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VBR

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What You See is What You Do

The new year brings the time for organizing our system and strategies, planning new projects, scheduling personnel, setting 2015 deadlines, and much more. Do we prioritize our agenda of annual, quarterly and monthly tasks? Or do we fly by the seat of our pants and hope for the best?

We all have systems to plan our duties, delegate some tasks and manage to fit in our personal responsibilities. Is there room for tweaking the system so it all runs more efficiently? Certainly.

Simplicity is often the most productive plan but also the most frequently overlooked. Start with breaking the formula down into the most common denominator. How do you plan tomorrow, next week, the upcoming quarter and the entire year? From smart phones to tablets, laptops, desktops or yellow legal pads, we each have preferred

TO DO...		Date
Work	Personal	
Appts/Meetings	1) Dry Cleaning	
1)	2) Car Maintenance	
2)	3) Personal Errands	
3)	4) Kids' Practice	
4)	5) Calls	
Calls		
1) --> 10)		
Projects		
1)		
2)		
3)		

means of setting appointments, itemizing work tasks and keeping up with personal/family activities. Simplicity suggests a structured, easily accessible and updatable one-pager that serves as a ritualistic action plan.

Since we have a zillion things rushing through our heads on an hourly basis, it is not humanly possible (speaking from experience) to remember everything. Whether opting for an electronic or paper version, you should have a priority-based list of duties/appointments/activities separated into business on one side and personal on the other. This will help achieve short-term and long-term goals, while keeping the home front content as well. It only takes one time of forgetting to pick up Mija or Mijo from soccer practice to make life at home less than fun. Have you never forgotten to run a necessary errand after a long day at the office?

The old expression "plan your work and work your plan" is more applicable

now than ever, with everybody running in a hundred directions. If you're anything like me, it's tortuous to say after the fact, "I can't believe I forgot to do that. If I would have only written it down." Don't be that guy.

You know the amazing upside to maintaining and updating your To Do list, strategically placed just inside your portfolio or a single click away on your screen? You can check off the finished duties and move on to the next, earning the "Hey, I accomplished a lot today!" feeling. Sounds cheesy? Maybe so but it works. That accomplishment helps keep us sane and productive both at work and at home.

Rio Grande Valley, let's set our sights high for 2015. Let's work together for regional prosperity and economic development. Your pro-business news magazine staff wishes you a Happy and Prosperous New Year!

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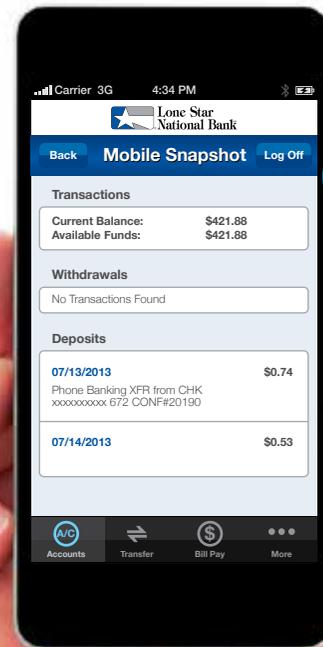
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Stay updated all month long with news from around the Valley. Sign up for our weekly e-mail e-Brief at www.valleybusinessreport.com.

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Pride & Joy – Our Little Girls and Boys

By Eileen Mattei

The Valley's high proportion of young people includes very young people: infants, toddlers and preschoolers. Certain Valley businesses cater to that population, helping families keep their children clothed and entertained. Whether shopping for gifts for a friend's newborn or playing beloved auntie and taking the tikes to the zoo for the day or searching for dress clothes for a wedding's little ring bearer and flower girl, you will find what you need for the kids all across the Rio Grande Valley.

Baby Size

Twenty-five years ago, Colleen Albury was running an airport gift shop and realized Harlingen needed a store carrying baby clothes and paraphernalia. She opened **Just for Babies** to supply the carriage trade with everything from cribs and christening gowns to bibs and baby carriers. Few women can walk into the shop filled with tiny dresses and baby blankets without saying, "Oh, how cute!"

Nowadays, a few of Albury's customers mention that their mothers shopped at Just for Babies 20-25 years ago for their own baby outfits.

Despite growing competition from big box stores, Albury said her customers return for baby gifts for friends and family. "They like the one-on-one attention they get here. They browse, and we've laughed together," said Albury. The shop keeps a baby shower and baby registry so newborns do not receive duplicate gifts. "They pick out the gift, and we wrap it for them." Besides high chairs, bedding, potty chairs and carriages, the shop carries toys, which they assemble so busy parents don't have to.

Changes in the world of babies include the spread of high tech, all-season strollers and combi-strollers. Bottle coolers and changing clutches are this year's hot items. Albury noted over the years the shop has expanded into clothing for pre-schoolers.

Gail Ewing, grandmother of four, opened **Zoodles** 18 months ago, with the theme "Wild about clothes and wilder about children." "My whole life I've been interested in having a store. I love retail. It's fun, different from anything I've ever done, and it is stretching me. I'm very service-oriented and here I feel like I'm serving," babies, children and moms. "This is what God led me to do. I'm finding out what the plan is bit by bit."

Once Ewing opened Zoodles, her first customers told her how much McAllen

needed a store like Zoodles. Most of the shoppers are young mothers buying for their own children, from infants to about 10 years old, or for the children of family and friends. "We have lots of registries, baby and birthdays," she said. Besides the wide range of children's clothing sizes, the store displays dinosaur backpacks, indoor tipis, kinetic blocks and sand kits, and Carolle dolls.

Zoodles is definitely a family affair. "My daughter Mallory (Latham) is my right hand, and she

is managing the store. Being a young mom, she is very good at researching new toys. My husband, who is a CPA, has been Santa on Saturdays and helped with the vision of the store." Her son-in-law, until recently an Air Force pilot, pitches in as shopkeeper when needed. A daughter-in-law in Philadelphia does the website, while family in Denton handles the online store.

"I know you have to surround yourself



Children at the indoor playground Little D's Party and Play have several slides to slide down. (VBR)

with great people,” Ewing said. “You need to empower them. Then you see employees excel and using their gifts, having passion for what they do. Without that, you don’t have a great business.”

Ewing has teamed up with local photographer Linda Blackwell, since people want portraits of their children. In the bargain, she found connections to others and a wider community. Even with Zoodles thriving, Ewing aims to make it better. “Everywhere I go, I visit children’s stores to get ideas.”

Chaco’s Kids is celebrating its 20th year in business, providing formal wear for boys and girls, ranging from baptismal gowns to gowns for young damas at quinceaneras. Nagle and Kitty Tueme and their daughter Paty help mothers select first communion dresses and suits as well as the gowns and mini-tuxes needed for ring-bearers, flower girls and the littlest bridesmaids.

Chaco’s carries casual wear for kids, but 95% of their business is selling dressy dresses for little girls who love looking like princesses at birthday parties, weddings and family events. “The spring is the busiest time for us with the demand for first communion clothes,” Paty Tueme said at the downtown McAllen shop. Behind her, clear plastic covers keep the rows of colorful, fancy dresses pristine until a little girl is ready to be dressed up.

Play Time

Adriana Davalos, a teacher turned stay-at-home mom, had little luck finding things for her young sons to do. She decided Harlingen needed a privately run, indoor playground and opened **Little D’s Party and Play** downtown in October. Her husband built the brightly painted wooden train and pirate ship which the children clamber over.

Tots are whirlwinds in motion at the indoor playground: they pedal Fred Flintstone cars, jump inside the bouncing castle, rock a few times on the rocking horse and climb up to the slides. Mothers and grandmothers sit outside the play area, networking or knitting, when they are not actively involved with the kids playing, for example, in the tiny grocery store.

“We just found out about this place, and now we are going to come at least once a week and let them run,” said Lupita Hernandez, keeping an eye

Kitty and Nagle Tueme and their daughter Paty outfit thousands of little girls with party dresses at Chaco’s Kids. (VBR)



on her granddaughter on a gray afternoon. “If they go outside, there’s a lot of mosquitos and gnats after the rain.”

Diana Bishop, a grandmother of two, said, “A friend of mine posted on Facebook that it was a really fun place. I came today because of the inclement weather. This is a



Aqua-Tots provides year-round swimming, perfect for childrens’ birthday parties. (VBR)

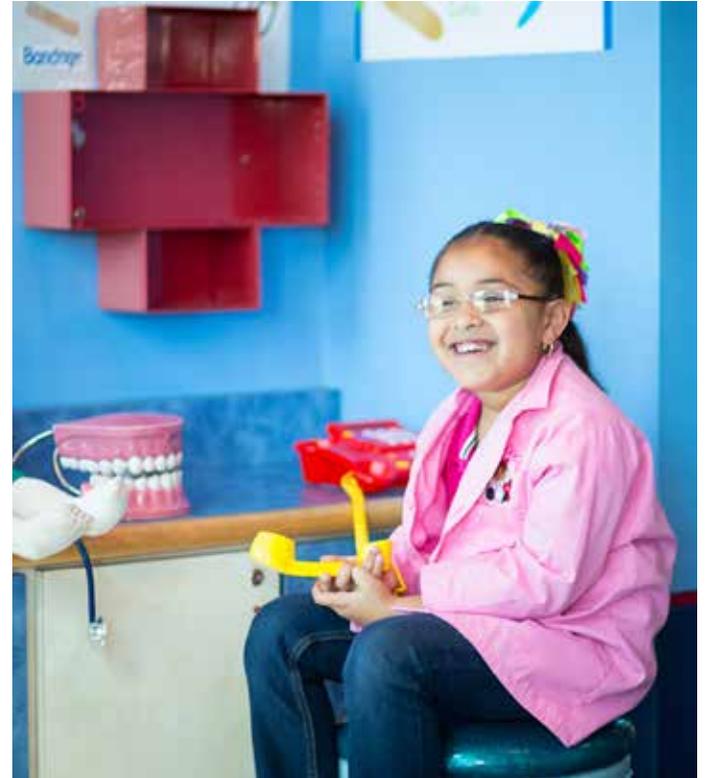


Blanca and her grandmother play at store shopping at Little D’s Party & Play. (VBR)

The mother - daughter team of Gail Ewing and Mallory Latham run the children's shop Zoodles. (VBR)



A child plays in the Dr. Bones section of the Brownsville Children's Museum. (Courtesy of Brownsville Children's Museum.)



safe place to be. We've had a good time." Even after five hours roaming the playground, her pre-schoolers wouldn't agree that it was time to go home. Davalos told the children when they came back there would be more fun things to do.

The party aspect, including baby showers and baptismal parties, has ramped up, Davalos said. She's already hosted numerous birthday parties, with balloons and clean-up service included in the four-hour rental fee. "The great thing about my business is that I have my children with me."

The **Brownsville Children's Museum** welcomes 40,000 visitors a year, either on family visits or on field trips to the region's only stand-alone museum for kids. The interactive and hands-on activities let kids play at being Dr. Bones or a TV weather forecaster. They can work in the Construction Zone or Under the Sea or on a Texas Farm. They can even play cook, cashier or customer in a miniature café. The menu of activities encourages kids to use their imaginations to explore the world.

In McAllen, **IMAS** offers the three dimensional Science on a Sphere which is guaranteed to fascinate kids of all ages. The NASA-designed exhibit opens up the earth and sky in ways that captivate the entire audience. Bringing science back home, the Watershed Journey invites kids to get their hands wet understanding the Rio Grande and its impact on their lives.

Speaking of wet, children from six months on up can take swim lessons at **Aqua-Tots'** two McAllen locations. Pool birthday

parties, with every detail arranged by the swim school staff, let adults relax and enjoy the event, watching tadpoles and frogs splashing to their hearts' content.

For more information, see Zoodleskids.com; aquatots-mcallen.com, and call **Just for Babies** at 425-0800; **Little D's** at 867-2528 or on Facebook; and **Chaco's** at 688-5777.



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Why 2015 Will be a Good Year for Business

By Eileen Mattei

"My bullish outlook is based on the American people, the backbone of the economy," said Mark Dotzour, chief economist at the TAMU Real Estate Center. Speaking at the Edwards Abstract & Title Company's annual State of Real Estate Forum, Dotzour identified the three drivers of the American economy as the consumer, businesses and the government. And the most important of these is the consumer.

"Our world class competitive advantage is buying. Who can outspend an American? Americans don't tolerate deferred gratification. We the people are recovering from an economic body-blow," Dotzour said. He pointed out that the net worth of American households is \$81 trillion. In comparison, the Fed's net worth is \$50 billion. That difference

is his reason for paying little or no attention to the tweaks and twitches of government policy and to media reports that don't have a clue about what the economic data means.

"The United States is now the best place on earth to invest, unlike four or five years ago. Even though, we have investment problems, the U.S. is still the prettiest pig at the trough," the economist said. "Americans are gaining confidence." He explained that was evident in the automotive industry. "Light trucks are the backbone of small business," and truck sales are booming. Additionally data shows that 10% of household income is now going to debt payment, which is the normal level. That means a higher percentage of income is available to buy things

than was the case last year or the year before.

"We live in a capitalistic country: that means making a profit is why we get up in the morning," Dotzour told the audience of realtors, bankers, attor-



neys and business owners. "All you have got to know about job growth is this: if profits are up, they will hire. There's no question in my mind that (American businesses) will hire," because corporate profits have been at a record high for a long time. Surveys revealed that one-third of small businesses plan to hire in 2015.

Dotzour noted that the nation has 4.835 million job openings in construction, manufacturing, the trades, professions, health care and hospitality. "It's likely that wages will go up in areas that have a shortage of skilled workers."

Employment growth in the border MSAs has been steadily rising since 1991, Dotzour pointed out. Yet the housing sector is not as strong as he would expect. "We should be building a lot more homes in Texas than we are. We've got job growth, but a certain segment of the population that wants to buy a home can't because of Dodd-Frank over-regulation. That is stifling economic growth in the country. I think in 2015, it will swing back."

He expects to see a 95% increase in home loans from Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac in 2015. Meanwhile, existing home sales are being driven by job growth, cheap mortgages and price appreciation. Nevertheless, people want to own commercial real estate. "There is no place else to go with your money."

Looking at the global economy, Dotzour noted that bad actors on the international stage, like Putin and Iran, want oil prices to go so low that fracking might end. He believes, on the contrary, that low oil prices will persist and that Putin and associates will run out of money and time to achieve their schemes.

Keep in mind, the economist said, "If you torture data long enough, it will confess to anything."

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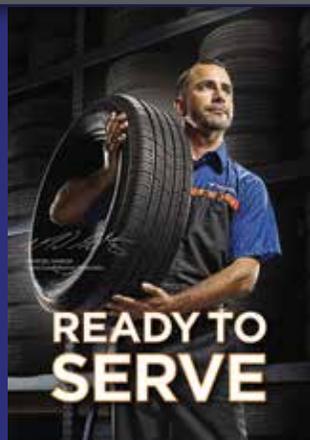
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Giving Birth to a Village

By Eileen Mattei

Getting a hotel property launched can be compared to bringing a village to life. Major hotel properties provide guests with food, security, entertainment, exercise facilities, connectivity, social events and of course, clean, comfortable rooms.

When the Residence Inn by Marriott opened on Dec. 18 in Harlingen, staff in housekeeping and reception, for example, had been training for more than two weeks. The management team, on the other hand, had been going full speed since July.

Gary Miller retired three years ago after 15 years with Marriott International, managing Residence Inns in Dallas and San Antonio. He moved to the Valley a year ago, and on a whim, stopped in the Residence Inn under construction next to Bass Pro ... and ended up with a job. Meelan Hospitality LLC, the managing company of the Residence Inn franchise in Harlingen, created the position of opening hotel manager for Miller. Soon after, they hired a general manager, Diana Garcia, who had worked for Marriott for five years in Brownsville.

The staff of the Residence Inn has been cross-trained to better assist guests. (VBR)



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The opening manager position initially had a sales focus, Miller said, but it soon morphed.

Garcia explained that hotels usually have only a general manager to oversee the millions of details and deadlines involved in opening a property. Having Miller's expertise on tap has been "a

good thing," as far as she is concerned. "It's been very positive to have him here. Everything rolls out a little quicker. He's like a right hand; he has that experience. If I have a question, he's there to help, brainstorming, helping with interviews and more."



The lobby in the new Residence Inn in Harlingen provides comfortable nooks for chats inside. This is the first Gen Nine model of Residence Inn by Marriot in Texas and the second Gen Nine in the nation. (VBR)

Miller in turn is learning about the importance of providing the newest generation of travelers with the services they expect, like mobile check-ins and free hi-speed Wi-Fi. “Marriott has changed so much since I retired. Now we are really focused on guest service, because everyone has almost the same amenities. Our friendly staff makes guests feel at home away from home.”

Garcia, 27, said that Miller, 63, brings a valuable perspective. “He helps us understand what other guests may look for. We get along well and bring different things to the equation.”

Despite the age difference, Miller and Garcia have the same approach to hiring and managing employees. “We hired people with the best attitude,” he said. “Many have not worked in a hotel before. It’s all about attitude and service. I can teach you how to run computer.”

Miller admitted he has little tolerance for those who say, ‘that’s not my job.’ “It’s like poison to my ears. We cross train everybody. Front desk knows what housekeeping does. When it gets full, the front desk can go help at breakfast.”

“We have management titles,” Miller said, referring to Garcia and assistant manager Ignacio Montoya, “but we know how to fold towels and strip rooms (to prepare for new arrivals) and run the front desk. I think it’s really a big asset when everyone knows how to do things and does them when there’s a need.”

“When you have a team that works together, you can do things quicker and do it the right way,” Garcia said. For her, the ideal attitude is “Let’s get out there and help.”

Residence Inn seeks long-term stay guests, what Miller calls the marathon business traveler, who stay from five days to three weeks or more. Enticements beyond the Generation Nine Residence Inn standard of contemporary one-bedroom and studio suites with fully equipped kitchens include free hot breakfasts daily, shuttles to restaurants and Valley International Airport, and The Mix, a social hour with appetizers and beer and wine several nights a week. The franchise also caters to Winter Texans, people scouting for retirement communities, and Mexican national families shopping at the outlet mall. The hotel also boasts projector-equipped meeting rooms for 40 and 80 persons.

Miller himself is transitioning to the position of hotel revenue manager. That requires looking up to a year in the future, balancing reservations and the flexibility to accommodate last-minute loyal customers. Garcia and Montoya are fully capable of operating the hotel without him, he said. “These two are very good at what they do. And this franchise has the best owners, Krishna Harlingen Investments. Their concept is hiring the best and giving them the opportunity to create the best.”

A Colonoscopy Can Help Save Lives

If you knew that the majority of deaths from colorectal cancer could be prevented if every adult 50 years or older got tested, would you do it? Unfortunately, millions of people do not.

It is important to know that if you are turning 50 this year, you should be prepared to give yourself a special birthday present – a screening colonoscopy. There are 50,000 reasons to schedule a colonoscopy ... that’s the number of people that die each year from colorectal cancer, the third leading cause of cancer-related deaths, but it needn’t be.*

*American Cancer Society

What is a colonoscopy?

A colonoscopy is a diagnostic test that allows the physician to visualize the whole length of the large intestines. It is done to investigate the cause of blood in the stool, abdominal pain, diarrhea, a change in bowel habit or an abnormality found on colon X-rays or a computerized axial tomography (CT) scan. The procedure requires preparation and sedation and carries risks, such as perforation and bleeding but it is considered one of the most effective cancer screening and prevention exams.

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Carlos F. Zapata, MD, specializes in gastroenterology/internal medicine and performs diagnostic colonoscopy tests. He received his medical degree at Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia in Lima, Peru and completed his Gastroenterology Fellowship at Banner Good Samaritan Medical Center/Phoenix VA Medical Center in Phoenix, Arizona, and his Internal Medicine residency at Advocate Illinois Masonic Medical Center in Chicago, Illinois.

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Trend Setter: A Florist Extraordinaire

By Anita Westervelt

Change is the name of the game with Bloomers store owner Pam Fuller. She has an eye for beauty and intuition for the next trend. After managing Bloomers for seven years in a Harlingen strip mall, she bought the floral business in 1992. With mass flower markets on the upswing, she knew diversity was essential. Within one year of purchasing the business, she moved Bloomers to a high-traffic location on Ed Carey in Harlingen.

Then Fuller began the first of many changes: incorporating two lines of jewelry and introducing customer requests such as Trapp candles. Fuller not only embraces change, she purposefully initiates trends before they come to the Valley. “Change is inevitable, so we head into it before the crowd,” Fuller said, who spotted Pandora bracelets in a California boutique and brought them home. “It was a big investment and paid off very well. People would drive from all over the Valley to get Pandora when they first came out.”

Beanie Babies showed up at Bloomers during that nation-wide rage. “People spent the night in the parking lot,” Fuller recalled. “They would follow the UPS truck. We’d only let

three customers in the store at a time because of fights.” Staying up to date, ahead of what’s in the Valley, then phasing out a product when it becomes common keeps Bloomers’ market line fresh. Fuller also looks for wholesalers who protect her territory and makes an effort to buy local merchandise. Their popular line of Consuela handbags is Austin-based.

After 16 successful years, it was time for another major change. Fuller moved her store to a temporary location for nine months while the Ed Carey store was razed and their dream flower and gift shop was built. “We buried a bible in the foundation and wrote scriptures on the walls before the sheetrock dried,” Fuller said. “On opening day, one verse (1 Samuel 1:27) bled through: ‘We prayed for this child and the Lord granted what we asked of Him.’ We later touched it up and kept it. We have been really

Festive flowers for all occasions are designed by the staff’s five Texas Master Florists. (VBR)



bleased.”

One of their newest products, Chalk Paint by Annie Sloan, is a decorative paint that requires no prep, no prime, no sanding when revamping old furniture. It dries quickly, has no odor, is non-toxic and covers surfaces from fabric to wood to cement, Fuller said. Her managers, daughter Lenzie Fuller Betancourt and Lisa Human, trained in North Carolina on the paints. In-store workshops and paint parties by appointment are available, at the only store south of Corpus Christi carrying it.

Education and community involvement are high on Fuller’s recipe for success. She employs 11, five of whom are full-time and certified Texas Master Florists. Fuller herself is a Texas Master Florist Advanced and has been inducted into the American Academy of Floriculture. She is the outgoing president of the Texas State Florist Association and sits on its



A long list of seasonal flowers is always available. (VBR)

McAllen’s TRUSTED BUSINESS ADVISORS.



Pictured left to right: Jaime Aranda, Diann Bartek, Brent Bishop, Ray Cowley, Jeana Long

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education board.

In December, Bloomers took Christmas wish lists. She and her staff called husbands to make shopping easier for them and sponsored a men's night featuring hot wings and antique cars showcased in the parking lot. "We believe in wonderful customer service. We treat customers like our friends, which they are," said Fuller. Bloomers' wedding specialist takes care of all day-of-wedding coordination.

Fuller and her staff keep current with innovative international styles in floral design, which comprises 50% of the business. "I like unusual work: wire, wood, birds, bamboo, sticks. Something out of the ordinary sets us apart from the competition. We want people to say, 'Wow, next time I'll use Bloomers.'" Fuller believes her creativity is a God-given talent and is thankful. "You can teach someone design, but you can't teach creativity," she said.

The store participates in chamber of commerce activities and fund-raisers, such as Dining by Design Harlingen, and sponsors store events. For their twice-a-year John Hart luggage and bag trunk shows, she purchased a machine to hot-stamp personalization in house with no turn-around time.

Keeping contemporary extends to advertising and marketing via a website and Facebook account. Customers receive e-mail blasts about specials and new merchandise. "Internet sales are growing more and more," Fuller noted. Bloomers takes orders 24 hours a day on the website and ships gifts all over the world. Recently, colorful yard signs have lined the parking lot alerting passers-by that Bloomers is a gift shop as well as a florist.

For more information, see bloomersharlingen.com.

Lenzie Fuller Betancourt, Owner Pam Fuller and Lisa Marie Human head up the creative team at Bloomers. (VBR)



Furniture make-over Chalk Paint® by Annie Sloan headlines at Bloomers. (VBR)

 The advertisement for Rental World features a top section with a white tablecloth, a red candle, and glassware. The text "Your Event Specialist" is written in a cursive font. Below this is a photograph of a white event tent set up outdoors. At the bottom, there is a list of phone numbers and locations.

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Making a Difference in Statistics

By Eileen Mattei

In 2011, University of Texas-Pan Am Professor of Economics Marie Mora received an email from the Bureau of Labor Statistics advising her that she had been nominated to the Data Users Advisory Committee. Would she be willing to serve starting January 2012? Mora began to work with the federal committee and, three years later, has completed her first term. She is the co-author of the 2013 book *Hispanic Entrepreneurship in the 2000s* and co-editor of *The Economic Status of the Hispanic Population* (2013).

DUAC meets for a full day twice yearly in Washington, D.C. at the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Mora explained. Subject areas range from inflation and prices, pay and benefits, and workplace injuries to productivity, spending and employment/unemployment.

The 17 committee members typically receive briefing materials prior to the meeting. "Each person or a group will volunteer to start the discussion about a specific question, like the definition of a metropolitan statistical area," Mora said. Other items might address whether reducing the number of questions in a survey or changing the wording of a survey

will make it difficult to compare the responses longitudinally.

DUAC members bring up points that need to be considered on each item. For example, in November, Mora and two others discussed "Redesigning the Occupational Outlook Handbook and the Occupational Outlook Quarterly." They addressed changes that could be made in response to customers' needs. During the same session, another group opened the discussion on "Measurement of household relationships in BLS statistical surveys."

"Not all of the committee will agree on the impact," she said, "but sometimes it is very clear that the committee is clearly in agreement." DUAC members do not hold a formal vote on the subjects under discussion since it is an advisory committee. Bureau



of Labor Statistics staff attend the meeting to take notes and learn the ramifications of any proposed actions.

Mora mentioned the nationwide spread of DUAC members who represent diverse interests as economists and researchers and between them can talk on a wide variety of topics. "You interact with people you wouldn't meet otherwise," she observed. Mora is the only member from Texas, and the only other academic is a professor at UCLA School of Law. Three members are with government agencies, such as the FDIC and the Federal Reserve Board of Governors; three are with unions:

AFL-CIO, UAW, and American Federation of Teachers. Eight are with think tanks, policy institutes or economic consulting firms. Business interests are represented by the chief economist of Associated General Contractors.

"Professionals are very concerned if they find errors in data," Mora said. "The quality of BLS' data is what drives their reputation." DUAC's participation is one means to make sure data remains accurate even as survey questions change and different measurements come into play. It is likewise important to prevent errors caused by people misunderstanding a question.

The bi-annual DUAC meetings now include an informal lunch with BLS Commissioner Erica Groshen, which provides a little behind-the-scenes information.

The take-away from serving on DUAC is significant for Mora as a professor. She teaches two classes at UTPA: a large, introductory class on principles of macroeconomics and a labor economics class. The latter works with data from BLS regularly.

"Some of the things I brought back relate to particular data sets" the class uses, she said. "Some of it is getting the insight. I have used BLS data a lot, and it's interesting to hear about the issues faced by data users." Mora's students also hear anecdotally the inside story on how committees work.

As she begins her second term on DUAC, Mora is looking forward to tackling more problem areas in statistics. "I appreciate they have included me as a representative from Texas and south Texas. Our area of the country is not represented much of the time. Now we have some input."

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Going Native

By Eileen Mattei

When 18 travel journalists converged on McAllen, their main objective was to get ideas for articles about the region's wealth of nature and birding sites. But along the way, they got acquainted with Delia's tamales, the beers and burgers at Roosevelt's at 7, and the exhibits at IMAS and the Museum of South Texas History, too.

The majority of the writers and photographers had never visited the Valley before, so they discovered great stories to tell their readers. Hailing from Spokane and Saskatchewan, Oklahoma City and Memphis, Alabama, Indiana and Ontario, the group was a mix of print and online freelance writers, photojournalists, columnists, publishers and editors. Their work appears in *Living Bird Magazine*, *Bird Watchers Digest*, *Chile Pepper Magazine*, *Men's Health*, *USA Today*, *Go Escape*, *Endless Vacation*, *Trailer Life*, *Smithsonian Magazine*, *The Oklahoman*, *San Antonio Express News*, *The Nashville Tennessean*, *The Kansas City Star*, *Austin Chronicle*, *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Toronto Star*, *Toronto Sun*, airline magazines and online outlets.

The McAllen Convention and Visitors Bureau/Chamber of Commerce hosted

Nancy Millar, McAllen CVB vice president, checks photos of Valley specialty birds taken at Edinburg Wetlands World Birding Center by photojournalists from Indiana and Oklahoma. (VBR)



the travel journalists because of the exposure their articles will provide regionally, nationally and inter-

nationally. Why bring so many of them here?

"It's to counteract the negative and sensationalized stories all over the country that keep people from coming to the Valley," said Nancy Millar, McAllen Convention and Visitors Bureau vice-president. "The journalists' stories introduce readers to the things the Valley has that are really worth making a trip for. They are professionals and easy to work with. In the journalist world, they are well known."



Chachalacas, so common in the Valley, are prized as an exotic bird by travel and birding writers. (VBR)

Millar works closely with the state and with Valley travel marketing co-ops such as South Texas Nature Tourism to promote the Valley as a destination for retirees and nature lovers. "The State

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of Texas has been very supportive in helping us overcome negative publicity.” The Office of Economic Development and Tourism, under the Governor’s Office, is featuring the Valley on its website.

This is the second journalists’ tour that Millar arranged through a destination specialist, which selects the most appropriate journalists for a destination from its files of over 3,000 professional writers, photographers and bloggers.

The first trip, which featured journalists writing for *AAA*, *AARP* and *USA Today*, resulted in stories in a spectrum of publications, including two articles in *Texas Highways*. “If we had bought that much advertising space (equivalent to the articles’ pages), it would have cost \$330,000,” Millar said. That’s not counting the effectiveness of well-written articles. People are five times more likely to read a story than an ad, she added. And they are more likely to act on a story.

“It’s been a tremendous return on investment. This tour is good because a lot of newspaper writers are here. We will get immediate results as well as long-term exposure,” Millar said, because magazines article have a longer lead time. In fact, by early December, articles on McAllen had come out in the Spokane newspaper (the travel column Home Planet talked about the ease of birding on the border) and in the *Atlanta Examiner’s* Outdoor Atlanta column. The latter recommended a dinner at the Patio on Guerra as the way to “close out a perfect day.”

Bobby Jackson of Huntsville, Ala., supplies photos to several nature magazines and writes an illustrated column for *Living Bird* magazine. Aiming the 500-mm lens on his Nikon camera at a gold-fronted woodpecker at Quinta Mazatlan, he commented on the abundance of birds and the opportunities to take multiple shots.

From Bentsen-Mission and Estero Llano Grande State Parks to the Edinburg Wetlands and Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge, the journalists took notes on easily accessible habitats and the sheer variety of loud, colorful and (to them) exotic birds. Sightings of green jays (McAllen’s official bird), kiskadees, aningas, long-billed thrashers and black-crowned night herons elicited excited murmurs.

“I’ve seen nine life birds,” said Wendy Clark of Birding Digest, who ended up spotting 12 life birds, species she had never seen before. The opportunity to do that -- to see so many new birds without having to leave the U.S. -- is one of the prime attractions of the Valley for nature travelers. The journalists were primed to convey the thrill and ease of birding on the border.

“Living Bird” columnist Bobby Jackson of Alabama steps away from his 500 mm lens at Quinta Mazatlan to talk to guide Erik Bruhnke, who writes for “Bird Watcher’s Digest.” (VBR)



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Listening to Your Customers

By Eileen Mattei

“We’ve basically adapted to our customers,” said David Leahy, who owns Quips ‘n Quotes with his wife Patty and parents Bruce and Susan Leahy. “Ten or 15 years ago, we didn’t have any fashion merchandise -- no scarves, no sweaters. It was one of those deals where we’d bring a few items in, and the customers would say you need to bring in more.”

That willingness to heed customers’ suggestions has kept the gift and card shop in business since 1972. Attuned to changes in retail and operational costs, the Leahys realized their stores in major malls --La Plaza, Valle Vista and Amigoland – were not ideal locations for attracting the customers they sought. “It’s hard for a local or small business to succeed in a mall,” Leahy said. “This (gift shop) concept works better in a strip location.”

Quips ‘n Quotes has had its headquarters at the store in McAllen’s Town & Country Shopping Center since 1996. Along with its other shop located at Harlingen’s Coronado Village, the business employs a workforce that runs from 30-50, depending on the season.

Multi-generational management poses

While the vast majority of Quips ‘n Quotes customers are women, men know they can find appropriate cards for all occasions there. (VBR)



no problems for the gift shop’s owners. “Dad and I have the store kind of split in half, because it works,” said Leahy, who got involved in the family business in 1994. “He buys fashion with the store manager. I deal more with the gift side.” Father and son work with their own assistant buyers, going to market between six and eight times a year.

The product mix includes Godiva chocolates, Vera Bradley accessories, Crocs shoes, and selected jewelry, stationery and hats for the Red Hat Society. In fact, the 16,000-square-foot shop carries such a broad range of items that it boasts “50,000 things to make somebody happy.” While Leahy said 90% of their customers are female, Quips & Quotes has a sports department stocked with collegiate and professional team paraphernalia, along with camouflage items. It is possibly the largest gift store in the region.

The long displays of cards for every occasion -- birthday, wedding, sympathy, seasonal – that dominate the shops’ centers are self-sustaining, Leahy explained. Hallmark recently installed new fixtures, although many other card brands are carried. Both Quips ‘n Quotes stores have U.S. Postal Service sub-stations which provide a tremendous advantage for people rushing in for last-minute cards and gifts. “It draws in a lot of

people,” Leahy admitted. “We do have to deal with long lines (waiting to buy stamps or mail just-purchased packages) for most seasons.”

When the in-house Holy Cow Coffee Shop opened in 1996, the plan was to serve coffee, Danish and muffins. Because customers requested more, it is now a full-scale coffee bar



David Leahy and the Leahy family continues to adapt Quips ‘n Quotes to suit their customers’ preferences. (VBR)

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serving breakfast and lunch and afternoon snacks.

While Christmas time ranks as the shops' busiest season and warrants a catalog insert in *The Monitor*, Quips 'n Quotes has already moved on to preparing for Valentine's Day, taking down Christmas displays and decorations. In reality, Leahy said, Mother's Day is a bigger holiday for them than Valentine's.

During the new year, Quips 'n Quotes' website will transition from primarily informational to a full-fledged shopping site. "The hardest thing with a website going to e-commerce is making sure your inventory is adequate," Leahy said. While the available merchandise in bricks and mortar stores is visible to shoppers, online customers expect their items to be shipped quickly, barring out-of-stock notices. Balancing inventory details is a process that will be ironed out. Without a doubt, customers as always, will offer suggestions so Quips 'n Quotes will continue to suit their needs. And the Leahys will listen.

For more information, see quipsnquotes.com.

A Quips 'n Quotes customer shops for a shirt for her daughter. (VBR)



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Keeping Up Appearances

By Anita Westervelt

While some people can decorate a home worthy of appearing in a home design magazine, most do not have that enviable talent. For those without the decorating gene, residential and commercial interior designer Dawn Ziehe can make it happen. She has been designing Valley and Island dream home interiors and attractive office settings for 20-some years.

With clients ranging from car dealerships, banks, restaurants, chemical plants and doctors' offices to all types of residences, Ziehe's goal is to make space work for the client. "I'm working for more than the person who hires me," she said. "A residential area may have to work for more than one family member. With condos, there may be the client and five grown children and their families who will be using it. Every family member has different expectations."

On the other hand, a commercial design has to function for an unknown number of people. "In commercial space, durability is an issue," Ziehe said. During her initial interview, Ziehe asks clients how they see themselves in the space: what they love, don't like,

style preferences and colors. Many times, she does a budget for them. With client desires and needs in mind, her creativity takes charge. She keeps up with trends by traveling to furniture markets in North Carolina and Las Vegas, and to Dallas and Houston's decorators' centers. She likes to see what's selling in shops in different parts of Texas.

After graduating from Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos with a degree in interior design, Ziehe interned at the former Harlingen business Interiors, owned by the late Jean Anne Pratt. Hired after the internship, Ziehe later worked with Jeri Garret at Cactus Flower Interiors on South Padre Island before branching out on her own.

When starting her own business, Ziehe adapted bits and pieces from those two companies to create an operation that worked for her. She kept the office, but worked primarily from home. "When I was home and had some free time, what I needed was at the office." Now, a large table in her home office suffices for laptop, paper work and client files. Ziehe uses the cell phone for photos and an iPad, but relies mostly

Dawn Ziehe. (VBR)



on a notebook at job sites. "The job requires a lot of note taking: what has been ordered, from whom, when the shipping date is," she said. She uses a computer program for designers to keep up with proposals, purchase orders and billing, and paying vendors and sub-contractors.

Ziehe has been running her own business for 14 years, working with 30 local subcontractors. "I've worked full time since I've been on my own," she said. "I stay busy with word of mouth recommendations. Over the years, I've had repeat customers, designed customers' grown children's homes, spouses' offices, and traveled to clients' homes or second homes in Fort Worth, Santa Fe and Port Aransas."

Her business has evolved through client requests. "You get to wear a lot of hats when you are on your own, even as the cleaning crew, when contracted workers don't show and the client is scheduled," Ziehe said. She once took on a project for an out-of-town friend whose warehouse had been vacated and needed to be leased again. "We cleaned it out, fixed it up, completely redid the offices and bathrooms, and painted the exterior. We even cleaned up the entire parking lot. When the client asked if I would consider redoing his warehouse, I had laughed and said of course! It was quite humbling."

In addition, Ziehe added remodeling work to her skills. "A customer asked me to oversee their entire remodeling project. I ended

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Dawn Ziehe blends her customers' planned use of a room with her own knowledge of color, fabrics and styles to create livable spaces. (VBR)



up as the general contractor for them and really liked it.”

Running an interior design business from home presents a challenge that has Ziehe at times struggling with time management. “So much of this is creative. Sometimes there are so many solutions – not right or wrong – but deciding which one will best suit the clients’ needs. If I only had myself to consider, I think I could easily work far into the night.” But with active twin boys and a teenage daughter involved in competitive gymnastics and dance, Ziehe works to include time to think and create in her schedule.

“Technology also has been a challenge, not so much learning it,” she said, “but designing for it. One of my subcontractors is a whiz on wiring homes for technology, sound and security. We’re now transforming spaces to house all of the components, sometimes taking over small closets. Everything works remotely with portable technology.”

Ziehe offers consultation at \$125 an hour. “Some people really do want to do it themselves and just need space planning, electrical layouts and color selections.”

For more information, call 571-7774 or email dawnziehe at sbcglobal.net.

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Working as a Region Boosts Growth

By Eileen Mattei

When seven executive directors of the Valley's economic development offices met in December at the Regional Economic Update, the focus was on what the Valley as a region is accomplishing and will be doing in the future.

In the past, one-upmanship and coup-counting predominated, but that attitude is changing. Regionalism is gaining traction as cities began to promote the Valley as a whole as they realize that development in one city strengthens the entire region.

Frank Espinoza, Harlingen Chamber of Commerce chairman, put the shift into perspective. "When a business prospect comes to San Antonio, they are looking at the whole region." The regional demographic is what attracts them, and this is finally being understood to apply to the RGV as well.

The executive directors summarized past, present and future strategies for economic development:

Keith Patridge, McAllen EDC. "Companies are not looking at what side of the street to put their building, but at where they have the best chance to make money and minimize their costs. All the issues of a company

Executive Directors of Valley Economic Development Corp. provided summaries of growth in their cities and progress on cooperative projects at the Regional Economic Update. (VBR)



locating here -- electricity availability, transportation, infrastructure -- are regional. We have to work together to reach our potential. We are just one part of a whole. The key for all of us is the skill sets of our workforce. Each community has its strengths. Twenty-seven years ago, we were just looking at creating jobs.

MEDC works both sides of the border and has assisted in locating 657 companies resulting in 153,000 jobs. In the past two years, MEDC has fostered the relocation of six corporate headquarters to the Valley. Patridge noted the Ford F-150 truck has electronic components designed and built in the RGV by people who grew up here. "That's the direction we want to go," doing the development and commercialization of products here.

Alex Meade, Mission EDC. "Businesses know no boundaries. They know markets, not city limits. That lets us leverage the region's assets. We know if a project grows the region, it grows our community."

Royal Technologies located in Mission with a \$45 million investment and eventually 400 jobs, with the support of McAllen EDC. Royal executives agreed their Valley facility made the Michigan plant stronger. "That said a lot. It has helped us market our region," Meade said. The EDC invested in a Detroit Chamber membership and now the Mission logo is posted in that Michigan boardroom, connecting with manufacturers for a price equivalent to a single industry magazine ad.

Locally, Ruby Red Ventures has already funded 17 Mission companies with expansion and growth plans, creating 60 jobs. Code the Town is championing computer science/technology skills and related entrepreneurial opportunities.

Salomon Torres, San Benito EDC. "San Benito is reflective of small communities in the Valley following a new way. We consider if a project is going to have an impact beyond the town and on

the region. We cannot put all our growth on the backs of local taxpayers." So San Benito is going after monies already designated by government agencies for projects to develop communities like the Resaca City. "Small cities will play a role in the economic development of the entire region."

Mike Gonzalez, United Brownsville. "With SpaceX, it was exciting to see the region mobilized for a big project. It's one example of regionalism that shows how everybody wins. Everyone contributes different components. We need to rebuild the regional economy with a focus on the strengths of the border."

He gave San Diego as the role model of the future Valley mega-region that emphasizes economic flows. Gonzalez heads BiNED which aims to create a more globally competitive economy within the region, supplying more value to products in the cross-border trade. As near-shoring surges, the border should look to advanced manufacturing to insure itself a remunerative link in the supply chain.

Raudel Garza, Harlingen EDC. "We can't attract retail business unless we can sustain it." In the past two years, Harlingen sold over \$1 billion of taxable goods, like its much larger neighbors Brownsville and McAllen. Growth is coming from hospitals, hotels, Border Patrol and Bass Pro. Bechtel's upcoming construction of a \$600 million power plant will mean 600 jobs over 30 months.

Alma Colelli, Rio South Texas. "We're all cheerleaders for the Rio Grande Valley, and we have a lot to offer. We're transitioning into a new economy and a new image, an updated brand." Counties and cities will keep their own identities, she said, but regionalism – UTRGV, Space X rapid response manufacturing – is the new spark in the Valley's future.



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Protecting Property in an LLC

By Frank Orozco

While LLCs are common in the business world, a relatively new form of LLC could be of great use to South Texas property investors. The Texas Series LLC provision was added to the Texas Business Organizations Code in 2009 and offers a unique twist on the ability of an LLC to diversify its overall holdings while limiting its liabilities. A Series LLC essentially has the ability to create separate “series” or cells which may have different assets, members or managers, and distinct business purposes and objectives. If certain formalities are maintained, the debts of one series may not be recovered from the general assets of the LLC or any other series. More simply, a series can function as if it were its own LLC and protect itself from the liabilities of other series and the “parent” LLC as well.

Take this example of using a Series LLC: An upstart property investor decides he would like to purchase multiple properties in the Rio Grande Valley. If the investor creates a standard LLC, all the properties would be purchased in the name of the LLC and comprise the LLC’s overall assets. However, under this form of ownership, every property is exposed to the liabilities of the LLC in general. If a lawsuit arises out of an occurrence on one property, a judgment could be collected against the other properties held by the LLC.

To protect the other properties against this result, the investor could instead create a Series LLC. Assuming that all the formalities are met, if the investor keeps each property in a separate series, the liability of each series is limited to the assets held within the name of that particular series (i.e. the single property in this example).

A series has the ability to contract, hold title to assets, grant liens and security interests, and sue and be sued. Thus, a series can operate much like a traditional LLC while still affording the Parent LLC the enhanced liability protection. For investors looking to pass on responsibility to family members, this feature can offer many possibilities.

While both the Series LLC and a traditional LLC provide liability protection, it is important to remember that limited liability is no substitute for insurance. The cost of defense alone can quickly exceed the amount claimed



in a lawsuit. Furthermore, Series LLCs come with various practical and legal issues. For example, not all states have adopted a Series LLC statute. When an investor does business outside the state, the limits of liability may not apply if an out-of-state court decides not to recognize the Texas Series LLC statute.

Therefore, the Series LLC is currently recommended solely for the purpose of doing business in Texas or other states that recognize the Series LLC. Furthermore, in order to maintain the liability limitations, the assets of each series must be kept separate from those of other series. Even the slightest “commingling” of assets can destroy the individualized liability protection of the Series LLC. Accordingly, the need for detailed bookkeeping is necessary.

Series LLCs require special considerations, and it is advisable to speak with an attorney knowledgeable in the nuances of dealing with this type of business entity. However, if properly drafted and administered, the Series LLC may present great advantages for those looking to invest in South Texas.

Francisco Orozco is an attorney with the Kantack Alcantara Law Office, P.C., a Rio Grande Valley law firm whose practice includes estate planning and probate, real estate and business law. For more information, see kantacklawoffice.com.

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Neighbors With Benefits

By Eileen Mattei

The Border Economic Development & Entrepreneurship Symposium, hosted by UTPA and the Federal Reserve Bank, annually brings a broader perspective on the border region's economic outlook. Roberto Coronado, senior economist at the Dallas Fed's El Paso Branch, discussed Mexico's economic reforms and the implication for the Rio Grande Valley. "The number one growth impediment in the U.S. has been uncertainty," about changing regulations, Coronado said. "Imagine being in a country (such as Mexico) with nine structural reforms. You don't know what the rules of the game will be."

Mexican productivity has not grown at an acceptable pace, Coronado said. Structural reforms --of financial, energy, telecom, education and labor sectors -- are predicted to change that for the better. Mexico has persevered as the second largest vehicle producer in North America since 2008 and is currently the number one supplier of auto parts.

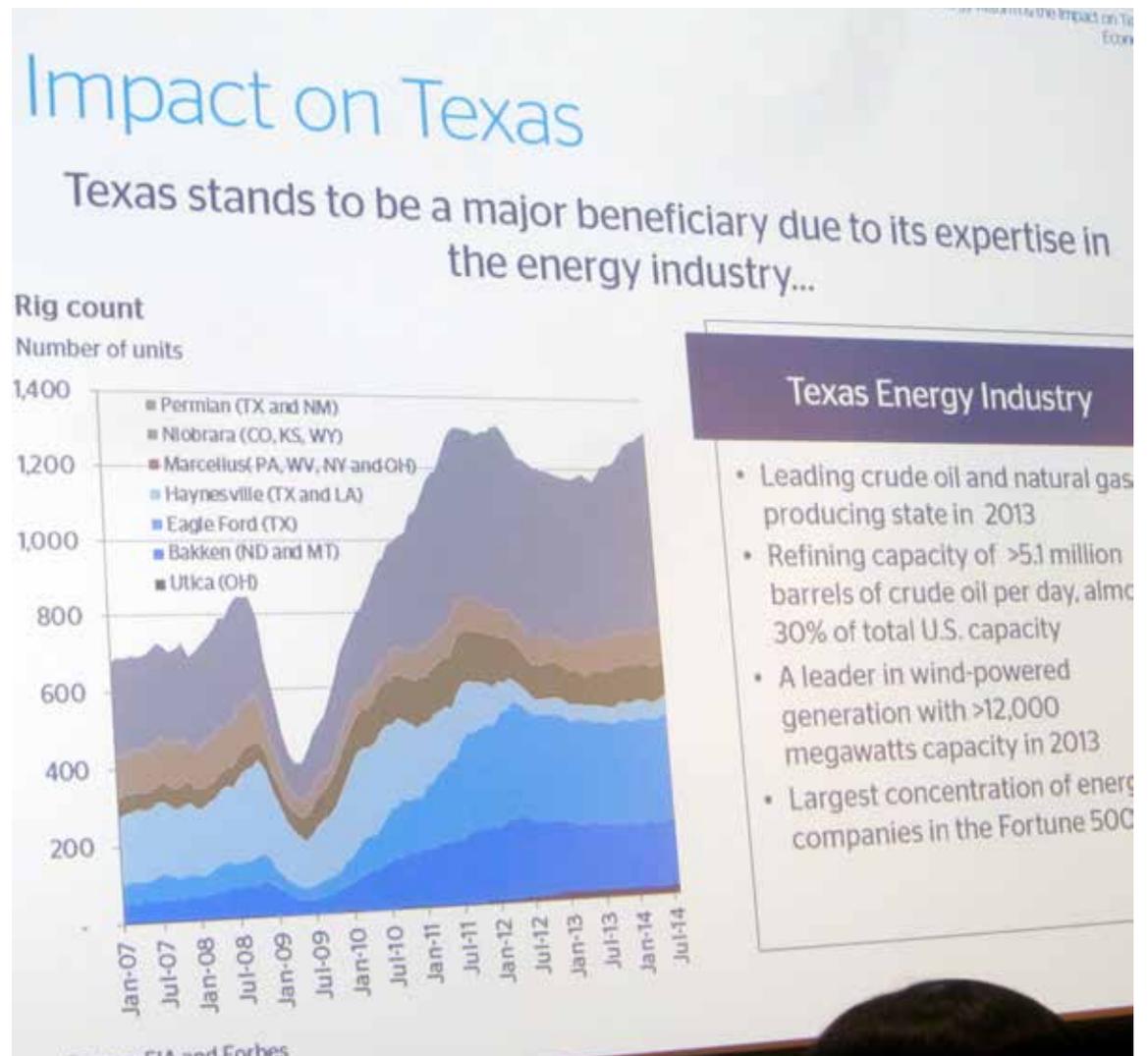
"NAFTA brought stronger economic integration to the two countries. Both economies have moved in lockstep fashion. The two are heavily synchronized. One in three new jobs created in McAllen since 1990 can be attributed to maquiladoras," Coronado said, while the ratio is one in ten jobs in Brownsville. Mexico is the U.S.' third most important trading partner. Texas, a key partner in the cross-border trade, exported \$100 billion in goods to Mexico, accounting for more than one-third of the state's exports. Approximately 40% of the Texas-Mexico trade goes through Hidalgo and Cameron counties. The total trade crossings between Mexico and Texas amounts to \$750,000 per minute.

In what Coronado called a Texas border phenomenon, jobs are migrating from manufacturing to services, accounting for the growth of jobs with better wages. Since 2000, the border region has charted a significant improvement in per capita income with the proliferation of service-oriented jobs that facilitate cross border trade. In fact, the slowly rising per capita income is closing the gap to the national level.

Security issues since 2006 have depressed global investment in Mexico. It is estimated that lack of security assurance costs the Mexican economy between one-half to two percentage points of GDP.

Executive Vice president with Brownsville Economic Development Council Gilbert Salinas, Dean of UTPA's College of Business Administration Teofilo Ozuna and Marcial

No matter what the price of oil is in 2015, Texas border cities and Mexico can expect a continuation of mutually beneficial trade. (VBR)



Nava with BBVA Compass discussed what Mexico's energy reform in particular will mean for the RGV. Although Mexico has large oil reserves, it doesn't have the technical capability to exploit them. Mexican oil production has dropped dramatically to 2.5 million barrels/day which led to fuel shortages which shuttered several Mexican automotive plants in 2013.

Texas firms have the technology and experience to revive Mexico's hydrocarbon industry. With an estimated of \$50 billion in foreign direct investment in the energy sector projected, spillover of that investment into Texas non-energy sectors should follow. If Mexico's GDP improves, the country will increase its import of many items from Texas. Opportunities abound, not only for energy companies but for hotels, skilled workers, food supply, retail and those supplying security in a hostile environment.

"Stronger growth in Mexico as the reforms take hold will boost trade with Texas companies. That will create new opportunities for individuals and companies on both sides of the border. The border could experience a dramatic transformation," the speakers agreed. The reforms could be responsible for adding 500,000 jobs in Mexico over the next two years. By

the end of 2018, the impact on Texas GDP is projected at \$45.4 billion with an increase in 217,000 jobs. Nevertheless, Ozuna cautioned against focusing all efforts on one natural resource such as oil.

Salinas noted that in the past, Brownsville had been dependent on maquila spinoffs, but now it was "addressing regional assets and human capital ... and focusing on becoming a vital part of the supply chain." A heavy manufacturing campus has been placed on the northwest side of the city. Major investments in infrastructure -- the 800MW Tenaska power plant, the Mazatlán-Matamoros supervia, water plants -- would let the region function like the international city that it is.

Jointly marketing the region, training of the workforce at all levels, and supporting local business creation are initiatives that should help reduce the economic disparities between Texas border cities and major metropolitan areas. Energy reform, it has been said, is not a panacea, but it is stepping in the right direction.

Running a Successful Family Business

By Carlos Vasquez

For many entrepreneurs, running a small business means working alongside family members. In fact, according to the Family Business Center, family-owned businesses make up 80-90% of all business enterprises in North America.

While entrepreneurial families may strive ardently and feel strong connections to their businesses, family-owned enterprises are not without their challenges. Family-owned businesses often have personal problems that evolve into business concerns. These issues frequently lead to tension that affect all employees of the business, including non-family members, and the business itself.

There are ways to mitigate these occurrences, however. Keeping these points in mind may lessen contentions in the workplace and allow for families with business ventures to enjoy the fruits of their collective labor.

Put it in writing.

It is extremely important that entrepreneurs have a partnership agreement in place when starting a business with family members. This document can help lessen any arguments and disputes on issues related to administration and management, accountability and misconduct, including dispute resolution. Hiring an attorney to draft the agreement is highly recommended.

Create a Chain-of-Command.

The U.S. Small Business Administration recommends that business owners create and display a chain-of-command in the company. Creating a clear chain-of-command based on skills and experience can help remove unnecessary communication problems in the business. This hierarchy helps family and non-family employees understand who to answer to and establishes the responsibilities of each family member in the company. Chains-of-command are a great way to show which family members have decision-making authority.

Define Roles.

It is important for family-owned businesses to keep work-life and home-life separate! It is also imperative to understand that the roles that family members have at home may be vastly different from those in the business.

Stay objective.

Personal conflict within a family is unavoidable; the trick is not to let it affect the business. When dealing with conflict among family members employed in the company, it is important to stay as objective as possible. Remaining objective will demonstrate to all employees of the company that family conflict and politics cannot be used to manipulate business operations.

Understand and comply with child labor rules.

At times, children may help with the family-

owned business. Employing children may not only affect the way the business is taxed, there are also legal issues to consider when hiring minors. Visit IRS.gov and DOL.gov for further information.

Prepare for the Future.

Creating a succession plan is a great way to ensure that the business survives long after the death or retirement of an owner. According to the Family Business Center, only 30% of family businesses continue to the second generation. Not having a plan or assuming that other family members will resume operations after the owner's departure may be disastrous. The succession plan should identify the goals of the business, who will lead the company and the roles of other family members. The transfer of business ownership to a chosen successor should also be established.

In addition to proper business planning, following the steps mentioned above can help in having a flourishing, family-owned business for generations to come.

Carlos Vasquez is a research assistant at the UTPA Small Business Development Center within the Business Development & Innovation Group. He provides support for business development efforts by lending in-depth research assistance to clients of the center. For more information on UTPA SBDC services for small businesses, call 665-7535.

GENERATIONS OF TRUSTED ADVICE



In the Spotlight



Top Left: Meet your employees, 15 years from now. Mission EDC's Code the Town is helping develop the next generation's STEM (Science-Technology-Engineering-Math), reading, logic and critical thinking skills. In December, over 150 kinder to sixth grade students completed the first two-week Sylvan Learning Coding Camp and became acquainted with computer science. Students explored coding and learned how to create their own video games and apps. Code the Town awakens students' interest in possible technical careers while growing Mission's future high tech employees. (VBR)



Middle Left: Representatives from Grand Rapids Foam Technologies, Fox Packaging, Zebra Technologies Corp. and Panasonic Corp. of North America with Kelly Services Inc. hold the \$216,303 Skills Development Fund grant check from the Texas Workforce Commission. The four-member manufacturing consortium will use the grant through South Texas College to custom train 252 new and incumbent workers in automation technology, welding, safety, quality and manufacturing skills. (VBR)



Bottom: Harlingen Mayor Chris Boswell and Matamoros Mayor Norma Leticia Salazar led two public ceremonies in December to formalize a "sister city agreement" symbolizing direct cooperation between the two cities. The mayors signed the international document which states that its purpose is to "strengthen the ties of friendship and cooperation" in ways that positively affect economic and social progress for the two cities. Some topics of mutual interest listed include public safety, trade, education, the environment, science and technology, and sports. (Courtesy)



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– **Pilar Gonzalez**
Dip it / Owner

*2nd place winner
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Safety tips will help you set up a family safety action plan.



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