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See page 6



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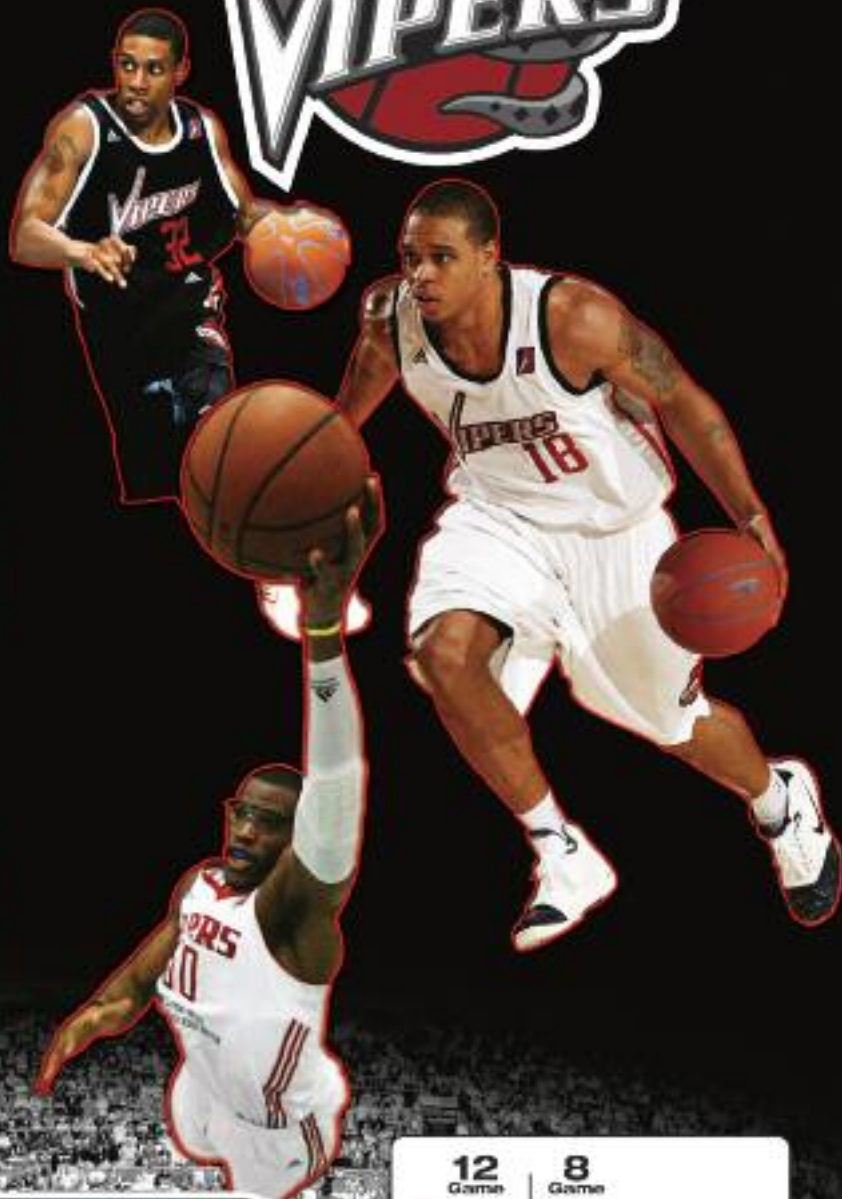
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VETERANS HAVE THE SKILLS AND WORK ETHIC TO BECOME GREAT EMPLOYEES

By Angela Burton

Since February 2011, I have participated with an advocacy group for veterans called Cameron County Coalition for Veterans organized by the United Way of Southern Cameron County. The coalition consists of governmental, non-profit and business organizations whose mission is to provide a venue that supports veterans and their families by convening, collaborating, mobilizing and advocating for their needs. One of those identified needs is employment. I learned there are approximately 800 veterans actively seeking employment in Cameron County while 500 of those veterans are receiving unemployment benefits. Those disturbing numbers aren't just regional.

There were over one million unemployed veterans in America during 2010, according to

"Employment Situation of Veterans in 2010", a report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. With an overall population of 22 million veterans and a total of just over 12 million veterans in the civilian workforce, veterans had a jobless rate of 8.7 percent last year. While this was comparable to the national average unemployment rate of 9.4 percent, there are some alarming trends that may result in higher unemployment for veterans in the short term.

For example, the unemployment rate for post 9-11 era veterans was 11.5 percent with younger veterans (those ages 18 to 24) suffering from an average unemployment rate above 20 percent in 2010. For that age category, the unemployment rate among veterans currently stands at a staggering 26.9 percent. Additionally, current or past members of the Reserve or National Guard had an unemployment rate of 14.0 percent in July 2010. Data

for these cohorts bring even more concern, given an additional 155,000 veterans will be leaving active duty and 100,000 guard and reservists will be demobilized and returning to the workforce during 2011.

In March 2011, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce launched "Hiring our Heroes" program, a year-long nationwide effort to help veterans and their spouses find meaningful employment. The Chamber started the program in partnership with the Department of Labor Veterans Employment and Training Service (DOL VETS), to improve public-private sector coordination in local communities, where veterans and their families are returning every day. Working with their extensive network of state and local chambers, DOL VETS and other strategic partners, the U.S. Chamber plans to match veteran talent with career opportunities in the private sector. The U.S. Chamber

continued on pg. 4

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continued from pg 3

has vowed to organize 100 hiring fairs from June 2011 to April 2012.

On August 5, 2011, the White House proposed two new tax incentives: a "Returning Heroes" plan under which employers could earn up to \$2,400 for hiring recently unemployed vets and \$4,800 for hiring those unemployed more than six months and a "Wounded Warrior" credit of up to \$9,600 for hiring disabled vets out of work for more than six months. A tax incentive for hiring veterans is not a new idea, but right now it's an especially timely one.

The post-recession "recovery," such as it is, has definitely been a sputtering engine of job creation, even with a net gain of 117,000 jobs in July. Now with markets showing signs after the budget battle that even this shaky recovery is in jeopardy, the need for jobs becomes even more critical. An estimated one million vets were unemployed in June, and that number will rise as more vets come home.

In August on behalf of the Cameron County Coalition for Veterans, the United Way of Southern Cameron County submitted a grant developed to match funds for business internships and training opportunities for newly hired veterans. I sincerely hope Chamber members will take advantage of these incentives when hiring.

From the White House and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce all the way to Cameron County, we are developing programs designed to assist veterans with employment opportunities. From my experience as a veteran, many separated service members, chiefly those with technical specialties are able to find employment upon leaving the service. However, the untold story is that of the combat-veteran staff sergeant who with no college degree has led an infantry squad through a year of war.

From my experience as a businesswoman, although this veteran mentioned above does not have a technical specialty or college degree, he/she possess a multitude of soft skills and characteristics extremely valuable to employers. Those characteristics are many but include: first class leadership training and experience, critical thinking skills, a can-do attitude, integrity and respect, a mission-driven mindset and accountability. In my opinion, these are skills that cannot be taught in school, but are learned in the trenches, shoulder to shoulder with real people, facing real obstacles.

Angela Burton is the CEO of the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce and a U.S. Army veteran.

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Contents

Veterans for Hire 3

Border Patrol Benefits the Valley 6

Elliff Motors 8

Big Bang Medicine 10

Veterans and Local Economy 11

South Texas Moulding 12

Nature Tourism 14

Edinburg Hospitals 16

Interstate 69 18

Kung Fu Family Style 19

La Cantera 20

Importance of Interview Skills 22

Welcome Home RGV 23

Vista Summit 24

Cooking for Fun and Profit 26

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BORDER SECURITY HAS A BRIGHT SIDE: A STIMULATED ECONOMY

By Eileen Mattei

The silver lining in the dark cloud over the border is that the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and other Department of Homeland Security agencies infuse millions of dollars into the local economy. Besides enjoying the relative peace resulting from CBP's protective presence, Valley businesses are increasingly the beneficiaries of spending by the federal agencies as well as by their off-duty employees.

In the late 1980s the Rio Grande sector covered by CBP's predecessor had between 300 and 500 agents. By 1998, the number had risen to 1,000. Today, the same sector, which covers 17,000 square miles, has 2,400 Border Patrol Agents who are based at the new headquarters in Edinburg or at the nine regional stations: Brownsville, Fort Brown, Harlingen, Weslaco, McAllen and Rio Grande City plus Kingsville, Corpus Christi and Falfurrias. That surge in numbers reflects the federal response to both increased threats

to homeland security and to the flood of illegal immigrants and smugglers probing the border for weak points.

Amid the grimmer statistics are reassuring economic data: federal border spending has tripled in the last ten years. One estimate has put the spending on border security at \$90 billion for the past decade.

The Government Services Administration (GSA) is the central procurement division for federal agencies. It awards contracts for the installation of high tech watch towers and contracts with technology companies to maintain multi-million dollar rail and



Edinburg is the headquarters for 2,400 Border Patrol Agents. (VBR)

cargo screening equipment. It lines up food service for alien detention centers and contracts with veterinarians to care for drug-sniffing dogs and the animals of the Horse Patrol. The list of services and products seems endless: stabling, office supplies, equipment upgrades, vehicle tires and copy machine repairs.

"Many of the products CBP uses are purchased from local vendors," said Daniel Milian, Supervisory Border Patrol Agent, Office of Public Affairs in Edinburg. "Often times, CBP tries to make purchases from small businesses but CBP also uses nationwide retailers in the RGV as well. GSA offers businesses the opportunity to sell products and services to those agencies. When making a purchase, we use GSA when required and will verify if the purchase can be made through GSA. If not, then an outside vendor can be used."

Eric Ybarra of Weslaco-based Dos Logistics, Inc., in April signed a five-year contract to provide engineering and architectural professional services for various agencies of the Department of Homeland Security, "It is a great revenue generator for a small business like ours," Ybarra said. "The SBA has provided me with the resources and tools to obtain federal contracts." Dos Logistics became a certified 8A minority-owned small business, which enabled it compete for contracts on the same level as much larger firms. Since 1999 Dos Logistics has also worked with municipalities and counties and helped them develop infrastructure by pulling all the compo-

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nents together from design to funding and project management.

Routine vehicle maintenance on CBP's huge fleet of vehicles is generally handled by CBP employees. "However, local vendors are contracted for towing services and when there is a backlog of vehicles that require maintenance, vehicles are sent to local dealers," Milian said.

Bert Ogden Motors in Mission, for example, handles all the warranty work on applicable CBP vehicles from the lower Valley to Rio Grande City, according to Marsha Green of Bert Ogden Motors. Fuel is a contract purchase, but fuel is purchased from local gas stations if need dictates.

"Janitorial services for the Rio Grande Valley Sector are contracted out to Training, Rehabilitation and Development Institute (TRDI), a company that provides job opportunities to disabled individuals," Milan added. "Equipment and other major expenditures vary based upon the type of equipment and whether or not the federal government has an existing contract with a supplier. Sometimes major purchases are made locally. Just like with any purchase, it largely depends on where the best value for the money can be found."

TRICKLE-DOWN ECONOMICS

CBP is the federal government's largest law enforcement workforce. In the Valley, that translates into over 2,000 firmly middle class households. Border Patrol agents and other Homeland Security employees who live in the Valley spend their salaries in their communities, which has a positive impact on businesses and sales tax revenue. Border Patrol Agents' starting salaries range between \$38,000 and \$49,000. Their average salary is \$75,000, in part because overtime and 60-hour weeks are not uncommon, according to the CPB website.



Realtor Doris Lepard said Border Patrol families buy and sell houses through her on a regular basis. (VBR)

The Rio Grande Valley sector is the home of about 13 percent of CBP's deployed forces on the border. Nevertheless, the number of Border Patrol Agents per mile of border in California, Arizona and New Mexico is about double that found in Texas.

Border Patrol Agents rent apartments and buy and sell houses, breathing life into the residential real estate market. "We saw a big influx about five years ago as they came out of training academies," said Debbie Del Bosque, general manager of Century 21-Johnston Co. She believes many agents newly assigned to the Valley decide to rent until they get comfortable with the area. Others have expectations of getting transferred closer to their home in a few years and avoid buying. While the Harlingen market has not had as many CBP employees' houses on the market as in previous years, according to Del Bosque, one realtor, Doris Lepard, said that she works with Border Patrol families buying and selling houses on a regular basis.

Like other residents, Border Patrol Agents and their families eat out in restaurants, shop for clothes, computers and groceries. Their kids take piano and karate lessons and participate in Little League and scouting. In fact, your neighbor with CBP could easily have been a history teacher or a news anchor or a



A contract with the Department of Homeland Security has boosted revenues at Dos Logistics, Eric Ybarra's engineering services firm. (VBR)

graphic designer before moving into a better-paying job.

The beginning of the Border Patrol dates back to 1904 and the mounted inspectors who tracked border smugglers. Interestingly, the RGV Sector this past summer acquired its own horses (instead of leasing them) for its Horse Patrol. The reversion to horses gives greater accessibility in achieving the Border Patrol's mission. It also opens yet another avenue where local small businesses can provide services and increase their incomes.



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EVERYBODY DRIVES A USED CAR

By Eileen Mattei

At Elliff Motors, great-grandsons of Luther Elliff are now working in the used car dealership he founded in 1944. For over 60 years, the slogan “Everybody drives a used car” has kept an upmarket spin on Elliff’s pre-owned vehicles. Each generation of the Elliffs appears to have the gene that makes them avid car dealers, who seem to have a good time while they’re working.

“Some families don’t get along real well. We get along fine,” said Bill Elliff, 47, third generation spokesman. “We bump heads every once in a while, of course. But we all know our roles and agree that it’s not worth shutting the business down over an argument. We move on. That’s the reason it works.”

Bill Elliff and his brother Joe bought the business from their father Larry in 2000 and have co-managed the company since. Yet Larry Elliff, 79, still works at the Harlingen office every day, and he remarked that the used car market, in this recession, is the strongest

he has seen in 57 years in the business.

“He is a wealth of knowledge,” Bill Elliff said. “I have had the great fortune of having two good teachers, my dad and my grandfather. When I was little, I spent just about every weekend and the whole summer with my grandfather washing cars and working on them while Dad traveled to buy cars. They both were instrumental in Joe and me staying in the business.”

After 25 years gainfully employed, Bill Elliff remains enthusiastic about his career choice. “What’s



Bill Elliff talks with a customer in his office. (VBR)

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so great about this business is that there is something different every day. No two used cars are the same; they're in different conditions. We really enjoy it. Joe loves to buy and sell."

The retail side of the business has kept growing and is typically strong during economic downturns. Over the last 20 years, the family has purchased adjacent properties, torn down buildings and expanded the lot. "We're always crowded," noted Elliff, surrounded by sparkling clean, late model vehicles. The company has its own on-site, service department which tests all vehicles being retailed and brings them up to roadworthy standards. The facility stays busy because it is open to the public. Elliff vehicles, which range from \$40,000 to \$4,000, are sold either under factory warranty or a 90-day dealership warranty.

Elliff Motors is still trying to overcome one misconception that persists about independent used car dealers. "We have competitive interest rates." The company can tap into retail financing from about 10 different sources, besides financing some items in house.

Elliff has five buyers who work for them doing nothing but buying and selling vehicles wholesale in Dallas, Houston and other cities and then shipping cars all over the state. Some cars and trucks are funneled through the Harlingen lot while most are wholesaled. "We supply used cars to new car dealers and buy from them if they are overstocked. It goes both ways: they call with a customer looking for a specific car." Big Valley Auto Auction plaques proclaim that Elliff Motors both sold and bought over two million dollars worth of cars through them during a one year period.

In a surprising move, Elliff has become the largest utility trailer distributor in South Texas. "It was a fluke that we got into it. We had the property and did it on a whim, and it has turned out okay," Elliff said. Beginning in 1994 the company began handling several trailer brands: Big Tex, CM and Wells Cargo. In 1996, Elliff opened a separate trailer store in Pharr with both locations selling hitches and



trailer accessories as well as trailers. The company has become one manufacturer's exclusive distributor for Mexico.

Three generations of the Elliff family are active in Elliff Motors. (VBR)

In December, Elliff will begin selling cars and trucks in Pharr. Collin Stewart, one of the founder's great-grandsons has been at that store for three years.

Tyler Elliff, the newest member to join the family business, graduated from Texas A&M this year.





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WIRELESS MEDICAL DEVICES IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION

By Javier Vasquez

Two recent market reports indicate that wireless, medical applications and services in the U.S. alone will become a \$4.4 billion-dollar industry by 2013 and the number of healthcare related wireless sensors in use would exceed 400 million units by 2014.

One of the main catalysts of this growth is the numerous reform efforts that are taking place at all levels of government and private funded healthcare. Agency directors and insurance CEOs are focusing on all aspects of reimbursement with special emphasis on eliminating over-utilization by demanding better accountability from healthcare workers which include doctors, hospitals, nursing homes and home health care providers.

The Rio Grande Valley's healthcare environment is poised to be right in the middle of the forecasted

boom due to various contributing factors. One of the key factors is our growing population. According to a 2008 publication by the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, the Valley's fast growing population and its large share of individuals covered by government-sponsored health benefits creates a large pool of potentially eligible patients. Since 1990, the population growth rate has far exceeded the state's 38% average.

It should be noted that many Valley healthcare organizations and providers are not waiting to see what kind of changes reform will enforce or if future repeal efforts will be successful in coming years.

Applied healthcare technology is already employed by many area providers to help them practice medicine more efficiently such as data analysis and registry software that can be used to arrive at more accurate diagnosis and treatment options.

Area hospitals and physician offices have adopted and implemented network electronic medical record (EMR) systems which provide them the fast access to important medical history current medications, allergies and lab/imaging results. Within the next few months and years, the newly formed health information exchanges here in the Valley will also further provide the infrastructure to potentially connect every healthcare entity via a secured network.

Like any industry though, the quality of the data is key for any system to be useful. Across the technology spectrum, much of the data gathering and entry has for the most part been a manual process. Every industry must employ and train individuals to gather data via observation or through use of an instrument that is then inputted into a computer. It is in this aspect of the process that the wireless industry seems poised to make headway.

Here is one sample scenario. A physician wants to determine if a patient's medications are working correctly and needs to refer to a logbook of blood pressure readings or blood sugar levels to adjust the medications based on their level of effectiveness. To accomplish this, a person must take multiple readings a day and record them.

The patient then is scheduled for a follow-up appointment after a few weeks to review the readings with their doctor and make the necessary adjustments to the medications. This process may

repeat itself several times until the correct medication and dosage is found.

It sounds simple until the doctor reviews the numbers and determines that a level of error is possible due to either the inability of the patient to correctly take their readings or the use of non-calibrated equipment.

The doctor in these situations will authorize a home health agency to provide this service at the patient's home for a set amount of time to obtain the readings. A nurse will visit the patient on a scheduled basis to obtain the readings and report them to the doctor as requested.

With a wireless medical application, this scenario changes a bit in that a home health agency or monitoring service can utilize a mobile wireless platform in the patient's home. A wearable sensor is placed on the patient that can monitor and gather information such as heart rate, pulse and oxygen saturation.

Wrist-attached blood pressure cuffs or glucometers with wireless transmission capability can upload their information to WIFI systems and be transmitted to nursing staff at home health agencies or monitoring services where a nurse can download the information onto report spreadsheets and forward them to the ordering physician via fax, secured internet portal or voicemail.

With some medical apps, a physician could view the information right on their smart phone and easily contact the home health agency or the patient to make adjustments to their medications.

At the next patient visit, the doctor will have available a concise data report with multiple readings from different parts of the day that provides a better understanding on how the medication(s) are working for the patient and make better decisions on the needed dosage.

The wireless wave will represent a great opportunity for both patients and medical entities with the realized efficiencies of care plus provide a boost to the local IT industry which will be called upon to support these wireless environments.

Javier Vasquez is Executive Director of the Cameron-Willacy Counties Medical Society and an experienced medical practice manager.

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VETERANS CONTRIBUTE TO LOCAL ECONOMY

by Carlos Gutierrez

Beyond their service to the country, entrepreneurial veterans also make valuable, economic contributions throughout the United States, the State of Texas and most definitely, here in the Rio Grande Valley.

According to the 2007 U.S. Census Survey of Business Owners (SBO) Report, there were 199,476 veteran-owned businesses in Texas with sales receipts of 95 million dollars. Locally, 6,744 of those veteran-owned businesses showed sales of \$2,816,768!

Undeniably, the Rio Grande Valley has flourished in the last few years due in part to an increase in population but also to an upsurge in successful business development, including in veteran-owned enterprises – defined as such when 51% or more of the company is owned by a veteran.

Despite their commercial triumphs, veteran-owned businesses today face hurdles like that of any enterprise: lack of funding and lack of sales. Funding itself has been enormously hindered by a depressed global and national economy. Even though interest rates are lower than they have ever been, business

loans are extremely difficult to obtain. This puts a capital burden on veteran-owned businesses, making it extraordinarily challenging to expand or employ more workers.

To assist veterans with business ownership challenges, The University of Texas-Pan American Veterans Business Outreach Center (VBOC) provides business counseling and training in a variety of topics, including marketing, management, operations and government contracting. These services are free and beneficial for any veteran-owned business, but especially for at-risk companies.

Presently, many veteran-owned businesses greatly need comprehensive plans to start or continue operating in a depressed market with limited funds. The VBOC works closely with these business owners and provides them with the resources and tools to implement in these difficult, economic times. It is also important that Veteran-owned businesses seek help to develop strategies to adapt to erratic market conditions in order to maintain long-term profitability.

As mentioned previously, a large majority of veteran-owned businesses are in need either of seed

capital or working capital. VBOC business advisors also help owners prepare financial statements and loan packages for submission to lending institutions. Financing information on micro-lenders and regional lenders as well as on U.S. SBA secured loans - such as the Patriot Express that is developed specifically for Veterans, is provided in all business counseling sessions.

Unquestionably, the contributions of veterans to this country and the region are ongoing and enduring, especially if they also own successful businesses. This Veterans Day, the VBOC extends its appreciation and gratitude to all veterans and invites veteran-owned businesses to visit the VBOC for business assistance as they venture forth in their entrepreneurial journeys.

Veteran Carlos Gutierrez is the director for The University of Texas-Pan American Veterans Business Outreach Center (VBOC), a component of the Business Development & Innovation Group at The University of Texas-Pan American (UTPA) in Edinburg. For further information on VBOC services, please call (956) 665-8931.




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BROTHERS' BUSINESS BUILT ON WOODS

By Eileen Mattei

When brothers Dennis and Larry Seal started South Texas Moulding in 1980, it was a good time to be getting into business, Larry Seal recalled. Dennis, a hobbyist woodworker, had noticed that no one in the Valley was supplying wood mouldings for interiors. The brothers started off with a small millwork shop in Mission. "Our first load of rough-sawn pine had scorched edges, a remnant of the forests leveled by the eruption of Mount St. Helens," Larry Seal said.

Business grew, prompting South Texas Moulding to branch out into hardwood lumber, and in 1983 to relocate to Donna and add new machinery. This production facility has grown to include over 50,000 square feet of covered production space and storage areas in five buildings.

"Things have changed. Over the years, we became very proficient at making and providing mouldings and hardwood lumber," said Seal, seated in the company's distinctive offices which showcase a wide selection of window arches and walls paneled

in maple and red oak. "Our next step was the stair business, and after that was hardwood plywood. I venture to say we have more plywood varieties in this one store than anybody else south of San Antonio and Houston. The same goes for moulding." South Texas is a specialist in hardwoods, mouldings and cabinetry hardware like slides and hinges. They also stock solid core interior doors and pocket doors.

Inside the warehouse, racks loaded with different sizes of oak, ash, walnut, maple, mahogany, cherry, alder and poplar plywood stretch into the distance. The moulding inventory, manufactured on site, forms steep sided triangles that group together standard shapes and lengths of maple, red oak and popular mouldings. Mesquite, walnut and other premium



Dennis Seal keeps millwork production on track at South Texas Moulding. (VBR)

woods are also available. "If we don't have it, we've got a good source for it," Seal noted.

Dennis Seal runs the production side; Larry Seal handles administration, and they both get involved in sales. A third brother, Lock, runs the Corpus Christi

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store. South Texas Moulding also has stores in Brownsville, Mission and Laredo, but all moulding production is done in Donna.

Nevertheless, the state of the construction business has impacted South Texas Moulding's business. "It's terrible," said Seal. "If it weren't for remodels, it would be tough. But it seems like everybody is redoing their kitchens, bathrooms or bedrooms. They are small orders but they add up. Honestly business

has picked up since school started. It always does; people are back from vacation." That means more contractors are bringing in their clients to have them choose the woods or cabinetry hardware. The company is also sending more wood to cabinet shops and is supplying Mexican customers who are building in the U.S.

"We've been through rougher times, like 1987 and 1988. Then we got down to five people," Seal said. "You play the hand you're dealt. It's just business. We've been lucky that we've got all the stores, so we pretty much cover the region from Del Rio to Corpus."

Most of the employees at STM are trained on the job. "We've been fortunate in being able to find good people. We hire them because they like working, and then they appreciate working with wood," he said.

In the millwork shop for specialty orders, millworkers have just finished a series of wooden brackets embossed with rosettes, complete with bar code stickers. On the production floor under Dennis Seal's supervision, workers are running lumber through a variety of computer-controlled machines that plane and mill and rout long planks. The shop also fabricates



Larry Seal inspects a plank emerging from a planer. (VBR)

stair treads, stair landings and balusters out of specified woods. A huge dust collection system pulls sawdust from each machine and accumulates it. Sawdust and chopped-up wood scraps are sold to stables.

South Texas Moulding now employs 49, but only one of them is a second generation Seal. "It only takes one," said Larry Seal, referring to 30 year-old Dyver Lock who works in the Donna store. "The family can handle working together because each one has a facet of the business that they really enjoy and are interested in."



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NATURE TOURISTS HAVE TRIPLED IN 15 YEARS

By Eileen Mattei

“We’ve known that nature tourism had a huge economic impact on the area; we just didn’t realize how big it really is,” said Keith Hackland, owner of the Alamo Inn B&B and a member of the South Texas Nature Marketing Coop (STNMC). A new Texas A&M Nature Tourism survey, commissioned by STNMC, revealed that approximately 2.3 million people each year visit Cameron and Hidalgo counties specifically because of watchable wildlife. They observe some of the Valley’s birds (a phenomenal 500-plus species), butterflies and other creatures.

Over \$300 million is spent annually in the Rio Grande Valley by visitors who come specifically to bird or engage in other watchable nature activities. The survey calculated a nature tourists’ stay is an average of five days, they spend \$127 per day and return to the region multiple times.

Nature tourism has much greater economic impact on the Rio Grande than residents realize, according to Nancy Millar, who heads the McAllen CVB and the multi-county STNMC. “In fact, nature tourism is the



only growing sector of the tourism industry, which is Texas’ second largest industry after energy.” Yet the current generation of municipal and regional leaders along with the general public are largely unaware of

Nature tourists flock to the Valley to see birds like chachalacas, pygmy owls, and green jays that they can’t see in other parts of the U.S. (Keith Hackland)

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the significant economic impact that nature tourism has on Valley jobs, businesses and sales tax revenue.

That’s why the STNMC decided to invest a good portion of their shoestring budget in a new survey that would update nature tourism statistics. The previous survey, completed 15 years ago, no longer presented an accurate portrait of the dollars, pesos and euros that nature tourism brings to border communities. The survey reported that birders and other nature tourists have higher incomes and higher education levels than the average tourists. Because of the increased number of nature loving tourists, the survey stated that the visitors are spending three times more money in the border counties than was spent 15 years ago.

Nature tourists are not just tree huggers, explained Martha Noell, President/CEO of the Weslaco Chamber of Commerce and STNMC member. “Nature tourism is a huge job and economic development generator. The money goes directly into the community, to restaurants, hotels, gas stations and admission fees that support the sites themselves. The numbers revealed by the survey are way more than we anticipated. We want to get that information to new EDC boards and elected officials who have no concept of what nature tourism means to their community.”

The birds of the Valley, publicized by years of strong national and international marketing efforts, have made the Valley famous nationally and interna-

tionally as one of the U.S.'s premier birding destinations. Doubtters only have to visit the region's wildlife refuges at Santa Ana and Laguna Atascosa, the nine World Birding Centers and the three state parks and listened to the range of accents and languages of the people lifting binoculars to watch a green jay, chachalaca or groove billed-ani.

Conducted during May and June, the off-peak time of the year for birding, the survey found that 23 percent of all leisure visitors to Cameron and Hidalgo County travel to the Valley specifically to enjoy nature tourism. Since the initial survey dealt with off-peak nature tourists (it excluded beach-focused tourists and local residents), the results are considered very conservative numbers. A second TAMU survey is now underway to catch nature tourists at the start of the peak birding season, which includes the RGV Birding Festival November 9-13.

"Nature tourism is good news: it is creating jobs," said Hackland, whose B&B caters to birders. "It also puts a value on 'wild lands.' Ranchers and other habitat owners are discovering that nature travelers will pay to visit photo blinds and tour wild areas on their properties."

South Texas Nature Marketing Coop discovered that the international market is untapped and has been pursuing European birders and luring them to South Texas with the variety of bird species seen here. "We're telling them the Valley is the richest place for birds and it's friendly people," said Hackland. STNMC (whose partners include Alamo, Edinburg, Harlingen, Hidalgo, Houston, McAllen, Mission, Port Aransas, South Padre, Weslaco and Willacy County) hosts journalists from European publications who have been spreading the word about nature watching opportunities on the border. Currently British, German and Swedish tour agencies are arranging tours to the area, which is sparking a call for guides to lead birding tours. Martha Noell said when she hears British and European accents in Weslaco restaurants, she knows the travelers have come for the birding.

Millar said the South Texas nature market is perfectly positioned to attract an emerging demographic. "Retiring baby boomers are looking at different options than their predecessors," she said. "They want more soft adventures, and we are poised to take advantage of that."

For the full report visit www.southtexasnature.com.



Golden-fronted woodpeckers nest in the Rio Grande Valley. (Keith Hackland)

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THE HOSPITALS OF EDINBURG

By Eileen Mattei

Edinburg's first hospital opened in 1916 in the Montgomery family's home. Within 10 years that had been supplanted by a three-story municipal hospital. Now the Hidalgo County seat has three acute care, state of the art hospitals serving an ever-growing population. The hospitals combine high quality patient care with advanced technologies. Each is surrounded by medical offices and ancillary services.

PHYSICIAN OWNED

The largest physician-owned hospital in the United States, Doctors Hospital at Renaissance dominates the area around the intersection of McColl Road and Dove. Managed by actively practicing doctors, Doctors Hospital began as an outpatient surgical center in 1997. Today DHR has 506 beds and provides a full range of medical and surgical services with over 450 physicians seeing approximately 150,000 patients there each year. The hospital's individual facilities include the Women's Hospital, the Wound

Care Center, the Cancer Center, the Rehab Center, the diabetes center, and the Behavioral Center as well as five freestanding Imaging Centers across the Valley. The Emergency Room now has 21 beds and four fast track beds, complementing its in-depth specialty coverage in the ER. A Pediatric Medical Tower provides pediatric ICU and oncology services.

Doctors Hospital has the greatest nurse to patient ratio in the valley, with more personnel per patient than any other regional hospital, said DHR spokeswoman Kelli Owen. DHR was the first in the region to offer robotic surgical procedures because of physicians advocating for early adoption. DHR has been frequently cited as one of the top 20 medium sized hospitals in the nation.

"We treat anyone who walks in door," added Owen, who noted that 75 percent of their patients receive either Medicare or Medicaid. In 2008, the hospital provided \$13 million in care to uninsured persons, following a conscious decision to provide this care. In 2009, the average employee was paid \$29 per hour. The combined payroll and local purchase

of products and services created an economic impact of \$1.1 billion in a recent year.

CARING FOR KIDS

The child's toy-block design and colorful exterior of Edinburg Children's Hospital convey theme-park happiness to the family approaching the five-year-old facility. South Texas Health System, which manages Edinburg Children's Hospital, invested \$25 million to build and equip deep south Texas's only free-standing children's hospital, in acknowledgement of the region's very young and rapidly increasing population.

The 107-bed comprehensive pediatric facility provides the region's only pediatric Emergency Room, with equipment designed for little ones' bodies, and a staff of 101 pediatric specialists. Bright interior murals lighten the atmosphere while children are being diagnosed and treated. The hospital takes advantage of two operating suites dedicated to pediatric surgery in Edinburg Regional Medical Center immediately adjacent. Children from Cameron, Starr and

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The Edinburg Regional Medical Center and Edinburg Children's Hospital provide acute medical care to distinct populations. (South Texas Health System)

Hidalgo counties are treated in Edinburg by pediatric staff using advanced technology. It allows families to access general pediatric care, diagnostic cardiology and surgical services without leaving the Valley.

The Children's Hospital has been rated as an Asthma Center of Excellence, the first hospital in Texas to achieve that standing and only the second in the nation, said Steven Foster, interim CEO of both hospitals on the Edinburg campus. That's an important advance for the region's pediatric population. "We have taken extra steps and established protocols to treat asthma with the best standards of practice to assure the best outcomes for our patients," he said. Protocols cover the care of young asthma patients from the time they arrive at the Emergency Department or are picked up by EMS and continue through their treatment and rehabilitation procedures. "We expect to bring new programs in, especially for Children's with the recruitment of unique specialties."

Children's also has one of the Valley's two Ronald McDonald Family Rooms. This refuge of calm and quiet is just steps away from the sick child's room. It gives parents a place to shower, rest, and fix a snack during the day.

With Edinburg Children's Hospital next door, Edinburg Regional Medical Center is able to provide the sole adults-only Emergency Room in the region. That makes the ER a relatively calmer place, without scared and crying children. The 130-bed, four story acute care hospital includes a Chest Pain Center, with Cycle III accreditation from the Society of Chest Pain Centers. ERMCC has also received accreditation as a Stroke Center, and when necessary can connect patients to its sister facility, McAllen Heart Hospital. Between the two hospitals, 504 physicians have staff privileges. The website states that "Every employee receives service excellence training and personally pledges to put our patients' needs first."

ERMCC's 24-bed inpatient rehabilitation unit is important to the community because of the segment of the population that may suffer from strokes, diabetes and other diseases that affect mobility and daily living. It is also the only inpatient rehab that takes pediatric patients. "The major reason for the rehabilitation unit is to make sure we help our patients regain their mobility," said Foster. He predicted the hospitals would continue to grow with the city.

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EN ROUTE ON INTERSTATE 69: 230 MILES

By Carlos Cascos, Cameron County Judge and Ramon Garcia, Hidalgo County Judge

Late this year the first official Interstate 69 signs will go up on I-37 and US 77 west of Corpus Christi, pointing motorists toward the Lower Rio Grande Valley. That stretch is part of more than 230 miles of the I-69 route in Texas that is already at freeway standard. US 77, US 281 and US 59 are being incrementally transformed into Interstate 69, a process that has been underway for decades. Construction projects are underway or soon will be at Falfurrias, Encino, George West, Lyford, Kingsville, Sinton and SH 550 in Brownsville. Two more projects are extending the US 59 Eastex Freeway north of Houston. In the past few years freeway upgrade projects have been completed on US 281 and US 77 at Alice, Ben Bolt, Kingsville, Robstown and Sinton. In some locations right-of-way needed for the future interstate was acquired decades ago. And for years the Texas Department of Transportation has been designing and constructing upgrade projects to meet interstate design standards.

The Federal Highway Administration has approved adding a 6.2-mile section of US 77 freeway north of

Robstown to the Interstate Highway System. More I-69 signs will be added next year on a 75-mile section of existing US 59 freeway north from Rosenberg through Houston and on into East Texas. Plans are being put in place that will extend the Interstate Highway System to the Lower Rio Grande Valley sooner instead of later. An environmental review is nearing completion and progress has been made on funding to fill in the missing pieces of US 77. The goal of eliminating all stops on US 281 north of Hidalgo County is now being rapidly achieved thanks to the determined effort of Valley leaders over the past decade.

We know how important it is for our communities to be served by an interstate highway and that message has been heard clearly in Austin and Washington. Every member of the U.S. House and U.S. Senate from Texas has signed on to co-sponsor a bill that will authorize Texas to post Interstate 69 signs on portions of US 77, US 59 and US 281 that already meet interstate standards but do not yet connect to the existing interstate system. This would include about 80 miles of existing US 77 and US 281 freeway in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. One version of the bill would also add the existing US 83 freeway between Harlingen and McAllen to the congress-

sionally designated I-69 route. Large sections of 900 miles of I-69 routes in Texas are now safer to drive because they meet interstate highway standards. With each overpass and every additional mile of I-69 upgrades, new doors open for economic development, new jobs and more efficient freight movements. Reduced travel times create new opportunities for families, giving them improved access to better jobs, university campuses, regional medical centers, shopping and greater recreational choices.

The US 77, US 281 and US 59 upgrade program has had strong local support for decades. Five regional segment committees made up of dozens of local officials and community representatives have been at work the past two years developing recommendations including which improvements should come first in each region. This fall the committees are seeking public input and their combined work will be assembled in a master plan to help guide the incremental development of Interstate 69 over the coming decade.

The Alliance for I-69 Texas is a coalition of cities, counties, port authorities and community leaders fighting for completion of I-69 in Texas. Since it was formed in 1994, the Alliance has provided sustained leadership and Cameron and Hidalgo counties have been helping lead the charge. That work continued in the recent session of the Texas Legislature. Because Texas faces an ongoing highway funding crisis, fresh alternatives to traditional project development are essential. The Alliance supported successful legislation that expands the authority of cities and counties to set up transportation reinvestment zones (TRZ) to build transportation projects. Additional or incremental tax revenue that is generated in the zone because the road project is built is captured and used to pay for the project. It does not involve any new taxes. Other approved legislation confirms the state's willingness to allow public-private partnerships to build some major highway projects with specific legislative approval. The Alliance strongly supports having these financing tools available.

The Texas population will continue to grow and with growth will come more manufacturers, more product distribution centers, more freight moving across the Rio Grande, more tonnage through our seaports and more families heading for their destinations. With our partners in the Alliance for I-69 Texas we are committed to securing funding that will keep us moving steadily toward the day when the entire I-69 Texas route is part of the Interstate Highway System. Each of the communities it touches will realize the full benefit of Interstate 69 only when it is completed as a seamless expressway from the Lower Rio Grande Valley to Houston and on to Texarkana.

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DETERMINATION PAVES THE WAY FOR FAMILY

By Heather Cathleen Cox

Kung Fu is more than just a martial art. It's a way of life, especially for Scott Kimak, owner of Harlingen Fine Arts Studio (HFAS), located on Business 83 in Harlingen. Originally from Chicago, Kimak's passion for Kung Fu began when he was a 5-year-old boy. When he came to the Valley in 1995, he opened a Kung Fu studio, teaching afternoons and evenings after his full-time job. In 1999, Kimak was a silver medalist at a national Kung Fu competition.

Seven years ago, Kimak's manufacturing job left town. Since his wife, Diana, was working as a teacher, the Kimaks decided that Scott would pursue teaching Kung Fu full-time. Two years later, the Kimaks found and purchased the building which now houses his studio where nearly 300 students from across the Valley take lessons.

Kimak said, "The main emphasis of Martial Arts is determination. You can apply what you learn in Martial Arts to anything you do. The determination it takes to excel and be successful here will translate into anything else you do." While there are different practices or styles of Kung Fu, at HFAS, Kimak teaches Northern Shaolin, Eagle Claw, Tai Chi and Brazilian Jiu Jitsu.

Roughly half of the students at HFAS are involved in the cheer squad, South Texas Xtreme. Initially, Kimak's vision for the studio was singularly focused on Kung Fu, but his wife, Director of South Texas Xtreme, had a much broader vision. "I give so much credit to Diana. My expertise is in Kung Fu, but she was a high school cheerleader in Elsa," Kimak said. Expanding the business to include cheerleading, tumbling and dance "...was her brain child. I'm just the one who came up with the money," he added with a grin.

South Texas Xtreme is one of the few cheer competition squads in the lower Valley. In its two years of existence, it has brought home two national championship victories, even taking second place at the 2011 Varsity All-Levels International Championship. Currently, South Texas Xtreme consists of four squads which are broken up by age and level. They're planning to expand.

The huge success of HFAS is due to a group effort. "I have to give a lot of credit to the cheer and tumble coaches. My entire family pitches in and helps out, too. It's a team effort. I couldn't do it all by myself," Kimak said. He noted the studio only hires the absolute best cheer and tumble coaches, most of who live many miles outside of Harlingen's city limits.

Zumba is the most recent addition to the array of arts taught. The success of the class is due in part to the parents who are taking advantage of an opportunity to enjoy a workout themselves while waiting for their child to learn

Kung Fu or attend cheer practice.

With HFAS open from 4:00 to 9:30 p.m. every day and teaching students cheerleading, tumbling, several styles of Kung Fu and dance, the Kimaks and their four children (all of whom are involved in tumbling and/or Kung Fu) keep a crazy schedule. That, however, won't keep Scott Kimak from broadening HFAS's horizon. "We have to keep making the place better. This winter, we'll be black-topping the parking lot and putting air conditioning in the back," where the spacious cheer/tumble annex is located. "A lot of the money that we make gets put right back into the building, and it really pays off. We just keep expanding."

The Kimaks have emphasized the overall safety of the equipment HFAS owns. "Safer equipment is very expensive, but as the studio keeps expanding, more students will benefit and excel. We're going to keep going for gold," Kimak added with utmost confidence.

One of the most rewarding parts of being able to do what he loves—teaching Kung Fu and offering an arena for lifetime fitness and wellness—lies in the relationships built with the children who enroll in classes. "My wife and I offer these children a great form of exercise. It keeps them off the streets, out of trouble and teaches them life skills

like how to work together as a team and how to shoot for the sky without letting anything hold them back."

"Yes, there are other martial arts schools out there. Come by and see us, and then I recommend that you go and check out the competition.

See the difference," Kimak said. The first class at HFAS

is free. "As word gets out, hopefully the school will keep growing." From the momentum the Kimaks have already established, there's every reason to expect this will be the case.

For more information call 425-2468 or visit www.south-texasxtreme.com.



Kung Fu champion and instructor Scott Kimak. (Heather Cox)

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THE GREAT ESCAPE - WESTIN LA CANTERA

By Eileen Mattei

When you need to get away and relax in a big way, the Westin La Cantera Resort in San Antonio works magic that makes the busy world go away. Perched on a hill overlooking San Antonio, the luxurious resort welcomes guests to a haven with no obligations, no time tables. The Hill Country oasis exudes an atmosphere of welcome and relaxation from its main building, modeled on the King Ranch's Big House, to the two championship golf courses that roll through the native landscaping. The hallmark of La Cantera is impeccable service, Texas-friendly style. It's an addictive amenity you get used to rapidly.

La Cantera's luxury ranch ambiance begins in the lobby which overlooks San Saba Plaza and its water gardens lush with ferns, lilies and dwarf papyrus. A young magician wanders past guests checking in, and his sleight of hand tricks bring grins of amazement from all ages.

Open a door from the lobby to slip into the quiet retreat of the Esparza Library and sink into one of the leather couches or comfortable chairs, surrounded by

bookcases with borrow-able volumes, dominos and chess sets.

The five Lost Quarry pools tempt guests for an immersion in a landscaped setting. The sports, activity and main pools are heated in the cooler seasons. The fire pit next to the pools is the scene of early evening S'mores, free for all ages, as are most family activities.

Drop into La Cantera's Texas wine tasting and delight in the bounty of one of the nation's major wine producing states. Then drift into Brannon's Café for a dinner of flatiron steak with chorizo and cheddar cake or venture way past comfort food to the savory Adult Mac N Cheese with wild mushrooms and pancetta.

Under the stars, slip into the Lost Quarry's long, hot tub. Catch a glimpse of San Antonio twinkling



The Grille at the Palmer Course overlooks the championship links. (VBR)

below before catching up on your sleep in the comforts of your well-appointed resort room.

In the bright cool morning, wander past the Yoga on the Lawn group and the cenizo rimming the patio to venture onto the Nature Trail. In a few steps along the wide, mulched path and presto! the outside world disappears. Junipers, oaks and mountain laurels shade the easy mile trek through gently rolling hills dotted with interpretive signs.

Take your relaxation seriously by booking massages and body and beauty treatments at the Castle Rock Spa. Serenity envelops you as wait next to orchids and a trickling fountain in the dimly lit Tranquility Room.

Castle Rock's menu of spa services includes the Rosemary Mint Awakening, a sybaritic massage and body wrap. The guest is smoothed, softened and warmed with peppermint and rosemary oils followed by a bone-melting foot and scalp massage that opens the door to nirvana. The Texas Wine Makers massage pampers you to a fare-thee-well and includes a glass of Texas wine. The Castle Rock Lavender Body Polish exfoliates, softens and polishes. You get the picture: seductive pleasures that prompt you to book a second experience.

After-lunch options include stretching out and doing nothing or, if you feel re-energized, actively indulging in a treat. What appeals to you most: a round of championship golf on the Palmer Course or the Resort Course with landscapes that recall the Scottish highlands? How does world class shopping sound? You can hop aboard La Cantera's complimentary shuttle that delivers you in five minutes to The Shops



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at La Cantera. Later on, in the convivial nooks of Steinheimer's Lounge, settle in with one of 50 classic cocktails. Bartending is celebrated as a craft here and only fresh juices are used.

Francesca's at Sunset is the crown jewel of La Cantera, positioned to capture the beauty of sunset and twilight in the hill country. Every element of service, ambiance and food blends to make a dinner



The luxury resort Westin La Cantera pampers guests with impeccable but friendly service, Texas-style. (VBR)

here a truly memorable event. The sommelier, for example, shares his love of wine, unobtrusively aiding your enjoyment of the restaurant's cellar.

Francesca's menu reflects a farm to table philosophy of using locally grown foods whenever possible. Whatever the ingredients, every dish is outstanding in presentation and flavors. The gazpacho made with almond milk, sundried tomatoes and crushed almonds is a heavenly blend of tastes. The entrees range from an antelope chop Diane to the house favorite, the corn-crepe lobster enchilada. It's impossible to leave one drop of that sublime sauce on your plate. People tend to linger over dinner, unwilling to break the spell of a perfect evening.

Yet there is still so much to do: use the Castle Rock Health club's 7,600 square foot cardio and weight training fitness center. Take a class at the Golf Academy at La Cantera. Catch a free Zoomagination show and pet a huge iguana or clingy sloth. Listen to the giggle of kids as Scooby Doo talks to them at the Looney Tunes Breakfast at Brannon's. Hear Dinosaur George's story of Texas dinosaurs and fossils. Play tennis.

It's certainly true that you can relax and restore your mind, body and spirit at La Cantera. You can



Francesca's at Sunset boasts a remarkable wine cellar and a amiable sommelier. (VBR)

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THE ONES WHO MADE IT

By Susan LeMiles Holmes

Did you know that only 27.8 percent of students entering community colleges graduate within three years? Most never graduate at all. The ones that do make it have won hard individual battles, each overcoming multiple reasons to not quit.

They might have started out with a language barrier and been imbued with fearful family values that begged them not to change, or reach out, or do something that would surely take them away from home. An even harder war is breaking free from a gang culture that already has jobs for them.....dangerous ones.

Then they had to face finding financial aid, going into debt, not having a computer or transportation, having two jobs, three kids and homework, all to arrive and find that high school has not prepared them for the academic challenges of college. That means remedial courses and it is estimated that 58 percent of two-year college students must take at least one of them.

Once a semester, I want to introduce you to 80

students from Texas State Technical College who made it. They ran the gauntlet and are ready to take the last step to enter the work force. Remember your first job interview? Jitters, sweaty palms, tangled tongue, fear of the unknown, terrified of rejection? The next step for The Ones Who Made It is the same step you yourself had to take.....the job interview.

TSTC Career Services sponsors an Interview Practicum once a semester. Our objective is to give students an opportunity to have three simulated job interviews, learn from them and have no negative consequences. Some participants are receiving class credit, but many more come because they want to do their best.

Each semester we recruit 40 volunteers from the business community to conduct these interviews and be Interview Coaches for a morning. For many of the students, it will be the very first time they verbally express what they have learned and what they know how to do. They will have to answer that most difficult of all questions, "Tell me about yourself."

The reason kids go to college is to get a job AND to become "job ready." The business community's

Author Susan LeMiles Holmes (courtesy)



participation in preparing them for the future means more than you will ever know. The Interview Coach's job is to give each participant the experience of having to shake hands with a stranger who is a business person, present himself with a resume and to look someone in the eye and say, "I'm ready to enter the adult work world."

Interview Coaches will receive orientation on a standard interview outline, what to expect from the students and how to evaluate the interview. Students are very curious as to how they are perceived and they really want to understand how to improve. Coaches will be asked to give direct, objective, kind feedback to the student immediately following the interview. The student leaves the coach's table with the evaluation fresh in his mind and gets to put the suggestions to work immediately in the next round of interviews.

If you want to feel good about the future workforce; if you are curious and want to meet The Ones Who Made It, volunteer to be an Interview Coach. Interview Practicum events are scheduled for the current academic year on November 9, 2011, March 21, 2012 and July 10, 2012. They are held at TSTC's Cultural Arts Center from 8:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) defines Workforce Development as "ensuring that tomorrow's workforce has the skills, competencies and behaviors to succeed in the workplace." They openly acknowledge that two-year institutions are a critical key to our economy's profitability and competitive advantage. Workforce Development is a big job, and everyone in America is needed to get this country going again.

If you could help with this invaluable gift to The Valley's future workforce, please contact our TSTC Career Services coordinator, Josie.Saldivar@harlingen.tstc.edu or 956-364-4131.

Susan LeMiles Holmes is Director of Career Services at Texas State Technical College and a published novelist. You can inquire about hiring TSTC graduates by emailing susan.holmes@harlingen.tstc.edu

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WELCOME HOME WINTER TEXANS

By Fawn Foudray-Golich

As people get older, "they just have this sense, this feeling, that time is going faster than they are," said Warren H. Meck, a psychology professor at Duke University. This seems to be true across cultures, across time, all over the world. No one is sure where this sensation originates. Scientists have theories, of course, and one of them is that when you encounter something for the very first time, more elements and more information get stockpiled into your memory bank.

Yes, it's true, our youngest years are chock full of innovation, but Meck pointed out that when you reach your 60s and 70s, experiences get more precious. Once again you remember all the details. So take this "fresh" description for why time moves faster as you age and evaluate it as you will.

"By knowing the above, we can gain a closer look and get more actively involved with our senior winter residents," said Kristi Collier, founder and publisher of Welcome Home, RGV. When the mercury drops and snowflakes start blowing, retirees head south. This phenomenon is gaining momentum because of the aging Baby Boomer population. Their annual migration affects everything from the states they travel through to city government. The Rio Grande Valley's new generation of Winter Texans brings over \$800 million to the Valley during their stay.

Four years ago, Kristi Collier, a native Valley girl and self-made entrepreneur from McAllen, discovered this niche quite by accident. Several years before, she had started a coupon book business, sold novelty items and then published a directory to help winter visitors find the services they desired. The hard copy directory and the online directory of Welcome Home RGV have grown to include real estate listings, columns, event calendars and jobs for Winter Texans, converted Texans and natives. Collier became actively involved with RV park First Responder programs, park managers, activity directors and residents. She earned their adoring title of 'Winter Texan Chamber of Commerce.'

"As a destination location, we must make sure we provide ample services to meet their seasonal demands and a better understanding of this up-and-coming population," Collier said. Since these part-time residents hold on to residency in their home state (or Canada) while they travel, they are not included in the local population estimates or year round responsibilities as are year-round residents. Additionally, they are not part of the overall tourist population since they typically stay much longer than vacation or business visitors.

(continued on page 27)



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Pictured: SpawGlass Team Member Mike (left) and South-Texas Regional President Rene Capistran (right) congratulate the 2011 SpawGlass Fishing Tournament Grand Champion team: Kale Fosal, Shawn Glass, Rick Guerrero and Sandy Guerrero.

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VISTA SUMMIT – ECONOMICS OF EDUCATION

By Eileen Mattei

“Economies are like ecosystems. Getting groups together to cooperate on strategies is the smart way to go,” said Bruce Katz of the Brookings Institution at the Vista Summit held at the University of Texas at Brownsville. Katz put the goals of the economic and education-focused Vista Summit in a nutshell: entities in the region must work together in order to develop its full economic potential.

Katz said the Rio Grande Valley has the opportunity to follow an emerging economic model, one driven by exports, fueled by innovation and products manufactured here. He repeated the importance of exports, which is one of the few bright spots in the national economy where the unemployment rate could remain near 9.9 percent “for quite some time.” Exports are the best hope, he said, because “domestic demand has been completely crippled. Our greatest competitive advantage is that we are a nation of immigrants. That will refuel us and lead us as we innovate, produce and export. That’s how wealth is created.”

Dr. Francisco Cigarroa, Chancellor of the University of Texas System, hosted the two-day conference attended by academic, healthcare and community leaders. The objective was to get those sectors talking and working together, partnered in the development of a more educated, healthier and, therefore, wealthier population. Higher education is viewed as the key driver of economic development in the Valley.

Making sure everyone gets a good education is now an economic necessity, not just a nice thing to do, one speaker pointed out. Dr. Nancy Cantor, Chancellor of Syracuse University, described the role a committed university can play as the anchor institution in promoting a community’s innovations and opportunities, both educational and economic. “Hope is essential; so is information,” she said.

Cantor’s recommendation for full institutional involvement elicited a response from UTPA professor Francisco Guajardo. “Most of us in universities are only minimally engaged in what’s happening outside



Alonzo Cantu described the impact that a caring teacher had on his life. (VBR)

the university walls,” he said. Although he has become involved in Edinburg civic issues, Guajardo was surprised there are no formal pathways for engagement. The centuries-old separation of town-and-gown still exists, with neither side sharing their knowledge and expertise.

The focus of Valley-wide leadership is critical, and the UT campuses are taking the lead to increase cohesiveness and networking. Dr. Cigarroa said the UT System supports the synergy of UTPA and UTB in striving for regional cooperation. The universities will be joined by the UT Medical School to be built in Harlingen. “Few educational ecosystems are like this, so young. Rarely do you see this sense of urgency,” he said.

Partnerships between education and business are projected to propel the Valley to the core through a commitment of education, medicine and technology. Fred Rusteberg, IBC chairman, described an existing partnership. United Brownsville is a comprehensive city wide plan to upgrade education, healthcare, infrastructure and the environment through the collaboration of businesses, agencies, schools and resources.

Medical training programs and increased attention to healthcare are essential for economic development. Dr. Rose Gowan, a local physician affiliated with UTB’s School of Public Health, described the costs to a community when 80 percent of the population is overweight or obese. “It’s a community of low achievement,” she said, noting that workforce losses from the effects of diabetes appear to be trending even higher.

MEDICAL SCHOOL RESPONSIBILITIES

“Everybody outside of the Valley looks at the region as a single entity. If we could outlaw city limits and

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county lines, there is no limit to what we can do,” said Randy Whittington. The Harlingen attorney heads the Southwest Texas Medical Foundation which is pulling together the myriad elements that will transform the three Valley RAHC campuses into a four year UT medical school. “What local elected officials can do is understand what it means to have a medical school and health science center in their community, and understand what it means to have that responsibility. If we create a medical school, we can do it in a 21st century way. We’ve got the resources and the capacity few other areas have to do something different.” For economic development, the medical school complex has to be comprehensive with research, clinical and residency programs.

The UT system has committed to plans for the Rio Grande Valley, according to UT Vice Chancellor David Prior. First up, UT will establish the UTEACH Institute in January at UTB and UTPA. The goal is to produce 700 new science, technology, engineering and math teachers by 2021. UT also has funded \$9.5 million for faculty and researcher recruitment at UTPA and UTB. A \$10 million simulated teaching hospital, shared by the two universities and the RAHC is expected to be a catalyst building up to the medical school. UT will be

investing \$4 million at each of the RAHC, UTPA, UTB and Laredo campuses in biomedical research programs. Other initiatives are planned with the long term goal of development of human capital.

“Without collaboration, cooperation and synergy this will fail,” said Prior. UTPA president Robert Nelsen agreed: “no more Friday night fights. There is too much at stake.” UTB President Juliet Garcia said she wants UTB to be known as producing the most STEM teachers.

Community and technical colleges, called the workhorses of higher education, are preparing students for technology-based careers and can expect closer ties to the UT system, Dr. Cigarroa said. “We need to work together to find synergy. I believe in South Texas and the Rio Grande Valley. One of the reasons I became chancellor is to play a small role in influencing the allocation of resources...You have my commitment that by working together, we will make great things happen here.”



UT Chancellor Dr. Francisco Cigarroa, UTPA President Dr. Robert Nelsen, UT Brownsville President Dr. Juliet Garcia and UT Vice Chancellor David Prior listened to speakers from the Ford, Bill and Melinda Gates, Dell, Greater Texas and Lumina Foundations at the Vista Summit. (VBR)

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LEARNING TO COOK FOR FUN, PROFIT AND HEALTH

By Rebecca Sweat

Start with a successful, visionary culinary instructor. Mix in three internationally trained chefs and a handful of eager students. This recipe combines to make the International Culinary Institute-Sugar (ICI Sugar) in Pharr.

The local institute began enrolling students in April and is the Rio Grande Valley's first culinary focused private school. The Pharr location is the fifth ICI campus to be opened by director Susana Garcia and is the first in the United States. Garcia learned her love of cooking while growing up in the kitchen with her family. This passion has taken her around the world for training in some of the top culinary institutes.

"I am a cook, and I love cooking. I originally started in the kitchen to get my family healthy, which is why I decided to be a chef," Garcia said. Following the encouragement of friends and family, Garcia began teaching courses out of her home kitchen in Tampico in 1998. As her enrollment expanded to over 100 students monthly, she opened her first culinary institute. Now, ICI has two locations in Tampico, along with one in Victoria and one in Monterrey.

Garcia said she opened the culinary school in Pharr because she has enjoyed coming to the U.S. since she was a child. The

Pharr location is the first of the many culinary institutes that she hopes to open across the state of Texas.

The school currently offers three main courses in International Cuisine, Healthy Gourmet, and Baking and Pastry. Several three-week intensive courses are also scheduled throughout the year. The most recent intensive course covered Mexican Cuisine. Just in time for the holidays, ICI Sugar will offer a Christmas Dinner and Baking course. A baking intensive course is also offered several times throughout the year.

Garcia explained that the courses are not just about how to make the recipes, but that instructors also teach the history, nutrition and proper presentation of each dish. The goal of these courses is to teach students more than they would learn reading a cookbook or watching a 30-minute show on television.

Dishes from around the world are studied throughout the International Cuisine course. Students are introduced to the culture of each country, rare ingredients and learn about serving and culinary customs. The Healthy Gourmet course does not focus as much as other courses on the basics of cooking, but instead it teaches students how to make healthy choices and substitutions in their favorite dishes. This class is also becoming very popular for those with diabetes since recipes are low in sugar and calories.



Chief instructor Richard Weber plates a vegan whole wheat carrot cake in the Healthy Gourmet class. (Rebecca Sweat)

The Baking and Pastry course is becoming a popular course. Students learn to make everything from scratch and start with simpler items such as cookies and muffins before progressing to more difficult pastries and cakes. By the end of the course, students will be able create artistic cakes using fondant and advanced decorating techniques. Students in the Baking and Pastry course are also taught business basics so they can sell and market their creations.

In addition to classroom education, students also tend a garden located on the campus. Here, students organically grow many of the ingredients that are used in class.

ICI Sugar currently has three full-time instructors, each with their own area of expertise and world-class training. Programs are offered in one-year or six-month sessions and meet once per week. Classes are taught during the day, at night and on the weekends in order to accommodate students' busy schedules.

Garcia said that ICI Sugar teaches a wide variety of students. Some are serious chefs who hope to pursue further education following completion of the ICI program and others simply want to learn more about cooking. Many of her former students have been accepted to top culinary institutions throughout the U.S. and Europe. The Pharr location currently serves students from Brownsville to Rio Grande City and northern Mexico.

ICI Sugar is a member of the World Association of Chef Societies and Garcia said that her goal is for the campus to become fully accredited to offer two-year and four-year culinary programs, a process that may take two years. Although growth remains a business and personal goal, Garcia's priority is always her students. She believes if you know how to cook, you can always find employment in any economy, and to be the backbone of a family.

"Cooking knowledge is very important because you use it in your house with your family, husband and kids. Giving your family a good, healthy meal is to love them," Garcia said.

For more information about ICI Sugar, visit www.icsugar.com or call (956) 787-1221.

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(continued from page 23)



Winter Texans and Converted Texans turn to Welcome Home RGV for listings of events they'll enjoy. (Credit Kristi Collier)

“Delving into the lucrative monetary, service and indirect impacts should be of considerable interest to local government officials who want to attract these temporary residents for economic development into their city,” she said. The competition is warranted and heating up between Sunbelt cities to attract those that commute twice a year or sell their primary residence and live in a recreational vehicle. This fact dates back as far as the 1920s, when they labeled these travelers “tin can tourists.”

Today, these mobile homes can take residency in a docile desert, quiet prairie, a mountain’s edge, isolated lake front, or a South Texas trailer park where they are transformed into Winter Texans. They have choices. Snowbirds are mostly retired persons who primarily are white, married and better educated. The newer generation of winter visitors is usually healthier and looking for volunteer opportunities, cultural experiences, recreation, sporting events, tourism and entertainment activities in their host communities. They have a higher monetary status than others in their age group with typical income from pension payments, investments and social security. Additionally, many of these sources are tax sheltered or tax exempt, providing more disposable income.

These additional folks in our communities translate into economic development because of their disposable incomes. These temporary residents are likely to visit area attractions, shop local stores and malls, and dine in restaurants and so on. When this happens, the city and its merchants win from a sales tax perspective. When a city owns a golf course, museum or recreational area this translates into additional revenue generation opportunities. While the tax benefits may be attractive, it is important to remember the changes caused by the temporary change in population. Whether they drive RVs or cars, trucks with pull-trailers or Class A motor homes, winter visitors increase the number of vehicle lane miles driven across the Valley, translating into increased street maintenance from bearing more weight.

From water and power supplies to internets at the library and activities in the senior centers, destination cities are learning from their experiences in welcoming winter visitors. As service demands have grown, so have our communities.

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