

APRIL 2022

# VBR

## Deep Roots

**Battle Tested In Weslaco  
Brownsville's Sweet Spot  
Mission Goes Chic**

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# Spring Into Action

by: Todd Breland

When it's broken, we fix it, right? We fall, we get back up and make everything like it was or even better. That's the determination of the Rio Grande Valley.

Things don't always go the way we hope. Plans fall apart; systems break. When we get knocked down, we rise to the occasion and put on our big boy and girl pants. The sweat pours, the muscles ache, but the Rio Grande Valley is full of tradition and pride. We dust off our feet after the chips stack against us and we rebuild.

A recent catastrophe is the reason for my report today. Our very good friend from the Valley and his family were on the unfortunate side of Mother Nature's wrath just east of Austin. With a few snaps of the fingers, his property was devastated. One of the two homes was destroyed and the second suffered major damage.

Neighbors gathered, friends brought chainsaws and powers of the human spirit turned a disaster zone into a recovery operation. Our

Harlingen-native friend didn't ask for help (as he never would) but it came. And it came in abundance. A severe negative turned into a full-blown "we will rebuild."

Sometimes our businesses and organizations are knocked down to the foundation. Outside factors twist operations by splintering the very walls that sustain our companies: personnel, support systems, team morale. After the skies clear, we assess the damage, cry many tears and dig deep.

From recent years to recent weeks, our Valley businesses and our Valley-native friend say no to quitting. We say yes to winning because the brightness of tomorrow's sunlight is dependent upon us. Us as in together. Our companies and our homes were not built or rebuilt with one set of hands. Teamwork wins ... every time.

**We are One. We are the Rio Grande Valley.**

*If you would like to help our friend & his family recover from the March 21 tornado, please email me at [todd@valleybusinessreport.com](mailto:todd@valleybusinessreport.com).*



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# Mansion Finds New Mission In McAllen

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

A walk into Quinta Mazatlan takes patrons into a visual and architectural history of McAllen.

It was on this 80-acre site over eight decades ago that adventurer and writer Jason Chilton Matthews built one of the larger adobe homes in Texas. The 10,000-square-foot home stands tall today with a regal dignity overlooking an estate of lush green habitat.

Quinta Mazatlan is one part an architectural wonder in how the Spanish Revival style mansion has been preserved and restored to its original grandeur. Its secondary piece is as spectacular with wildlife corridors and “palm condos” providing pathways through vibrant natural settings. The Matthews estate of

mid-1930s origin sits just east of McAllen’s airport. It is today an urban sanctuary with a wide reach of programs, events and youth education.

The mansion was saved in 1998 from the wrecking ball when the City of McAllen purchased it during an auction and recognized it as a local jewel. It was too valuable to lose forever. The big house and grounds reopened as a “mansion with a mission” in 2006. It has become just that, welcoming 80,000 annual visitors of all ages and types, including birders and 15,000 area students who come to learn about the Tamaulipan forests once prevalent in the Rio Grande Valley.

“Since its origin, Quinta Mazatlan has been

about engaging children of all ages with the natural world,” said Colleen Hook, the facility’s manager. “The beautiful sanctuary is used to teach and inspire others to grow nature throughout the city and region, starting in one’s backyard.”

## Students Drawn To Sanctuary

On a recent Friday morning, a large group of high school-aged students were busy in groups of twos and threes, transplanting tree seedlings.

Quinta Mazatlan has “strong academic alliances,” according to Hook. Those partnerships include agreements with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley and over 20 area



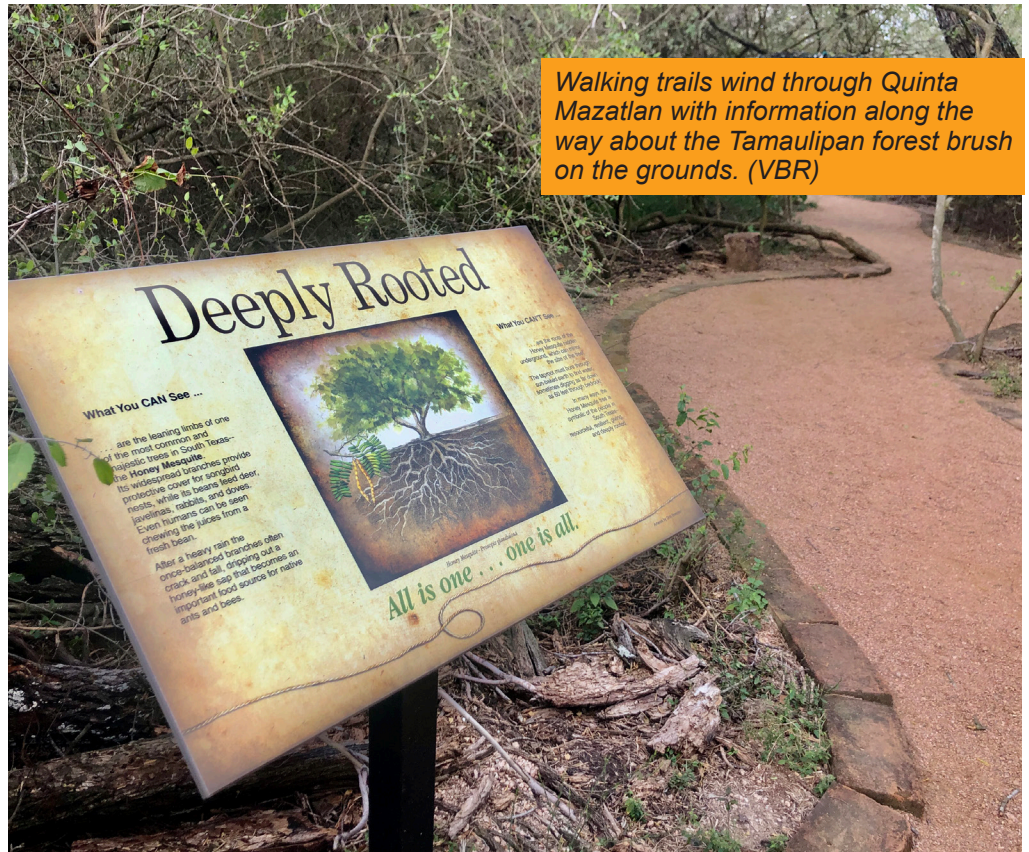
A walkway leads to one of the front entrances to Quinta Mazatlan. (VBR)



school districts. The most notable partnership, perhaps, is the one with the McAllen Independent School District. Quinta's current contract with McAllen ISD includes on-site field visits by third-, fifth- and seventh-grade students along with high school students in advanced science classes.

The school district's presence at the urban sanctuary will grow in the years ahead with approval of \$4 million in funding to expand Quinta Mazatlan. It will construct a McAllen ISD Discovery Center in the coming years. The school funds came through federal dollars meant to assist students returning from the pandemic to safe school activities. The initiative drew some local opposition and unfavorable national media coverage that the project would use pandemic-related funding.

It is an investment, however, into something that is already working. Quinta Mazatlan gives students across many grades a look at something unique. The ecosystem and native habitat of the Valley attracts visitors and birders from all over the country and the world. Students see firsthand what people travel thousands of miles to observe in the literal backyard of where Valley youth live.



Walking trails wind through Quinta Mazatlan with information along the way about the Tamaulipan forest brush on the grounds. (VBR)



## ALAMO EDC REVOLVING LOAN FUND PROGRAM

The Revolving Loan Program is just one of the incentives the Alamo Economic Development Corporation has established as part of our efforts to encourage business growth and job creation in the city. This program is designed to assist small businesses and start-ups by providing a low-cost alternative financing option.



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Colorful touches adorn the grounds of Quinta Mazatlan. (VBR)



“Our space will be doubled in order to accommodate more students and more hands-on learning opportunities,” Hook said of what she called the Center for Urban Ecology. “Environmental stewardship doesn’t magically happen at age 18, or when one begins one’s first job. Caring for the environment must begin at a young age and in various formats, programs and opportunities. The CUE will offer Valley students more learning and research opportunities.”

### Splendor Of A Mansion

The grounds of this urban sanctuary are a visual treat which seem sufficiently spectacular.

And then you step into the Matthews mansion.

There are bright chandeliers hanging atop tables and furniture from decades past. Carved front doors engraved in the 1930s by a Swiss wood carver warrant a written historical account, saying they were meant to recreate a Spanish governor’s palace. Sunlight streaming in from large windows light long hallways.

This was the headquarters for Matthews

and his wife Marcia, who traveled the world during World War I. Legend has it that he fought alongside Lawrence of Arabia. Matthews somehow found his way to what he called the “crossroads of the Western Hemisphere” of McAllen of the 1930s. It’s where he built his mansion with an adobe swimming pool and a Roman bath.

“For the walls of his mansion, he experimented with his own secret formula for adobe bricks, descended from, he claimed, King Nebuchadnezzar’s palace in ancient Babylon,” a framed poster says near Quinta’s entrance. “Local townspeople scoffed that the first heavy rain would wash Quinta Mazatlan away. But the bricks survived – outlasting the owners.”

Indeed, it has, with Matthews and his wife passing in the 1960s after living long lives. Their mansion today is home base for tours, special events, folk art and all manner of discussions and information about birds, butterflies, plants and wildlife. The home and the habitat, as its builder intended, have become a new crossroads with rare bird sightings, and tourists and students coming to see the mansion that is still on a mission.



A statue of a native cat strikes a pose along one of the trails at Quinta Mazatlan. (VBR)



Long hallways with tile floors are one of the many features of the Spanish Revival style mansion. (VBR)

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# Veteran Finds Solitude & Freedom Via Fishing

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Ruben Sanchez's man cave doesn't feature the usual bank of big screen televisions and pool tables, with a stuffed deer head or two mounted on the walls.

For Sanchez, it's "my sanctuary," a place to retreat within himself to take away "a lot of my demons." He is a Purple Heart recipient and former airborne paratrooper who uses his getaway to assemble handmade fishing rods in a converted garage of his Weslaco home.

Battle Born Rodz is what he calls his company, a title well-earned with his years of service in the U.S. Army while being stationed first in Germany, and then eventually Afghanistan, where he was seriously injured. Battle Born for now is a two-man shop with his brother-in-law helping with the building of rods. They ship out as many six rods a week to points all across the country.

"California, Florida, Alaska, you name it," Sanchez said. "We haven't stopped since May 2021. There hasn't been time to go into retail with all the individual orders we get."

It all started as "a side hustle, a hobby," he said, with his late mother sitting in the corner of what would become his workshop.

"My mom would see me making a rod for myself and say, 'Ever thought of doing it as a business? There's going to be people who will want your fishing rods.'"

It seemed like an unlikely path for someone who grew up playing soccer – not fishing – in Mission. By the time Sanchez's mother made her suggestion, he knew the newfound hobby was the therapy that would provide an exit from the demons of his recent past.

## Attention To Detail

Each of the carbon fiber fishing rods lined up in Sanchez's workshop requires the careful assembly of 15 parts before getting to a finished product.

Sanchez holds one rod up, looking down the length of it, checking if everything is lining up just right. Each rod has a personal flair, a touch that makes it unique, be it a Dallas Cowboy logo, a customer's last name or a Mexican theme of some sort, especially those with a serape design.

"Those are my biggest sellers," he said of the Mexican themes. "A custom rod is

more personal, so it has more of a value to a customer than a regular, store-bought rod you can get at Wal-Mart."

Plastic bags filled with foams, reel seats, threads and lines hang over a long work board where the individual pieces are attached to the rods during the assembly process. The work on a rod can take days or weeks, depending on what a custom-

er wants. Investors have already offered resources to scale up his operations but Sanchez is hesitant for now to go bigger.

Battle Born Rodz exists and succeeds, in part, due to the role of social media in today's business world. Working in solitude from his Weslaco home, he has a national presence thanks to the thousands of followers he has on TikTok and its video-focused



*Ruben Sanchez has found a sanctuary in his Weslaco workshop where he makes handcrafted fishing rods. (VBR)*



networking service.

Sanchez picks up his cell phone, gets online in seconds, connects to TikTok and scrolls down his account page which is filled with videos and music, a lively digital marketplace that can take him anywhere.

"It's crazy," he said. "It's where people know what I'm doing."

### Finding His Way

Sanchez described going through "a culture shock" in coming back to the Rio Grande Valley after his years of overseas military duty.

"It was like back to reality," he said in dealing with a more normal life after the rigors and dangers of military life in Afghanistan.

It was a reality of dealing with the aftermath of what his military years inflicted. He suffered serious injuries, sidestepped death more than a few times, endured back surgery and painful knees from jumping off planes, and in his personal life, went through a divorce.

"There's a saying in the military that when you leave you're either drunk, divorced, or

disabled," he said. "I was all three."

Sanchez would regroup back home, but it would take time. He recalled those years back home when "everything would pile up," especially his struggles with alcoholism. He would remarry, go back to college to get his degree, all of which helped as he worked through rehabilitating from injuries and surgeries.

Sanchez sensed he still needed something more to take the space he was giving to drinking. He turned to kayaking and then with it, found fishing, which together gave

him a physical challenge where he could apply his restless energies. It led to Sanchez giving up drinking, a development that surprised some of his family members who figured fishing would give him another outlet for alcohol.

The opposite turned out to be true. Fishing liberated him and led him to sobriety.

"It's enough for me to be out on the water," Sanchez said. "When I go more than a few days without fishing, I start getting anxious. Then I get back out there and I'm fine."

"It centers me back," he said.



The handmade rods at Battle Born Rodz feature individual designs suited to what customers want. (VBR)



An Airborne patch in Ruben Sanchez's workshop is a remainder of his overseas military service. (VBR)

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# Bakery Finds Sweet Niche Across RGV

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Manuel Alvarez describes himself as a persistent sort, who once putting his mind to something is not easily deterred.

Those personal attributes were put to the test when Alvarez took on the challenge of being a baker of detail-heavy Japanese cotton cheesecakes. With the help of his wife, Nadia Escalante, Alvarez would “start a business out of nowhere.”

Rio Grande Valley communities are dotted with pan dulce shops and long-standing custom cake bakeries. In this mix, there is nothing quite like The Sweet Blvd, which makes and sells only one product. Pastel Japonés is how the Brownsville-based bakery describes what it offers. The fluffy sponge-looking cake has the rich custard elements of American cheesecakes with the addition of cream cheese.

To see one, yellow all around with sugar sprinkled atop to make for a snowy covering, is to imagine what a perfect dessert might taste like if you could find one. Getting to that finished product is no easy feat. Alvarez described how each Japanese cheesecake takes two hours to bake and requires four temperature changes during the process. Its complexities extend to the ingredients. There are 12 of them and the measurements of each must be exact.

“If you miss by three grams, you notice it,” Alvarez said. “It’s like a chemistry class.”

## An Exact Specialty

The challenges of making the Japanese version of the Western-style cheesecakes may explain why there were so few of them to be found at Valley bakeries. Alvarez and his wife checked around in 2019 to see if the Japanese pastry they were learning to make was available at area bakeries.

“We tried it, but it’s too difficult and it takes too long to bake,” he recalled being told by the few Valley bakers who had even tried making Japanese cheesecakes.

Baking in quantities is a business necessity for many Valley panaderías offering empanadas and conchas. There was no time to focus on the delicious but troublesome Japanese cheesecake. By then, Alvarez was progressing in his understanding of making a dessert delicacy from East Asia. The early reviews and feedback from family and friends was positive. Alvarez figured that maybe he was on to something.

“I told my wife, ‘No one else is making it, so why not us?’” he said.

It was time to start the business out of nowhere.

## Finding A Following

First there would be the deliveries, meeting customers in large parking lots in Harlingen, Pharr and McAllen.

There were weekly trips to Harlingen and Pharr, with frequent stops in McAllen as well. Their existing sales in Brownsville served as the home base.

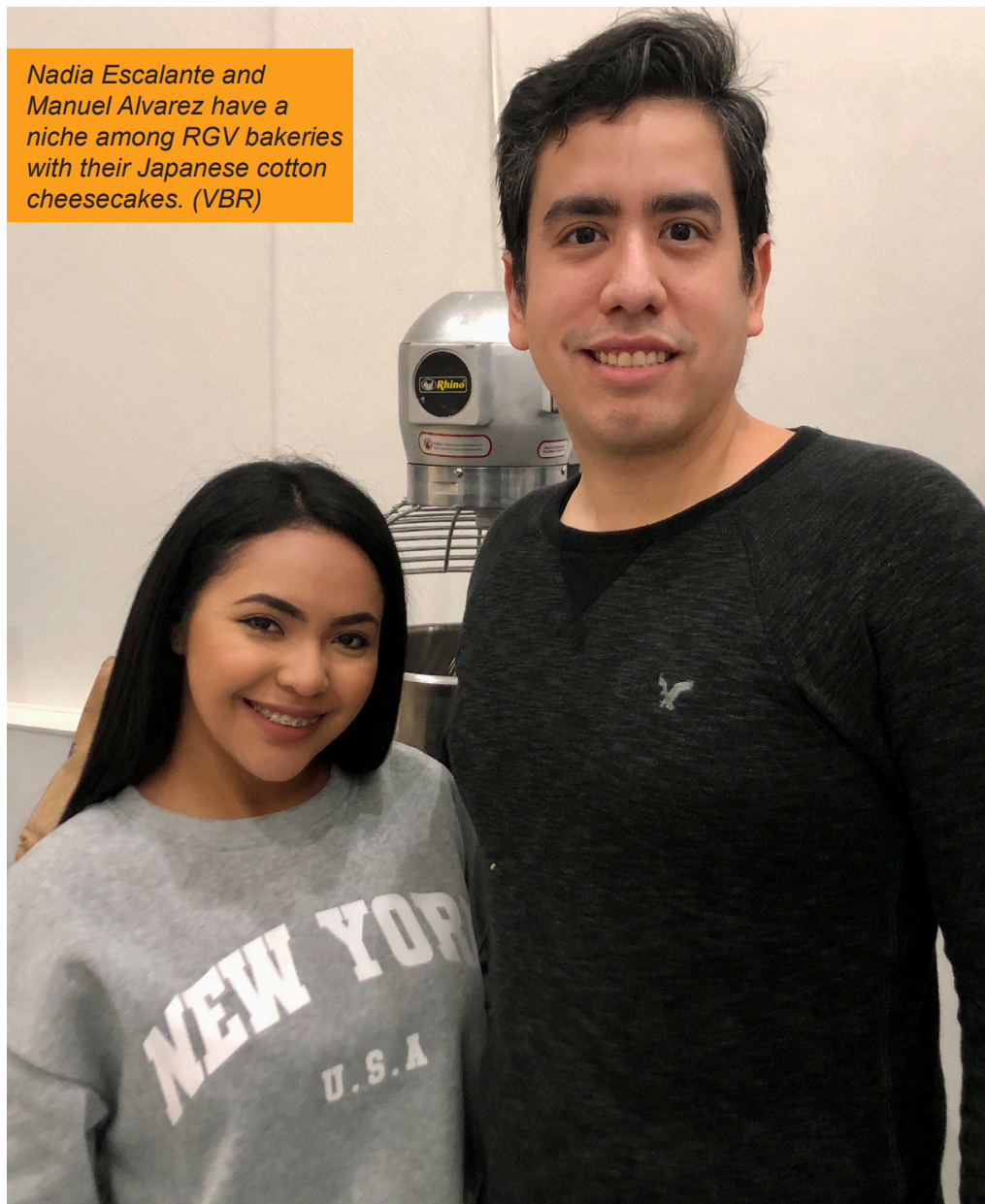
“When are you delivering again to Pharr?” asked one customer, Belinda Pruneda, on Facebook.

She wasn’t the only one asking. The Sweet

Blvd, with no storefront at the time, built up a social media presence based on word of mouth and positive customer reviews. The volume of likes and followers on Facebook was building, going over the 10,000 mark in a few months. The Sweet Blvd was also connecting with hundreds of customers on Instagram. Pictures of Japanese cheesecakes are eye candy. The positive reviews to go with the images of the cakes made by Alvarez and Escalante were more than enough to stir curiosity and the desire to try one.

“Did you get one already?” asked Adriana Arreola to a friend on The Sweet Blvd’s Facebook page.

*Nadia Escalante and Manuel Alvarez have a niche among RGV bakeries with their Japanese cotton cheesecakes. (VBR)*





In Valley Spanglish fashion, Alondra Perez responded, “No siempre que me acuerdo, ya estan sold out!”

The Brownsville couple steadily picked up production of their cheesecakes so customers like Perez could find one even if they forgot to ask for one. They began selling 150 cakes a week and in one holiday period sold 200 cakes in two days. Their at-home Brownsville bakery kicked into overdrive and they eventually realized more space was needed to grow their business. Searching for a Brownsville storefront location, they were turned down at one shopping plaza because its managers didn’t want to lease to a business making only one product.

“We were like, ‘Do you realize there are a lot of people who want what we sell?’” Escalante recalled asking.

### Baking Texas Style 1

Hardly deterred, the couple would find a good location on Boca Chica Boulevard, just east of Expressway 77/83 and along one of Brownsville’s busier traffic corridors.

At their new storefront, Alvarez and Escalante recently took a little time to rest and reflect how fast they’ve grown a business started out of curiosity, with only a guess how a heavily Hispanic market would take to a dessert with Far East origins.

“We never thought it’d go this well,” Escalante said. “We’re the specialists.”

Alvarez smiled at his wife’s description before going into a mini-history of how the Japanese took a European version of the cheesecake and put their own spin on it during the 1960s. He went on to describe the Spanish version of cheesecakes and how there are so many influences into what is made in his Brownsville bakery. The Sweet Blvd, he said, is developing its own version.

“We’re still trying to make it better,” he said. “We’re working on putting a Texan style to it.”



*A batch of Japanese cheesecakes fresh out of the oven in Brownsville. (Courtesy)*



*Japanese cheesecakes are a delight to see and taste, but require attention to detail in the baking process. (Courtesy)*



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# SPI Expecting Resurgence Of Spring Breakers

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

The South Padre Island spring breaks of most recent years were quite different from those that came before them. There were lower numbers but some good came out of the leaner seasons of 2020 and 2021.

The imagery of rollicking college-aged students was replaced by the more mature demographic family groups. There were fewer crowds to get through with the temporary decline of college youth on semester breaks. The pandemic broke up those routines with remote learning and less of a need to break up old routines.

The 2022 spring break season sees more of a familiar pattern with more colleges returning to regular semester schedules. The mold, however, has somewhat been broken up. SPI officials are seeking to retain the family group numbers while appealing anew to college students.

"You could say COVID was a negative, and it was, but it also gave us a new audience," said Teresa Rodriguez, the senior marketing and communications manager for the South Padre Island Convention & Visitors Bureau. "We saw more families and more tourists from other parts of the country."

Spring break marketing dollars, Rodriguez said, were split up between college students and family group demographics. The allocation of those spring tourist dollars indicates that SPI intends to move away from a historically heavy reliance on students in March going into April in seeking more diverse audiences during this time of year.

There's another huge consideration for the spring 2022 tourist season. It's the Mexican nationals and their traditional treks to the Island for Easter break. All of that was curtailed in 2020 and 2021 with restrictions largely keeping Mexican tourists from South Padre. It's a different situation in 2022 and the restrictions are largely gone. Island officials are thus expecting Mexican tourists to return in similar numbers from previous Easter holidays.

"I would say a lot of families are looking to come back," said SPI Police Chief Claudine O'Carroll. "I believe we're ready."

## Planning Ahead

Getting ready for the spring break rush is no easy task for Chief O'Carroll and other SPI city leaders.

The list is long for an Island community that goes from about 3,000 year-round residents to

50,000 plus with all of the spring visitors coming to SPI. O'Carroll's department therefore hires additional officers for the busy weeks of March and April. More jail personnel are also added and the local police department reaches out to other law enforcement agencies for help, including the Texas Department of Public Safety, the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

"It's a lifeline for us," O'Carroll said of the assistance from state and federal agencies. "We're a small town. The help we get from our partners is very important and much appreciated."

O'Carroll plays a leading role in setting up an emergency operations center at SPI City

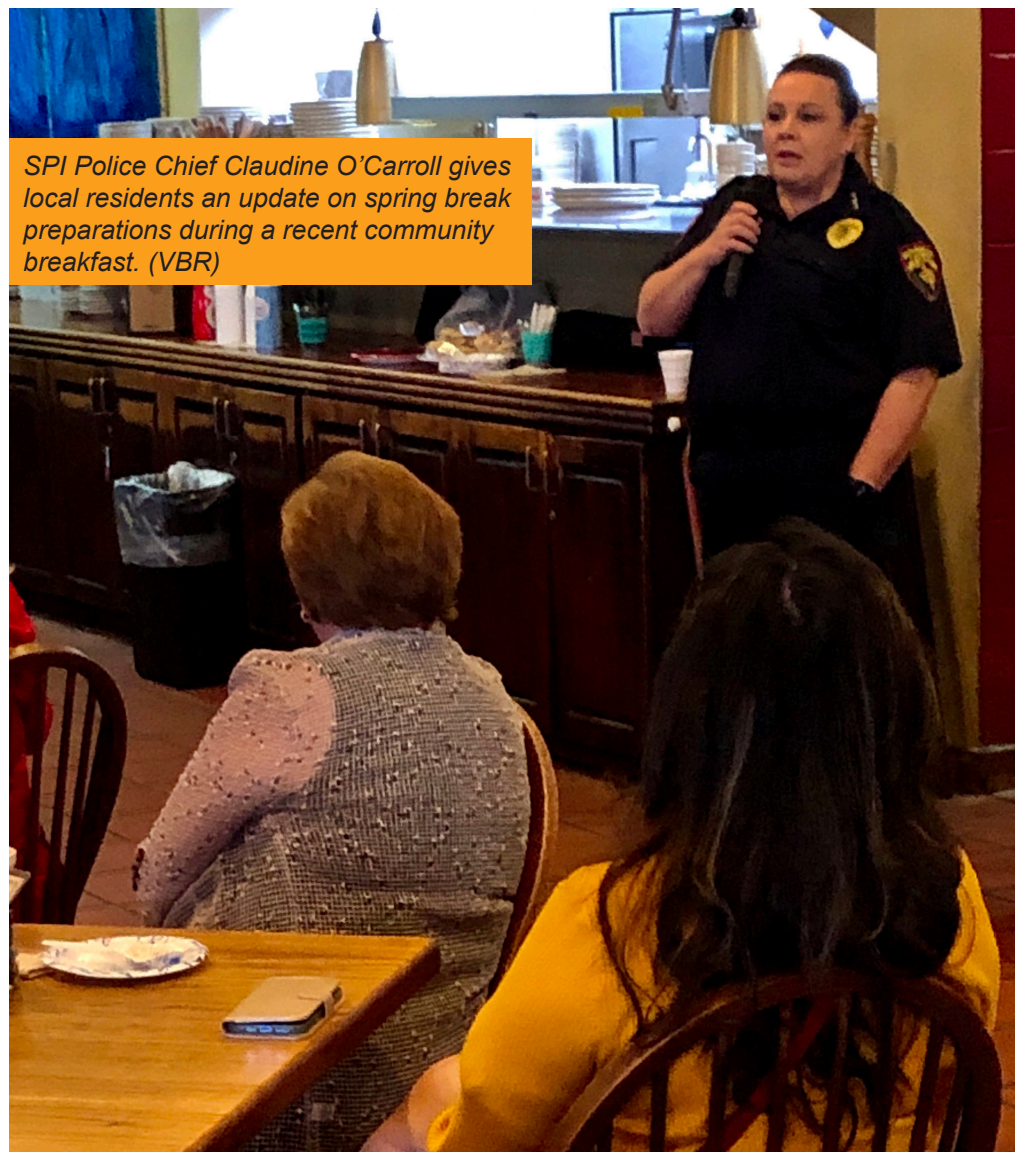
Hall. It serves as a hub for local police and fire department administrators to coordinate their efforts with their federal and state partners. These days, those efforts include monitoring social media activity for any possible threats before they can lead to potential trouble.

"We plan for the worst and hope for the best," the SPI police chief said.

## New Awareness

At the convention and visitors bureau, Rodriguez said her organization has discovered a new wrinkle among the college-aged students of today.

Those coming these days for breaks from semester life aren't making SPI a destination just for the beach and surf.



*SPI Police Chief Claudine O'Carroll gives local residents an update on spring break preparations during a recent community breakfast. (VBR)*



“They are more environmentally aware,” Rodriguez said of how spring breakers are changing. “They are more interested in nature and adventure.”

This could lead to more visits to area world birding centers on the Island and elsewhere in the Rio Grande Valley. Hiking at the nearby Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge may be an option for an outdoor adventure, as well as visiting the new South Texas Ecotourism Park in Laguna Vista.

All-in-all, the 2022 spring break season promises improved numbers for the Island with a return to more normal routines and daily life, with plans to incorporate new developments in tourism and market anew to make SPI a continued destination.

Island officials report that college students of today are more environmentally conscious and interested in birding centers and wildlife areas. (VBR)



Right: SPI's Visitors & Convention Bureau is marketing to both families and college students in revising plans from previous spring break seasons.

Far Right: SPI businesses are expecting an increase of tourists this spring over 2020 and 2021 seasons.





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# Mission Entrepreneur Drives To Success

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Cassy Rodriguez had what she called “the best job ever” as a driver for pre-production Ford trucks displayed at car shows and big entertainment venues featuring stars and celebrities.

The job paid well, too, but the Mission native was spending weeks at a time away from home. It was a huge sacrifice for the mother of three young children. The tours to promote a new F-150 model or a Ranger pickup would last for months. Rodriguez flew home for a few days before heading out on the road again and away from her children.

It was ultimately too much to bear for the young mother. She would leave the Ford Motor Company job, but not before developing a new plan for her future. Rodriguez wanted to own her business and base it in her hometown. She steadily put away money to give her the startup resources to launch a new local venture. Rodriguez started the online version of Dos Chicas Boutique in early 2019 while still working for Ford.

The boutique’s style is western chic. From the start, online sales via Facebook, TikTok and Instagram were good and kept improving. Rodriguez added mobile sales in selling clothing and accessories from the back of a trailer parked at local, high foot-traffic events. The successes of all of those efforts were promising enough that Rodriguez decided to take the plunge. She left her job with Ford in late 2020 and opened a Dos Chicas store location in March 2021.

Rodriguez beamed with pride recently at her Griffin Parkway store in Mission in recounting the lessons learned from Ford and going out on her own.

“You try to be unique and get brands no one has heard of,” she said of running a business in a competitive clothing category. “I learned about customer service working for Ford. You need to do a lot for your customers. That’s the way it should be.”

## Being There For Customers

The Rio Grande Valley Livestock Show was around the corner in March when two customers from Weslaco walked into Dos Chicas.

They are Instagram followers of Dos Chicas and had been keeping a close eye on

the available selections with the big show in Mercedes coming up. One is a schoolteacher who took a day off to kick back and get the look she was searching for.

“It’s what we do,” Rodriguez said in assisting the customers who drove over from Weslaco. “We have customers that come to us and say, ‘Can you dress me up?’ It might be for a livestock show or a rodeo or a country music concert. I help customers pick out clothes that maybe they couldn’t picture themselves in, but when they see themselves wearing it, they love it.”

Online sales are a must for most businesses these days, as they are for Dos Chicas, but the store location allows for more of the in-person interaction Rodriguez enjoys. Her banter with in-store customers appears to be effortless. Customers take well to her suggestions, asking Rodriguez for advice on

styles, brands and fits.

“Oh, that’ll look good on you, girl,” Rodriguez tells one customer before she heads to a dressing room to try it on.

The salesmanship gene appears to be passed on to Rodriguez’s young daughter Maci, the other girl in Dos Chicas. When not in school, she likes to be in the store pitching in to do her part. The family affair continues with two aunts who work at Rodriguez’s store and are known by customers as “the tias.”

“It’s a lot of fun, really, dealing with customers, being friendly, having conversations, which is no problem for me since I like to talk,” Rodriguez said, smiling, as a customer walked out of a dressing room with an armful of clothing to buy.

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Cassy Rodriguez has taken lessons learned from working for Ford Motor Company and instilled them in her Mission store. (VBR)





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## MISSION

Continued from Page 14

### Hometown Connection

The majority of Rodriguez's sales are online, which she estimates at 60 percent to in-store sales of 40 percent.

Rodriguez is proud of all of the merchandise she sends out around the country while relishing the local footprint she now has with her store. She is achieving a dream of owning and running a business in her hometown. Rodriguez displays plenty of self-confidence but admitted to jitters when opening her store.

"I signed the lease on the same day I quit Ford," she recalled of the store location. "I felt like, 'Oh my God, am I ready?'"

Rodriguez, as it turned out, was more than ready, as two satisfied customers walked out the door for the drive back home to Weslaco, ready and soon to be dressed up for the livestock show.



*Cassy Rodriguez seeks out brands and vibrant styles that are unique in the western chic style. (VBR)*



*The Maci Collection at Dos Chicas is named after the business owner's daughter. (VBR)*

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# Agency Provides Services For Deaf In RGV

By Chris Ardis

Driving down Pecan Boulevard in McAllen, you may miss the homelike office bearing the sign “DHHC.”

The Deaf and Hard of Hearing Center is one of two in Region 11, which covers 22 counties from Corpus Christi to Laredo.

“In Hidalgo County alone, over 200,000 residents have hearing loss,” said Marla Martinez, the deaf and hard-of-hearing access specialist and center coordinator in the Rio Grande Valley. The DHHC provides a wide range of services to deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

“I am deaf and I speak,” said Martinez. “My parents are deaf, too, but my brother and sister are hearing.”

Martinez and her husband Eddie, also deaf, have two adult daughters. She recalled responding to a newspaper advertisement

seeking an access specialist to serve the Valley for DHHC.

“I begged for a small office here,” said Martinez of her hopes to serve the region.

Jaime Lugo, the executive director and the nonprofit’s board heard her pleas, establishing a DHHC in Edinburg in August 2020. They quickly outgrew it and moved to McAllen.

“We have access specialists who teach deaf and hard-of-hearing people how to self-advocate,” Martinez explained, “especially for their Americans with Disabilities Act rights. We teach them how to self-advocate first and we step in when we need to.”

## Training & Information

The ADA is a federal law. It went into effect in 1990, and much work remains to

teach municipalities and businesses about its requirements, which includes providing ASL interpreters in law-enforcement, and medical and legal situations. The DHHC technology specialist works with the Texas Workforce Commission to provide technology to deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, making their lives easier.

“Did you know there are Bluetooth hearing aids now?” Martinez asked.

These aids allow users to connect directly to cellular phones, televisions, tablets and other electronic devices. DHHC clients learn about alarm clocks with pulsating lights and bed shakers. This kind of technology is available at reduced prices through Specialized Telecommunications Assistance Program vouchers.

DHHC also works with TWC to pro-





vide job placement, helping clients create resumes, write cover and thank-you letters, search for jobs online and ask for interpreters for job interviews. The center also helps clients determine what Social Security disability benefits are available for them.

The DHHC strives to offer sign-language-interpreting services. Entities needing to hire a sign-language interpreter for a deaf patient, employee, customer or resident can call the DHHC office any day of the week. There are also training sessions provided. Every two years, the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement requires training on interacting with drivers who are deaf or hard of hearing. The DHHC offers this free, four-hour training to law enforcement agencies.

### Reaching All Ages

Beyond those rigors and requirements, the DHHC knows how to have fun. It provides outings and camps for deaf and hard-of-hearing senior citizens and youth. For those over 55, there are monthly activities. The DHHC reached out to youth last summer by taking youngsters to Camp Rio in Brownsville for canoeing and archery.

Another component among DHHC programs is a one-week Baby Sign Language Camp to be held this summer. This camp is specifically designed for hearing parents with hearing babies. Babies understand and use sign language up to a year before they develop speech, allowing them to communicate early. Research shows this early language development carries over to speech and to reading comprehension.

Financial resources are critical for the DHHC. The agency is contracted by the state for its access and technology services, Martinez said. It nonetheless still relies on grants and donations for all youth and senior-citizen programs.

The third Thursday of each month, the DHHC hosts ASL Karaoke at Brick Fire Pizza in Mission.

"It's a blast," Martinez said, adding that every dollar they earn makes their mission more attainable. "People can also donate on our website at [deafhhcenter.org](http://deafhhcenter.org). They can comment if they want the donation to go for a specific program."

Martinez' hands, and her voice, speak with excitement about the growth within the Region 11 DHHCs.

"We're here to help people with hearing loss learn to self-advocate," she said. "We're here for the community, to help them learn."





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