgiving for the last 100 years and the next 100 will be conducted. The Sunday event will conclude at 4:00 PM.

Galbreath reiterated that the "no charge policy" has been followed wherever possible throughout the planning. Besides the Centennial Book, the committee has purchased numerous souvenirs and mementoes that will be available as keepsakes of the celebration. The items will also be available after the celebration concludes and will be displayed at the city library in the future.

There is also a celebration planned for Saturday, April 10, 2010 at Pendleton Park. The city will honor its military veterans past and present. Chairman Fred Rendon who is heading up the affair related, "Veterans groups from across the Valley will be participating."

The veterans celebration will take place between 4:00 to 8:00 PM, near the site of the future Harlingen Veterans Memorial in the park. Rendon added the new memorial is a credit to the city's dedication to military veterans of yesterday and today.

A complete listing of centennial celebration events can be found at www.myharlingen.us. Click on the Centennial Logo to find times and locations of all that is planned.

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Business Feature

LONE STAR NATIONAL BANK OPENS IN SAN ANTONIO

By Adolfo Pesquera

Lone Star National Bank, among the Rio Grande Valley's strongest community banks, jumped into the San Antonio market earlier this year.

The McAllen-based banking chain expects to take advantage of the departure of some big national banks, as well as San Antonio's resilient economy to significantly expand its assets. Plans are to add up to 10 branches in the San Antonio market over five years.

Lone Star National Bank was one of the last banks from the Texas-Mexico border to step into San Antonio. Others already well established include International Bank of Commerce and First National Bank Edinburg.

A. Jabier Rodriguez, Chief Executive Officer of Lone Star National Bank for the past 17 years, said the board had considered a stake in San Antonio for a decade.

"We stayed in the Valley while everybody was moving away," Rodriguez said. "Our focus was to gain market share here, and in fact we became the Valley's bank."

Ultimately, a decision to pull the trigger on the San Antonio launch came down to the board of directors being impressed with San Antonio's diversified economy and its ability to shrug off the national recession, Rodriguez said. It seemed a sure-fire way to diversify the bank's asset base beyond the Valley.

"We noticed that San Antonio fared the recession extremely well," Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez relocated his family to San Antonio, moving from his Mission home to the Alamo City in early February to oversee the expansion first-hand.

A CEO relocating away from the company's home base might trigger talk of a firm's headquarters being moved, but Rodriguez insists no such plans are in play.

"I am traveling to the Valley monthly for board meetings. I feel we have a corporate annex here (in San Antonio)," he said.

Rodriguez did not entirely shut the door on a corporate move, adding that while there were no plans at this time, "I can't say that it won't happen."

Lone Star National Bank remains bullish on the Valley. It has 22 branches across the border region and has approved plans to open a 23rd branch this year in McAllen, across the street from La Plaza Mall.



Chief Executive Officer A. Jabier Rodriguez is spearheading Lone Star National Bank's move into the San Antonio market. (courtesy)

All the other new branches approved for this year are in San Antonio. The first will be at the bank's loan production office, 40 NE Loop 410, near North Star Mall and a region known to be frequented by affluent Mexican nationals.

"Our niche is in three areas: family-owned businesses, professional practices and Mexican nationals; 25 percent of our deposits are from Mexican nationals. Those same customers are the ones that have been asking us, 'When are you coming to San Antonio?' They are already here," Rodriguez said.

Two other branches opening include one in the South Texas Medical Center region at 7954 Fredericksburg Road and a six-lane motor bank with walk-in lobby at 10000 San Pedro Ave.

A few years ago, Lone Star National Bank was concerned about too many banks in San Antonio. But several chains, including Washington Mutual, Wachovia and Guaranty disappeared because of systemic failures in the industry that had nothing to do with San Antonio's economy.

This left a void, Rodriguez said, that Lone Star National Bank could fill if the bank snatched at the opportunity. Some of the branch locations Rodriguez is scouting include former WaMu and Wachovia sites.

Each branch will cost \$12 million to \$16 million to build, depending on its size and location. The goal

is to build a portfolio of loans in the range of \$300 million to \$500 million over the next five years, he said. Lone Star National Bank currently has more than \$1.8 billion in assets.

Staffing was up to five people by mid-March, and Rodriguez anticipates hiring eight to 11 people every six months - the amount of manpower required for each new branch.

Since settling into San Antonio and networking with the community, Rodriguez has been even more impressed.

"This economy has more potential than I originally thought," he said. "The economy of Bexar County is exactly twice that of the Lower Rio Grande Valley."

Lone Star National Bank was quickly embraced by the San Antonio Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, and the chamber's leadership played an early role in the bank's decision to expand.

"The Hispanic Chamber, for some reason, came down to the Valley to recruit us as a chamber member," Rodriguez said. "I'm not sure how they got word of our plans."

Ramiro Cavazos, president of the Hispanic Chamber, explained that as a native of Weslaco he makes monthly visits to the Valley to see family. Over the years, Cavazos watched Lone Star National Bank grow. And as a former head of San Antonio's Economic Development Department, it is Cavazos' nature to always have an ear next to the business community grapevine.

He met with Rodriguez and board chairman Alonzo Cantu over a year ago to confirm what he had heard of their intentions. Following that meeting, Cavazos recruited Hispanic Chamber economist Steve Nivin to work with Lone Star National's board.

"Nivin put together a market analysis to help them justify their business plan," Cavazos said. "We followed up with a meeting in McAllen (at the start of 2010)."

Cavazos said Lone Star National Bank should do well in San Antonio, and it should be able to distinguish itself as unique in the market place.

"They're very profitable," Cavazos said. "It's a majority Hispanic-owned bank."

That positions Lone Star National Bank - noted for its emphasis on building relationships over slick advertising campaigns - as among the most accessible financial institutions to those members the Hispanic Chamber champions, minority- and women-owned firms.

Lone Star National Bank made its grand community debut in San Antonio as a gold sponsor at the Hispanic Chamber's annual gala dinner Jan. 29th at the Grand Hyatt Hotel, which attracted 1,420 of the city's movers and shakers.

"Jabier and his staff were very impressed with our ability to draw in such a large and distinguished crowd," Cavazos said.

Lone Star National's timing for a major expansion was excellent, said Steve Scurlock, executive vice president of the Independent Bankers Association of Texas, an advocate for community banks.

"We have definitely seen some migration from large banks to community banks," Scurlock said. "There is a growing trend of folks who really appreciate going into a bank or clothing store and meeting someone they know."

In an era where big banks are tainted with a reputation of corruption and exploitation, customers are looking to put their trust in homegrown institutions that care about relationships.

It also helps that technologies have provided breakthroughs that level the playing field.

"There's really not much the big banks can do where community banks can't meet them," Scurlock said.

Entertainment HARLINGEN CENTENNIAL EVENTS

During Harlingen's Centennial Celebration, be sure to attend a special performance of the San Luis Potosi Dancers (pictured at right) at the Harlingen Municipal Auditorium the evening of April 15. (courtesy)

Also during the celebration, the city will dedicate its newest park, Centennial Park, on the morning of April 15th, including the unveiling of the nine panel tile mural entitled, "The History of Mexico and Mankind" that is the center piece the new park. (courtesy)



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Business Information

DEMOGRAPHICS ARE CHANGING TEXAS

By Davis Rankin

When Dr. Steve Murdock speaks, people listen. And after hearing and absorbing all the demographic data he shares, you know one thing for certain: Texas is changing.

If the saying used to be in Presidential elections, ‘As Maine goes, so goes the nation,’ in demographic or population terms it is ‘As Texas goes, so goes the nation.’ At a sparsely-attended presentation at UT-Pan American, Dr. Murdock, the Allyn and Gladys M. Cline Professor of Sociology at Rice University repeated the same message he has delivered for years: changes are coming in the make-up of Texas and we’d better be ready for them.

The former head of the U.S. Census, Dr. Murdock referred to himself in a recent interview with the online publication The Texas Tribune as the “Jack Webb of Demography” merely laying out the inexorable facts and not venturing into policy prescriptions. The data show something is lacking in Texas education and Murdock argues “if we don’t change (certain population characteristics) we will, as we change our population, change the very economy of the state and subse-



Dr. Steve Murdock teaches Sociology at Rice University and was the first State of Texas Demographer and a former head of the United States Census Bureau. (courtesy)

quently, the nation”

In an interview done the evening of his UT-Pan Am talk, Murdock announced his theme for the presentation, “that the major population changes that we see in Texas are really indicative of the population changes in the country, that the Texas of today is the U.S. of tomorrow. That’s particularly evident in the very rapid growth of non-Anglo populations, particularly Latino populations, and you see that we, in 2003, became a state that was less than half-Anglo. That happens to the U.S. in 2042 he told The Tribune. By 2023, 13 years from now, over half of the children in America will be non-Anglo” with the U.S. Census Bureau projecting that from now until 2050, 62% of the growth will be due to the Hispanic population. Murdock points out the ironic fact that of Texas’ population growth from 2000 to 2008, 62% was due to growth in the Hispanic population. Then comes an eye-popping fact: the U.S. projects the U.S. population to grow about 157 million people in the period 2000-2050, 7.6 million of them will be Anglo, only 4.8%, except Murdock doesn’t use the word only. As he says, the Anglo population in Texas and the nation is shrinking as a part of the overall population and aging.

So is the rising Hispanic population due to people moving here or to natural growth, that is, having babies?

“It’s both, answers Murdock, “and it’s also coupled with very low birth rates among Anglos, with a very old age structure. In many ways, our population structure—if you look at Anglos—is very similar to . . . Western Europe, and would have the same kind of implications if that was the only part of our population that there was, that is, if you look at some of the issues we see right now in Europe having to do with extraordinarily large proportions of older people on pensions, etc. The difference between us and Western Europe is really our non-Anglo populations are much younger than our Anglo populations.”

What concerns Murdock, and something he’s been speaking about since he became Texas’ first official State Demographer (appointed by Gov. Rick Perry), is what he calls the “socio-economic characteristics” that “tend to be associated” with demographic characteristics,” meaning “that non-Anglos in Texas have had lower incomes, lower levels of education

and if we don’t change those as we change our population, we will . . . change the very economy of the state and subsequently, the nation.”

According to one slide he shows at UTPA, in the year 2000, 12.7% of Anglos 25 and older have less than a high school diploma, shrinking by 2040 to only 2.2%. For Blacks, 24% in 2000 have less than a high school diploma, shrinking to 4.3% by 2040. For Hispanics, 50.7% have less than a high school degree, shrinking to only 32.1%.

The disparity in higher education is as stark. The same information he uses shows that in 2000, 15.5% of Blacks had at least a bachelor’s degree, projected to jump to 29.6% by 2040. For Anglos, it’s 30% and 47.8%. For Hispanics, 8.9% had at least a college degree in 2000, projected to almost double to 16.9%.

“I’m not a policy maker but it’s clear to me that if we don’t insure that all Texans, all Americans, have the skills and the education they need to be competitive in what’s an increasingly an international economy, we’re going to be less competitive in the future than we are today, both as a country and as a state,” he sums up.

Is he “thumping” for more school spending?

“I’m not thumping for anything; that’s not my job, but I think that what we are seeing is, I don’t know if spending is the only way to do it, but clearly we need some major infusion of improved completion rare for kids in school and it probably will take some more funds but it’s a ‘pay now or pay later’ kind of issue, meaning that it may be more difficult to make up for lower levels of education when people are adults with children, compared to making up for it when they are in school,” Murdock answers.

Murdock later suggested something akin to the post-World War II GI Bill of Rights that put a lot of veterans through college. “What we did with the GI Bill was to get them educated so that they became productive workers that impacted us in the 50s and the 60s and the 70s.

“We did that with a massive amount of aid aimed at that particular group of people. I’m not saying that’s the only answer but I’m saying that we may need to look at where we are now and look at the education levels that we have and the education levels that we think we need and see whether something similar to that” makes sense. Murdock said he has heard that the Executive Director of the State Coordinating Board thinks Texas needs a GI bill.

“We can’t do it nickel-and-diming it. This is a big problem; all the data I’ve looked at for 30 years show it’s gotten worse . . . it’s like your home and if it’s leaking water, the longer you wait, the more damage there is, in a similar way we’ve got a system where we’re not educating enough people. We’ve got to do something.”

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Business Profile

HOSPITALITY COMPANY EXPANDING

By Kevin Knoch

Through friendships formed by their association with the McAllen Chamber of Commerce, friends became business partners. The association has grown in the last 16 years and impacted the Rio Grande Valley hospitality and restaurant sector. The relationships have developed three companies; one is planning to open their fifth hotel in McAllen in October or November of 2010.

McAllen's Rick Guerra, who heads up the restaurant side of the venture, named Costillas Limited and Pasta Ventures, explained the breakdown of the two groups of mutual friends. The company handling hotels, is named Castle Hospitality.

"We started years ago with a Tony Roma's Restaurant in South McAllen." The year was 1994. The most recent enterprise broke ground in early February and is a Hampton Inn and Suites in McAllen located just north of the Expressway 83 between McColl and 2nd Street. On the hotel side, the partners are father and son Larry and Michael Fallek, Bob Wallace, Tom Joyner and Guerra. On the restaurant side add McAllen's Alter Holland to the partnership mix.

The group isn't limited to the RGV. They also have properties in Laredo, two hotels and a Tony Roma's. Guerra stated although tourist business in the city has slowed considerably, Laredo's truck traffic continues to generate high volume. Much of their hotel business is transportation related. The Laredo Tony Roma's is doing the best of their restaurants. Guerra attributes the success to population plus, "We have been in Laredo a long time and have so many regular customers."

The new Hampton project in McAllen is all local. Land owner is Castle Hospitality, the builder is a partner and a local bank is financing. When completed, the new Hampton Inn and Suites will have 112 suites and rise five stories high.

Castle Hospitality works with Marriott and Hilton products Guerra pointed out. "They are the two primary

ones and their standards are second to none." Adding the reservation system of the two hotel companies are the best in the hotel industry.

Costillas Limited now operates four Tony Roma's, a franchise chain originally from Orlando Florida; two in McAllen, one in Laredo, and another in Brownsville. The other restaurant is under the Pasta Ventures banner and is the Macaroni Grill in McAllen located in the Palm Crossing Shopping Center near the McAllen Convention Center.

Castle Hospitality properties in McAllen are the Courtyard Inn by Marriot, Fairfield Inn and Suites, Springhill Suites by Marriot, and the Homewood Suites by Hilton. In Laredo, they operate Embassy Suites by Hilton and a Fairfield Inn Suites by Marriot.

The hotel group has more news about one of their McAllen properties. The Courtyard by Marriot located on South 10th near the intersection with Wichita Street has undergone remodeling. Castle Hospitality announced in mid-March the hotel is rolling out its new lobby and room design at the hotel.

The group has a distinct advantage when it comes to the construction of one of their projects. Partner Bob Wallace and his son Brandon own Valley Commercial Construction. "We have our work done on a cost plus basis; it has saved us money" Guerra explained. Other companies have served as general contractors under Valley Commercial's supervision.

One important component to company success is employee satisfaction. Director of Sales and Marketing for Castle Hospitality Marriot Properties, Fatima Garcia made a key point. "More than 90 percent of Castle staff employees have been with the company over 10 years."

Garcia also pointed out the hotels have received recognition for their customer service. "Spring Hill Suites by Marriott was recently recognized for its customer service." The Fairfield Inn and Suites General Manager Noe Gomez, has been noted of late for his



McAllen's Rick Guerra heads up local Tony Roma's.
(K. Knoch)

work in his general management capacity.

Guerra would not be specific because details are not final but states, "After the latest hotel project is complete, I don't think there is any doubt we will be doing something in the near future."

Speaking about his partners, "We have had a good long lasting partnership." He admits it is a unique relationship. Kidding he added, "It's like family, they're not all perfect, but I'm still training them."



Springhill suites by Marriott. (courtesy)

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Feature Story

LOCAL RIO BRAVO PICTURES WORKS NATIONWIDE

By Kevin Knoch

Many struggle to break into the business. It can be tough to get started in the film production business. One Harlingen native, had an apprenticeship as a cameraman that would be the envy of many. Rodrigo Rodriguez toured the world for three and a half years filming travel documentaries for the Travel Channel, after graduating from the University of Texas Film School in the mid-1980s. His passport was stamped in diverse locations like Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, and the Czech Republic.

It was the first step in a learning experience that has led Rodriguez on a path to create his own film production company. After stops in Austin and Houston he now calls McAllen home. He operates Rio Bravo Pictures, the only film production company with post production editing capabilities along the Texas /Mexico Border.

Another unique aspect of Rodriguez' career and business is that his work is recognized and nationally known. One week he can be heading a film crew on the streets of McAllen, the next he can be directing a commercial in Austin, followed by



Rodrigo Rodriguez behind the camera at a recent shoot in the Rio Grand Valley. (K. Knoch)

two weeks in Los Angeles. What is distinctive about Rio Bravo Pictures is the post production editing work comes back to their facility in McAllen.

Looking back, it has been an amazing trip for Rodriguez, who logged valuable experience with instantly recognizable clients. After his time with the Travel Channel, he worked as a producer and interviewer for Entertainment Tonight; as a

director/ cameraman for Music TV, ESPN, Discovery Channel and the CBS program Trauma Center. "I gained extensive experience in television," Rodriguez related from his downtown McAllen office. He found himself doing commercials for clients that were run nationwide like Uniroyal and Home Depot.

Rodriguez explained how his career has developed and been influenced. "I have a passion for documentaries. I think that goes back to my work with Travel Channel days." Asked if he has thought about feature films, "I've always been interested in long stories like documentaries, not so much long feature form films."

Rodriguez feels his work is recognized by local residents, because of its intent to brand a company or concept in the viewers minds. He cited several clients in the local advertising market.

"We have branded Lone Star National Bank as the Valley's bank." The campaign has been running for two years so people are aware of the concept. "I think our local clients have experienced incredible results from working with us."

Citing another local campaign, "RGV Smiles, a dental company, experienced phenomenal growth after their commercial campaign. They have expanded their current office and opened a second one within 18 months." The results of the campaign gave RGV Smiles a big grin.

RGV Smiles' Dr. Rocky Salinas stated, "The collaboration between RGV Smiles and Rio Bravo Pictures is one we are most proud of." The dentist continued, "We went to Rodrigo with an idea, he took the idea and ran with it. Our vision to make visiting the dentist fun was executed and has been instrumental to our success."

Doing national commercial work years ago, "One of the first questions I heard was did I do Spanish media. I thought they meant bi-lingual commercials. What I soon found out was they wanted a Spanish language commercial. It worked out because I discovered I could direct a Spanish and English spot at the same time, producing two commercials." Rodriguez related he did the first Spanish Language television commercial campaign for Long John Silver Restaurants.

When working with national clients Rodriguez revealed almost always an advertising agency is intricately involved in the process. "Normally, with my national work, I work with ad agencies. What I find here in South Texas we normally work directly with the client. The client has a lot more input into the finished product."

Lone Star Bank's First Vice President and Marketing Director Edna De Saro related.

"I've had the pleasure of working with Rio Bravo Pictures on various productions. I'm very involved in the creative and the production side of our commercials. It amazes me we have access to this high quality production company in our market. A

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Rio Bravo Pictures Production Crew at work in McAllen recently (K. Knoch)

production company of Rio Bravo's caliber is usually found in more metropolitan areas."

De Saro emphasized none of the banks advertising work is done by an outside agency. "It is truly a jewel to have this company in our area, they have taken local advertising to the next level." Adding she often works shoulder to shoulder with Rodriguez during production.

Directing a film production business employing six full time employees has its hurdles in the RGV. Rodriguez declared the most challenging aspect of working in film in South Texas is finding qualified crew members with the appropriate backgrounds in film. "In other markets you can find people when you need them. Everyone is a sub contractor; they all have needed skills."

The director continued, "A crew member working for us one week can be in Dallas the next working for a different production company. Unfortunately, you just don't have the qualified people available when you need them." Adding the industry is very apprentice orientated, training can be a slow process for potential production crew members.

Rodriguez of Rio Bravo Pictures lives two lives. He is head of a local production company but he is also an in demand as a director in the film industry. "Nationally, I have an agent as a director. My agent is Jeff Lewis with Directors Network Artists in Los Angeles." Rodriguez revealed how busy his travel schedule can be.

"One week here, the next week I can be working somewhere else in the country working for another production company as a bilingual specialist director. That is common. Two months ago I directed a national campaign for Medicare in Los Angeles. I was there for eight to 10 days."

Rodriguez has done dozens of commercials for the Texas Lottery. Saying, "Most of those are shot in Dallas." If you watch television in Texas you have seen them. One of the advertisements was an award winner competing against other lottery commercials.

"It is a major component of our business. When you look at our demo reel on our Web Site (riobravopictures.com) you don't just see local work. You see all sorts of national work."

Rodriguez pointed out the national work gets shot wherever. "Then we bring it back to the Valley to edit. That is pretty amazing!"

He has tried to create a comfortable studio for his business. His post production facility in McAllen has all of the features you would find in studios around the country. Rio Bravo Pictures is housed in a converted loft style setting in downtown McAllen's Art District.

Brownsville Film Commissioner Peter Goodman is quick to point to Rio Bravo Productions' attributes. Goodman has dealt with film makers large and small far and wide since 2002. "When people come to town sometimes they are looking for a skilled professional to fill a spot for that shoot. The only name and phone number I give them is Rio Bravo Pictures."

Goodman enumerated the reasons for his Rio Bravo recommendation. "Several reasons, they have fantastically well trained creative people, including Rodrigo Rodriguez and Enrique Leal. They are the only place I know of that has and rents equipment. Rio Bravo now has a rental department that is very helpful."

The commissioner continued, "We are always eager to work with Rio Bravo Pictures. I feel comfortable with them because they are professional, good and they know their business. I have no problem recommending them for anything...Not because they are the only one, but because they are the best."

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History and Heritage

CITY AT THE CROSSROADS: HARLINGEN'S EARLY YEARS

By Eileen Mattei

Covered in thickets of mesquite and cactus, the southern end of the Wild Horse desert did not resemble prime agricultural land 110 years ago. But when lawyer Lon C. Hill traveled from Beeville to Brownsville in 1902 he recognized that a fertile flood plain was hidden by the thorny brush land.

"This is the finest soil in the world and when we get water on it you will see a garden spot," wrote Hill, age 40. He began buying thousands of acres west of Brownsville: Cameron County School Lands along with property owned by Henrietta King and small tract owners. The area was sparsely settled—only a few ranches perched along the Arroyo Colorado at low water crossings and near sweet water wells.

In order to develop and sell the land to northern farmers, Hill needed water for the crops and a way to get the crops to market. He had a plan to make it so. In 1903, Hill joined forces with investors from Brownsville and the Coastal Bend to provide the incentives (land, rights of way and depot sites) that the new St. Louis, Brownsville and Matamoros Railway required before agreeing to serve the region.



Land buyers came to the Harlingen area by train and were treated with watermelons. (courtesy)

Hill and his sons camped on the Arroyo Colorado in a spot called Salty Lonesome, one mile west of his proposed town site. With railroad engineers, he laid out a sendero, a trail, from his campsite west to the railroad camp on the right of way. This east-west path became today's Harrison Avenue.

Hill platted a 543-acre town site with wide streets, and what was called Lon C Hill's Town began to emerge from the brush in 1904. The post office opened in June 1904 with the name Harlingen. Hill envisioned his town would soon be crisscrossed by canals. Coincidentally, Uriah Lott, the president of St. Louis

Brownsville Matamoros railway had ancestors in Harlingen, New Jersey, and Harlingen, Holland, a town laced by canals.

Hill had convinced Lott that Harlingen should be the major terminal for the branch rail line running 55 miles straight to the west, out past Mission. By July 4, when the first official trip of the St. Louis, Brownsville & Matamoros between Corpus Christi and Brownsville was celebrated, construction had already begun on the branch known as the Sam Fordyce line.

The boxcar that was Harlingen's depot was soon replaced by a frame station with a semaphore to signal the engineers. Track-laying crews and land grubbers camped near the tiny wooden post office and store. As a frontier town with saloon tents

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catering to rowdy construction crews, Harlingen won another nickname “Six-shooter Junction.” The Texas Rangers and Customs Mounted Patrol stationed in Harlingen indulged in target practice near the depot, reportedly led to this moniker. The law used also used mesquite trees to temporarily restrain miscreants until they could be taken to jail in Brownsville.

Early in 1905, Hill, recently widowed, moved his family to an unfinished house in what is now Fair Park and formed the Town and Improvement Company with 2,614 acres. The first lots were sold to August Welder who built saloons and rental properties. Santos Lozano bought the next lots and built a general store. A small house next to Hill’s served as a school and church.

Even in 1906, the area was still being cleared. The manager of the Harlingen railroad hotel (2 baths, 10 rooms) said “the brush was so thick it was impossible to see the trains go by only a short distance away.”

In 1907 construction of irrigation canal system was underway, with Hill predicting “an inrush of investors and settlers” once the water supply system was completed. Meanwhile Harlingen residents relied on carters to deliver water barrels to houses and businesses. Town lots sold for \$50, and the first brick building used bricks made at Hill’s Arroyo kiln. Hill sold his first 22 farm tracts.

By 1909 families were moving to the dirt street town and to “two mule farms.” Several arrived in a “side door Pullman,” a humorous reference to a freight car loaded with a family’s possessions including livestock. That year, saw the first doctor, a telephone exchange and a cemetery burial. The town’s new school district built Juarez School for Spanish speaking students. Anglo students attended classes in churches and spare rooms until 1912.

Seventy-two residents voted to incorporate Harlingen. On April 15, 1910, Ike McFarlane was sworn in as mayor. E. W. Anglia became City Marshal, a position that paid \$50 per month. Although the town had no electricity and streets were unpaved, a waterworks system was established. Cotton gins, a sugar mill and farmers netting up to \$500 per acre indicate the town’s growing fortunes in 1911. Midwestern farmers arrive on sales excursion trains to look over and often buy farm tracts which could produce two money crops a year. Robert Stuart bought the first of his 10,000 acres in the Stuart Place area. The 11-grade high school fielded its first football team in action. What had once been Hill’s irrigation company became Texas first irrigation district.

By 1914, the Mexican revolution was spilling into Cameron County. Bandits created havoc, with violence and rumors of violence prompting farmers to flee in fear. Texas National Guard troops camped in Harlingen to protect the region. By 1916, they were joined by federal troops. Headquartered in Harlingen, the soldiers overwhelmed the stores and resources of the small town. Harlingen residents carried on, attending Catechu and Lyceum cultural presentations, at the three story Central Ward School. Kids swam at Naked Boys Bend on the arroyo. A smallpox epidemic resulted in a quarantine and deaths.

The 1920s brought unprecedented prosperity to Harlingen.

Annually, over 13,000 railcars of Valley vegetables and citrus were loaded in Harlingen for shipment north. The city’s ice plants gained the distinction of making more ice than any other place in Texas. A new nickname, “Howling Gin,” reflected the bales of cotton processed at the city’s busy gins. Another nickname, “Silk Stocking Row,” characterized the Taylor Street cluster of luxurious mansions built for rich business owners and farmers. Schools, houses, hotels and businesses went up at a breakneck pace. Land sales boomed. In one month, over 3,700 land seekers visited Harlingen to tour irrigated farm tracts.

The Rialto theatre on Jackson charged 25 cents for adults and 10 cents for kids, who listened to the pianist accompanying the silent films before talkies came in. The first hospital opened in 1923 followed by Valley Baptist in 1925. The magnificent art deco Municipal Auditorium opened in 1928. Its 3,000 seats were filled when luminaries such as John Phillip Sousa and his band performed.

The Depression and hard times arrived in Harlingen in the 1930s. Instead of cash, city employees were paid in script. The hurricane of 1933 decimated the city: the new auditorium was destroyed, the downtown shredded, farmers’ crops ruined. Relief trains from San Antonio brought medical teams and emergency supplies. In character, the city and its residents rallied and rebuilt.

In 1941 the Harlingen air gunnery school opened. By the end of World War II, it had trained 48,000 young aerial gunners, two of whom received the Medal of Honor. The huge air base



Bandit Raids from 1914-1916 prompted the Goodykuntz family of Harlingen--and many others in the area--to have weapons available day and night. (courtesy)

spawned the Airfield Bus Company which became Valley Transit.

The 1950s brought another economic boom, despite freezes and an extended drought. Harlingen Air Force Base opened to train navigators. Modern architects made their mark with distinctive South Texas homes and buildings.

The closing of the base in 1960s again rallied the citizens. From the ashes, Harlingen’s next future arose: Valley International Airport, the Marine Military Academy and Texas State Technical College.

Harlingen’s history has been written by the thousands of people who made the city their home.

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Business Evolution

THE VERMILLION RESTAURANT: WHEN CUSTOMERS DON'T WANT YOU TO CHANGE

By Eileen Mattei

A photo taken in 1934, when the Vermillion opened on Paredes Line Road, shows Mr. Vermillion with a pistol tucked into his belt. While Dan Davidson, owner of the Brownsville watering hole since 1971, says the Vermillion doesn't go in for change much, he doesn't tote a pistol. Given the high number of restaurants that don't make it to the five year mark, Davidson's achievement of running a popular, 76-year-old business is worth investigating.

"We've always identified with Brownsville. We don't want to lose that 1950s hometown feel. We've never gotten pretentious although we have had our share of success," Davidson said. That sense of place, reinforced by photos of mid-century Brownsville at the roomy booths, combined with good, predictable (in the best sense) food has kept the restaurant prospering during the Great Recession. "Not fancy, just

good" is the motto painted on the red frame building.

Gib Davidson, Dan's father, bought the small bar and grill with a short-term partner in 1951 from Mr. Vermillion. "My dad turned it into a success slowly. He would go buy one case of beer, and when that was sold he would buy another case. The same with 10 pounds of hamburger. We called it the Vermillion Drive Inn. It had four tables, six bar stools, and curb service. It was not a fancy place, no air conditioning, no indoor plumbing," Davison recalled. He also has memories of customers riding their horses to the Vermillion for a beer or two and letting the horse take them home. When the Expressway was under construction nearby, dust clouds swirled though the restaurant's open windows.

At 14, Davidson was peeling potatoes and washing dishes in the family business. As soon as he turned 18, his father made him a bartender. "In high



Dan Davidson, owner of the Brownsville watering hole since 1971, says the Vermillion doesn't go in for change much. (Mattei)

school, I remember being terribly embarrassed by this place. Today I'm very proud of where we are now and where we came from."

One of Gib Davidson's first cooks, Simitreo Otero, developed many of the recipes the Vermillion uses today. Davidson's comment that the last time a new item was added to Vermillion's menu was about 15 years ago would cause restaurant experts to faint dead away. Yet in a world where trendy grabs the headlines, Vermillion concentrates on giving customers what they want and that is what they grew up eating with their family at this restaurant. Now the busy restaurant is serving a fourth generation of Brownsville residents and more recent arrivals with Irish nachos and ceviche, the Tampiquena platter and shrimp Veracruz, burgers, daily specials, and the Vermillion's homemade chili and soups.

"As any one can tell you, I have a blast. This place has really blossomed since my wife Rachel started working with me in 1987," said Davidson, clad in navy shorts and a polo shirt soon after the lunch rush which lasted until almost 2 p.m. "I'm out here pressing flesh. Brownsville is not a terribly pretentious place. People like a reasonably-priced meal. This is where they are used to coming."

Davidson's wife and his long-time manager George Perez handle the computer side of the business applying 21st century efficiencies to a 76-year-old company. Davidson and the busy staff handle customer relations. "We have fun every day--customers, staff, the bosses. Some days we go way over the top." Last year's 75th birthday cele-

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bration was one such occasion: 1970s prices, waitresses in poodle skirts, great music and a great party.

The Vermillion has been rebuilt in the same location over the years, expanded and then doubled in size and remodeled again. "We could use more space, more parking, more kitchen, a totally bigger place, but it doesn't look like it is in the cards," Davidson. Plans to relocate ended with the recession.

Weathering the peso devaluations of 1976-1982 taught Davidson how to adapt to the situation and become more efficient. He called 2008 a banner year, in fact, the restaurant's best ever. Surprisingly, 2009's net was very close to the previous year. "We made adjustments, watched our p&q's on menu prices."

Davidson admitted that all his employees work very hard, from wait staff and busboys up to head cooks. "They know they have a job here if they know how to work." General manager Perez's mother Ester, has waitressed at the restaurant for 41 years, and Perez himself started as a dishwasher.

"My manager told me he is looking forward to celebrating Vermillion's 100th anniversary," Davidson said. The next generation is ready to serve and be served.



The Vermillion has been rebuilt in the same location over the years, expanded and then doubled in size and remodeled again. (Mattei)

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Business News

LEAN MANUFACTURING STRESSED AT LUNCHEON

By Kevin Knoch

It is about efficiency and the language of business emphasized general manager, Randy Phares, of Temple Inland's Edinburg and Reynosa plants. Asking the attendees at a South Texas Manufacturing Association luncheon on March 23rd, "what is the language of business" Phares received a loud one word answer "money". He went on to explain how businesses can improve their bottom line.

The improvement in a manufacturing or service companies production can be attained by adapting the principals of two programs: Lean Manufacturing and Six Sigma. Courses in both programs are available at The Texas Manufacturing Assistance Center, a statewide group with a branch at the University of Texas-Pan American. Addressing the group, Oscar Barrenechea from TMAC related how the principals of the programs can be merged together.

He stated the classic definition of lean. "Lean is defined as a systematic approach to identifying and eliminating waste. Non-value added activities through continuous improvement by flowing the product at the pull of the

customer in pursuit of perfection."

Barrenechea related, "Six Sigma is a business improvement approach that seeks to find and eliminate causes of defects in business processes by focusing on outputs that are of critical importance to customers."

He went on to point out how the tenants of the two programs are similar. Under "lean principals" you meet customer demand, with Six Sigma you meet customer specifications. Under "lean" you strive to reduce waste, with Six Sigma philosophy you strive to reduce variation.

It was Phares who demonstrated how theory can be translated to the manufacturing floor. He emphasized he can tell how a plant is doing by just walking through it. If work spaces are cluttered and disordered he asked rhetorically, "If you can't manage the blatantly obvious, how can you manage or improve the operation?"

Asking for volunteers, he produced a figure made of connecting blocks; disassembling the figure, he threw the blocks on the floor and asked for reassembly. The figure was put back together in 180 seconds. Phares stepped in and showed how the process could be improved.

The pieces were placed within reach of the assembler



Oscar Barrenechea and Miguel Mugica of TMAC at University of Texas Pan American. (K. Knoch)

and a diagram was placed right in front as a guide saving time and motion. The result was the figure was assembled in 35 seconds, improving the process by 145 seconds or four times as fast. Nothing changed but the placement of the pieces and diagram.

He pointed out the simple things can be done first in any work area. Clean up the area, stabilize tools and equipment, cut down on wasted motion, and standardize the best practices. Later on, decisions can be made about the best tools and training needed for an improved outcome.

Phares stated by improving efficiencies and adapting lean manufacturing and Six Sigma and other practices, his company has seen a substantial improvement in the bottom line. The Edinburg and Reynosa plants are the most improved among Temple Inland's 70 packaging plants. All of his workers have been trained in Six Sigma practices and are at a yellow belt level of the manufacturing discipline. The company has 120 employees in Edinburg and 25 in Reynosa.

Phares encouraged managers to look into learning more about the manufacturing principals. "The more people in the organization that can learn the concepts and the processes, the more successful they are going to be." Phares will be leading a conference on the concepts at a packaging expo held on South Padre Island on June 21 and 22.

More information can be found at the expo's Web Site www.ppgexpo.com.

Information about Six Sigma classes at TMAC is available by calling (956) 316-7011.

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Opinion

JUST MOVING UP, NOT LEAVING THE TEAM

By Ramiro Garza Jr.

Although I have recently left the world of economic development, I won't be far away. I feel like an athlete who has played together with a number of great teammates, who for whatever reason is moving on. Since graduating college and my first work in Port Isabel I have deeply been involved in this fascinating field.

Economic Development is a process that involves many team players as a community strives to achieve sustained economic prosperity. There are economic development professionals, community volunteers, elected officials, business civic leaders and city officials.

I've served many roles in the economic development process – community volunteer, financial credit analyst, business counselor and as an economic development professional.

Most recently, the City of Edinburg appointed me to serve as City Manager. Even though the role is directly associated with administering the overall affairs of the City, economic development is still an area of focus.

When a company is looking to locate in a community, it is important for there to be adequate infrastructure and the ability for a business to attain the necessary permits in a timely manner.

As City Manager, our role is to support the economic development efforts. For example, we are currently working on developing a downtown revitalization plan. The plan focuses on parking, traffic circulation, walk ability, aesthetics and infrastructure upgrades to improve the downtown area. A key component to this will be connecting City Hall with a pedestrian friendly corridor to the Downtown Square and to the University of Texas-Pan American.

This downtown plan initiative is jointly being worked on together with the business community, Edinburg Economic Development Corporation, University of Texas-Pan American, Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District and County of Hidalgo. Together, the plan will consist of initiatives that each stakeholder will assist in implementing.

This downtown revitalization planning process is more of a quality of life factor which has a direct impact on the economic development process. Many studies have shown that having a vibrant downtown enhances a community's ability to attract new investment and people to live there.

Quality of life initiatives are similar in nature to what was worked on previously in Port Isabel. During the Clinton administration Port Isabel was designated a Federal Empowerment Zone in the 1990s, it was the spark needed to address a period of high unemployment. At the time, the shrimp industry was on a decline and the peso devaluation had negatively impacted the area's tourism.

With the Empowerment Zone designation came financial assistance that placed the decision on local residents appointed to decide where to focus this assistance. There were many quality of life projects created that transformed the face of Port Isabel to what it is today. Projects like an affordable home development, to a historic preservation initiative, Port Isabel was able to maximize the assistance and continues to focus on these efforts today.

Whether a project is quality of life in nature or the attraction of a business, a City and its economic development corporation are involved as part of a team in ensuring it becomes a reality. So as it might



Ramiro Garza Jr. was recently appointed to serve as City Manager of Edinburg. (courtesy)

seem as I've left the economic development profession completely, I feel that I've only changed roles as I work alongside the economic development corporation to bring new investment and jobs to this area.

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Business News

RGV LEGAL JOB FAIR ATTRACTS CANDIDATES FROM NINE TEXAS LAW SCHOOLS

By Elva Jackson Garza

The Women's Bar Section of the Hidalgo County Bar Association in cooperation with the Hidalgo County Bar Association, South Texas College, University of Texas at Brownsville, and the Texas law schools hosted the first ever Rio Grande Valley Legal Job Fair in Edinburg.

On Friday, March 5 candidates from the nine Texas law schools in Texas were represented during the job fair as Valley law firms interviewed potential attorney and paralegal candidates for their firms. The laws schools that participated in the job fair included Baylor University School of Law; South Texas College of Law; Southern Methodist University Dedman School of Law; St. Mary's University School of Law; Texas Southern University School of Law; Texas Tech University School of Law; Texas Wesleyan Uni-



Pictured are Rhonda V. Beassie; University of Houston Law Center; Elva Jackson Garza, Vice President/Marketing Manager Edwards Abstract and Title Co.; Allison H. Regan, University of Houston Law Center and Marissa Sandoval, Cacheaux, Cavazos & Newton, L.L.P. (Garza)

versity School of Law; University of Houston Law Center and University of Texas School of Law.

Due to the current economic climate, the nine Texas law schools wanted to make it easier for employers to find summer associates and permanent hires. The support of the Women's Section of the Hidalgo County Bar Association enabled the participation of many employers.

The Rio Grande Valley Legal Job Fair was hosted at Edwards Abstract and Title Co. The facility was set up to accommodate twenty two employers who were available throughout the day to interview the candidates. Allison H. Regan, Career Counselor for the University of Houston Law Center Career Development Office and Rhonda V. Beassie, Assistant Dean for Career Development for the University of Houston Law Center coordinated the job fair.

"We are very pleased with the response from the law firms who set up to accept resumes from paralegals and professional support staff candidates," said Allison Regan. "The law students traveled from various parts of the State of Texas for the opportunity to interview with several law offices in one convenient location," she added.

The Women's Bar Section of the Hidalgo County Bar Association was instrumental in coordinating the job fair locally informing the

HCBA membership of the opportunity to schedule and conduct interviews on site. "We hope that the job fair will continue to grow and become an annual event in the Valley," said Marissa Sandoval, member of the Women's Bar Section committee.

Edwards Abstract and Title Co. accommodated employers and the students at the Edwards Training Center and various offices for the private interviews. Byron Jay Lewis, president of Edwards Abstract and Title Co. has special ties with the University of Houston Law Center. As a former graduate of the law school, Lewis wanted to give back to his alma mater and welcomed the opportunity to partner with the Rio Grande Valley Job Fair.

Edwards Abstract and Title Co. was founded in 1880 and has been serving the Rio Grande Valley with branch offices in Edinburg, McAllen, Mission and Weslaco. The title insurance company is celebrating 130 years of service in 2010.

For more information regarding the RGV Legal Job Fair, contact Ms. Sandoval, attorney with the law firm of Cacheaux, Cavazos & Newton, L.L.P. in McAllen at 686-5883.

Elva Jackson Garza is a Vice President/Marketing Manager for Edwards Abstract and Title Co. in Edinburg

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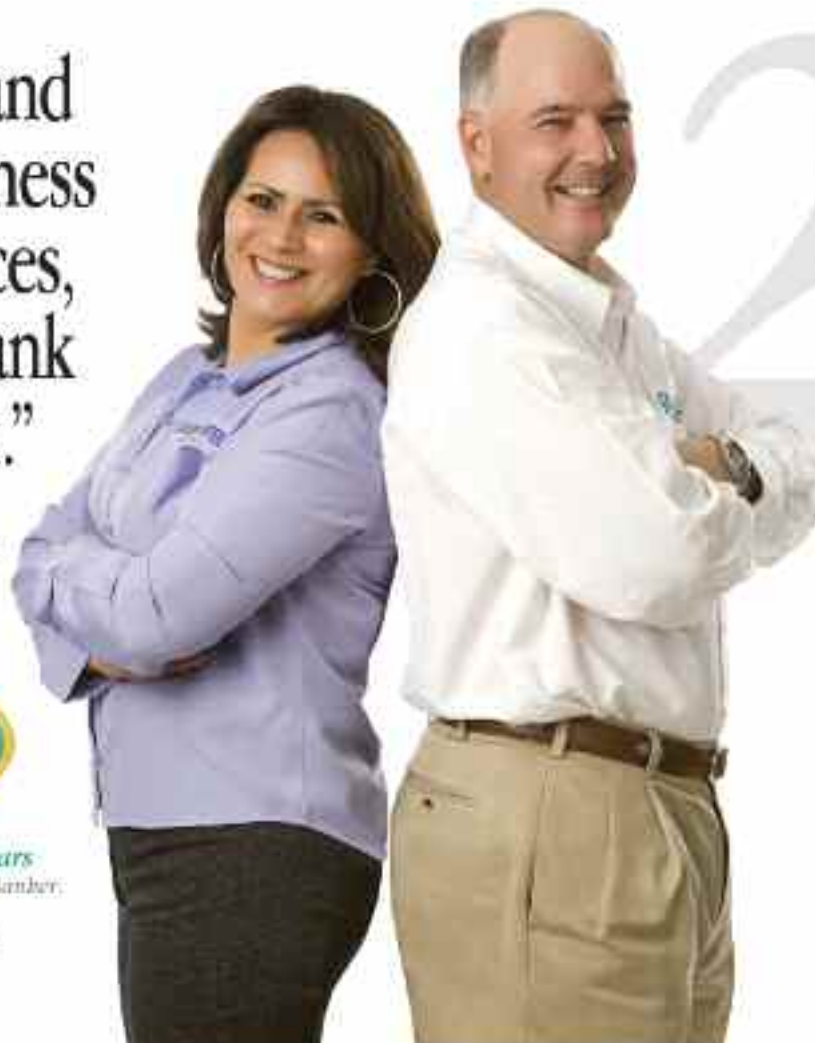
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