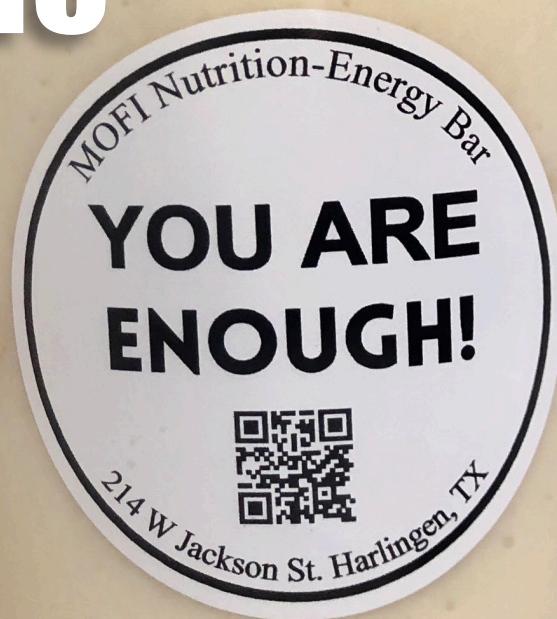


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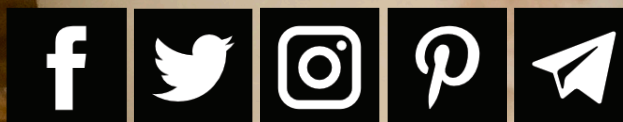
# VBR

## Flavors Of Life

**Trucking In Mercedes  
Welcoming Winter Texans  
McAllen Makes Pitch**



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# Preparing Our Homes and Businesses

by: Todd Breland

We all try to avoid a particular subject but it is a necessary conversation. In just a few weeks, the Atlantic hurricane season begins. June 1 through November 30 keeps us on our toes, especially through September.

Deep South Texas in recent years has seen its share of late spring through summer disastrous conditions due to excessive rainfall. We know well a sitting tropical system doesn't need to be a hurricane to bring chaos to our lives. Of course, the winds of a hurricane adds a new level of problems. Stalled or very slow moving system seems to be have the Valley's number in recent years.

Now is an excellent time do what is necessary rather than waiting until a tropical system parks itself over the Rio Grande Valley. May is optimal time for taking inventory of commercial and personal belongings, storing property photos on a Cloud, updating insurance policies and preparing an evacua-

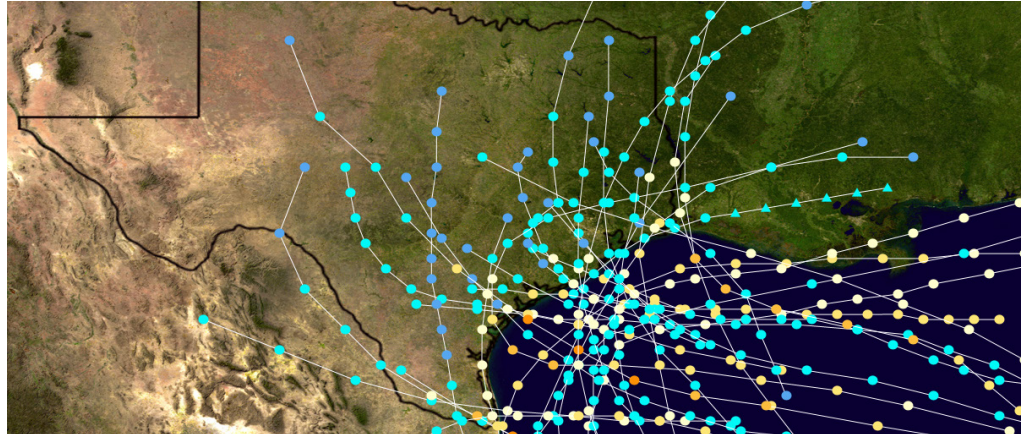
tion plan for weather-related disasters.

Obviously, flooding is our main concern. Our region is geographically disadvantaged being at or below sea level. We can't change that, but what we can change is how we prepare for the unexpected. Make no mistake about it -- Mother Nature is in charge. Trust someone who participates in high water res-

cues, the force of water and wind is no joke.

Within the next few weeks, please finalize a preparation plan for any tropical system. I challenge all of us to prepare this month for any level tropical development. Hurricane season begins June 1, but systems are certainly possible late May.

Be ready. Stay RGV strong.



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# Table Of Contents

Executive Summary	3
Raising The Bar	5
Poised For Growth	8
Keep On Truckin'	10
Winter Mission	12
A World All His Own	14
Batter Up!	17

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# Shop Sparks Good Vibes & Warm Welcomes

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Driving down Jackson Street toward Commerce, parking spaces are sparse near the old intersection that's a historic crossroads in downtown Harlingen.

The MOFI Nutrition – Energy Bar has something to do with this new burst of energy near Jackson and Commerce. Walk into the business and you get a warm welcome with the music of a fitness gym beating behind the shortened wall of the MOFI's front counter. Kaci Spikes-Kemp stands behind the nutrition bar's counter, exchanging greetings with gym patrons.

An array of powders, nuts and juices are all around her, the stuff that powers her wide selection of “Mega Teas” and protein shakes. The workout place behind MOFI is a separate operation with a different owner. The gym's customers walk by the MOFI bar on their way to and from their workouts. The two businesses blend nicely and contribute to the vibe and mission of what Spikes-Kemp is seeking to accomplish.

“I wanted something that adds positivity to my life and to the lives of others,” she said.

The capitalized words behind her shop's name define Spikes-Kemp's objective.

“Make Others Feel Important,” she said of the meaning behind the acronym of her shop's name.

The last few years have been mournful ones in dealing with the realities and effects of COVID-19, she said. Now more than ever, communities need positive places where residents can go and feel welcomed.

“You can take only so much sadness until you're filled up with another source,” Spikes-Kemp said.

In Harlingen, she wants her MOFI to be one of those sources.

## Finding Positivity

Spikes-Kemp is an East Texas native who came to Harlingen in late 2018. Her husband is retired military, Air Force, and took a job with an energy company at the Port of Harlingen. It was starting a new chapter in their lives. They knew little about the Rio Grande Valley. It had mostly been a drive-by on the way to South Padre Island.

The newcomers came to like the Valley culture, which Spikes-Kemp described as being family oriented and friendly. Har-

lingen appealed to her as being a city of respectable size but still small enough that when going out “you'll probably see someone you know.”

The pandemic put a dent in community spirit, as it did everywhere. Social distancing and limited access to public places

brought mental health issues of loneliness and separation. Spikes-Kemp was familiar with those issues in working as a peer support specialist for an organization in San Antonio that helps the homeless. During the pandemic, Spikes-Kemp was involved in online counseling to help people struggling



*Kaci Spikes-Kemp's smile and vibe makes everyone feel important at MOFI Nutrition. (VBR)*



with mental health aspects associated with the time.

She did so from the perspective of someone who has worked to overcome addiction.

“Seven years sober,” Spikes-Kemp said.

She made a trip back home as the pandemic eased and enjoyed a visit to a protein shake shop owned by a friend in East Texas.

“You could just feel the positivity,” Spikes-Kemp said. “That’s what I needed in my life, a place like that one.”

Getting back home, she set out to do just that, in Harlingen.

### Flavors Of Life

It starts out with the teas and there are plenty of them.

Most are served cold but hot is an option if that’s what a customer wants. The choices include coconut dream, cotton candy, gummy bear, and red high heels with strawberry, kiwi and raspberry among the ingredients. On the protein shake side, there’s banana crème pie, lemon ice box, pistachio delight and dulce de leche, just to name a few.



The MOFI Nutrition-Energy Bar features a wide variety of flavors for “Mega-Teas” and protein shakes. (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.



#### TO QUALIFY:

- Business must be located in Alamo.
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- 51% of the businesses must be owned by US Citizens or Resident Aliens.
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- Construction.
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Alamo EDC (956) 787-6622 [www.alamoedc.org](http://www.alamoedc.org)



MOFI Nutrition is helping to energize downtown Harlingen. (VBR)



All drinks are sugar free and sweetened by organic Stevia. It's not just about the colorful drink selections. Spikes-Kemp wants it to be about making healthy lifestyle choices, citing a mother who became a regular customer and used MOFI's teas as a form of "clean energy." The teas when combined with other positive lifestyle changes led to weight loss.

"She started noticing she had more energy to do more with her kids," Spikes-Kemp said of the customer. "A story like that makes everything worth it. I've had people like that come in for a drink and turned it into an entire lifestyle change."

Big windows bring in lots of natural light from Jackson Street. Some MOFI customers enjoy sitting by a small counter, sipping their drinks, looking out on downtown Harlingen going by. It's that kind of place, a hangout to enjoy, with more seating on the way, Spikes-Kemp said as she continues to redesign and tweak her shop at 214 West Jackson.

"I love being downtown," she said. "I feel like the community wants to grow and improve. I'm happy to be part of it."



Oats, waffles and so much more are in the offerings at MOFI Nutrition. (VBR)



No-sugar teas and shakes energize and refresh the customers of MOFI Nutrition. (VBR)

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This 11,322 sf building sits in the heart of Donna, Texas at the corner of Main and Fordyce Ave, Adjacent to the fire/police department and HEB Grocery.

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# Tres Lagos Success Spurs RGV Developments

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

In 1997, the limits of north McAllen didn't go much past Trenton Road, with the first signs of development just beginning to take shape in the form of a sign promising a new H-E-B on the way.

From that corner of Trenton and 10th Street, it was a trek much further north on adjacent Ware Road as it went past state Highway 107. Farmland with scattered duck ponds is what that part of McAllen's extra territorial jurisdiction looked like back then. An East Texas family that had recently sold its meat packing business saw the same farmland and envisioned other possibilities in the years to come.

Nick Rhodes recalled his family coming to the Rio Grande Valley around that time and sizing up a region they believed was poised for significant growth. It would take time, they realized, for McAllen's growth to migrate further north in its ETJ. They were

confident it would. They began buying up farmland and used it for those purposes to generate revenue.

Being patient, waiting it out, they purchased more property in going further north from Ware to Monte Cristo Road. By the year 2000, the Rhodes family had purchased 10,000 acres. Mission and Edinburg city limits pushed up against the western and eastern boundaries, respectively. The ambitious project was beginning to take shape. It was the beginning of Tres Lagos, a 2,571-acre master planned community, which opened in 2017. In just five years, over 1,500 homes have been built at Tres Lagos. There is block after block of new homes in what is now McAllen's new north.

It's not only homes. There are parks, walking trails, ponds and picnic areas, and schools. One is an IDEA Academy campus and another is a nearby middle school on

Rooth Road that is part of the Edinburg school district. Just over the horizon of the main entrance to Tres Lagos, a large multi-story building comes into view. It's the Valley's Texas A&M University campus.

"Everything so far has exceeded our expectations," said Rhodes, the president and chief executive officer of his family's mixed-use development company. "We're ahead of schedule."

## Looking Ahead

Rhodes Enterprises sees Tres Lagos as a 30-year project as it continues to push northward.

The progress thus far is impressive, but there are still several thousand acres to develop. There are 25 years to go before completion. The goals in addition to home construction include enhancing the emerging community with retail and health care facil-



*Tres Lagos has a grand entrance to its neighborhoods off of Ware Road in north McAllen. (Courtesy)*



ities and other services that will be readily available to Tres Lago residents.

Shoppes At Tres Lagos is under construction with the first stores and restaurants to be opened by summer. South Texas Health Systems has announced plans to build and open a facility in the Tres Lagos area. The concept is to create a designed living area with green spaces, parks, and commercial and retail space. It will be possible to walk or take a quick drive to attend schools or go to work.

The concept of Tres Lagos is being taken by Rhodes Enterprises to other Valley communities. The size of Rhodes developments in Mission, San Juan, Donna, Brownsville, and soon in Weslaco and Harlingen, is not of the scale of Tres Lagos. They are welcome developments nonetheless in their communities.

“Every city in the Valley has been very welcoming and appreciative of the investments we’ve made,” Rhodes said. “They’re excited to see rooftop growth in their communities.”

In Brownsville’s Sports Park area, Rhodes Enterprises and its Esperanza Homes brand is building new homes at a rapid clip. The price points at Palo Alto Groves start in the \$180,000s-to-the-\$230,000 range. Homes in the \$300,000 range are considered “move-up products.” The company’s cost cap for new home construction is \$500,000.

### Forecasting Trends

Rhodes sees new home construction in the Valley heading eastward to Mid-Valley communities like Donna, Alamo, Weslaco and Mercedes. Property prices in these areas are more affordable than in Brownsville or the McAllen/Edinburg area.

Access to Expressway 83 from these Mid-Valley communities is a plus for commuters traveling from the new neighborhoods to work. Developers, Rhodes said, look for communities that invest in utilities and infrastructure. Job growth in communities is a key driver of home sales. He predicted there will be less starter and entry-level home construction in the region as the Valley continues to grow and develop.

Rhodes said his company will continue to grow their existing developments and communities while searching for tracts of land that fit their criteria. The company has sold 500 homes thus far in 2022. It expects this year’s volume to exceed last year’s number of 600-plus.

“We’ve sold more than we can build (right away),” he said as Rhodes Enterprises grows its reach across the region.



*Esperanza Homes offers various price points for its new homes in north Brownsville. (VBR)*



*Children make their way down a hike-and-bike trail at Tres Lagos with the RGV’s Texas A&M University campus in the distance. (Courtesy)*



*A newly completed home at Palo Alto Groves in Brownsville is representative of the style and size of homes from Esperanza Homes. (VBR)*



# Food Park Brings New Options For Mercedes

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Joe Garcia leans out of his Casa de Hibachi food truck to talk cuisine.

“We did research, at first watching more for amusement, but then we figured let’s do this,” Garcia said of he and his partner Ray Cano. “Let’s add our twist to it, cilantro, limes, the things from our culture. So that’s what we’ve got, a fusion.”

The mixing of Japanese and Mexican food cultures is just one part of the story at the Queen City Food Park in Mercedes. It celebrated a ribbon cutting and grand opening on April 2. It was a breezy Saturday morning right by Expressway 83, just west of Texas Avenue, the main street running through Mercedes. The project was well over a year in the making due to delays, but Ashley and Roy

Gonzalez saw it through.

The couple had gotten some restaurant experience under them in recent years with a crawfish business in town. There is a RGV Crawfish Shack at the Gonzalezes’ new food park. It’s operated by one of Ashley’s older brothers. The crawfish business is one of four food trucks at the roughly half-acre spot at 350 North Virginia. It’s a complete package with paved parking, picnic tables, bathrooms and a space dedicated to cornhole playing.

The latter was proving to be an early favorite. A father and son were taking turns tossing bean bags at a raised platform.

“This is what we wanted, a family-friendly place for our community to get together,” Ashley Gonzalez said. “And now here it is, a

spot in the middle of Mercedes.”

## Centrally Located

It’s also a spot in the middle of the Rio Grande Valley.

Heading east or west on the expressway, the Mercedes food park is readily accessible off Vermont Street exits, be it a straight-ahead drive heading from Weslaco or a turnaround if coming from Harlingen.

“It’s a huge advantage,” said Gaddi Rodriguez, a food truck owner, of the park’s mid-point location. “It’s easy to get to, right off the expressway, no matter which way you’re going.”

Rodriguez’s day job is being an accountant. His “passion project” is Gaddi’s Snow Shack.



Roy and Ashley Gonzalez worked over a year's time to see the Queen City Food Park to completion. (VBR)



Rodriguez wants to give a twist of his own in adding some modern-day ice shaving to the raspas he grew up enjoying as a child in Mercedes. They were his grandmother's snow cones back then as a young Gaddi watched her operate a raspa stand. With his wife Sarai and their young children in and around the Rodriguez food truck, Gaddi talked about what it meant to open a small business in his hometown.

"We love the small-town feel," he said, after recounting a story of moving in recent years from West Texas back to Mercedes. "I hope what we're doing here is giving the community some options it didn't have before."

Garcia, like Rodriguez, returned to the Valley after years of living away in San Antonio, working in the insurance business.

The pandemic, Garcia said, convinced him to move back. He reconnected with a high school buddy, Ray Cano, who had managed chicken wing restaurants in several Valley communities.

Garcia's love of food coupled with Cano's restaurant management business made for a good partnership to start a new business. The topper was they could do it in their hometown. Garcia called it bringing "new flavors from the big city to our town." Cano said the Queen City Food Park will attract visitors from other communities.

"It's going to make our community stronger," Cano said.

### Emotional Connection

After the mayor and some other city and

chamber dignitaries left after the grand opening, Roy Gonzalez began to get the couple's own food truck ready for business that Saturday.

It's called Queen City Daiquiris. Gonzalez spoke of the uniqueness of having such beverages at a Valley food park. He and his wife strive to make their Queen City Food Park a bit different from others in the region. The couple spoke of their appreciation for the information shared by other food park operators. They are also thankful for the assistance of local government, the chamber and the Mercedes Economic Development Corporation.

"I thought I'd know how it would look after all of the work we put into it, but seeing everyone here and it happening right in front of me, it's emotional," Ashley Gonzalez said.



Cornhole is a fun, family entertainment spot at the Queen City Food Park in Mercedes. (VBR)



The Queen City Food Park in Mercedes attracts a good crowd on opening day (VBR)



Longtime friends Joe Garcia and Ray Cano teamed up to open Casa de Hibachi at the Queen City Food Park. (VBR)



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# CEO Makes Winter Texans Her Mission

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

It all started with a coupon book.

Kristi Collier in those early years of the 2000s had worked for the Red Cross and then a title company. The first job gave her entry to RV parks across the Rio Grande Valley in seeking Winter Texans who could volunteer for Red Cross activities. The title company job ended in 2007 due to the housing bubble crash of the Great Recession. By then, Collier had started a coupon book focused on the Winter Texan market.

“As a small business owner, I was looking for something that worked for me and could bring value to my community,” said Collier, a McAllen native.

Her contact over the years with Winter Texans brought familiar questions. Where can I find a good mechanic? Can you recommend a trustworthy doctor? Where do I go to find a good plumber or someone who services air conditioning?

“It just kind of hit me one night,” Collier said. “Why not be a chamber of commerce for Winter Texans?”

## Creating A Culture

She recalled “hitting the streets” in RV communities.

Collier was connecting, learning more, taking that knowledge and reaching out to potential advertisers. There are about 300 RV parks across the Valley with a Winter Texan population whose numbers fluctuate and are estimated at north of 100,000 seasonal residents. Attention to this tourist market is long standing in the Valley, from cities to businesses across the board, with focus at times scattered and short lived.

Collier has put a lens on the Winter Texan market like perhaps no one ever had. The coupon book was only a start. A vibrant seasonal magazine was created to welcome Winter Texans back to the RGV. A monthly newspaper was a later addition, which would become weekly during the tourist season. An area guide was introduced, with listings of RV and mobile home parks across the region. For even more detail, site maps for individual parks became available.

Add a mobile app and a robust website and Collier’s Welcome Home RGV reaches about every identifiable segment of the Winter Texan market. At her Nolana Avenue office in McAllen recently, Collier looked back with pride at the growth of her business and a staff that now

numbers over 20 employees.

“We just know how to connect people,” she said. “They, (Winter Texans), do so much for our area. We, as a region, need to show our appreciation for them.”

## Promoting Texas & RGV

Collier’s advocacy for Winter Texans will have a higher platform with her recent appointment to the board of directors of the Texas Travel Alliance.

The alliance is a leading voice for the Texas travel industry. Its membership includes transportation, destination, attractions and support businesses. Collier’s leadership as the president and chief executive officer of Welcome Home RGV was cited in growing a company that has gone beyond newspapers and magazines to establishing travel and real estate businesses.

Collier sees her board membership for a statewide association as a good fit for what her company does to market and develop tourism



*Kristi Collier joins McAllen Mayor Javier Villalobos at an expo in the city to promote tourism. (Courtesy)*



for Texas.

“They don’t know city limit signs,” she said of Winter Texans, who travel thousands of miles from their homes in the Midwest and Canada to reach the Valley, the Texas Hill Country and other Lone Star locations. “We’re selling Texas as a tourist destination.”

There is no more astute observer of the Winter Texan population as Collier. She analyzes the generational change from World War II era retirees to the Baby Boomers who now make up the vast majority of the tourists. The latter group is staying in the Valley for shorter durations than their predecessors, she said. They’re also willing to pay more for quality services and products. The Baby Boomer retiree is generally better educated and has higher expectations for how they should be treated and served, she said.

### Stories Told

Then there are what Collier calls “converted Texans.”

They are Winter Texans who have decided to stay in the Valley year-round. Welcome Home RGV products recognize their importance to local communities. A recent story in the weekly Welcome Home Winter Texan newspaper recognized two converted Texans who are involved in a welcome wagon program at a Donna RV Park.

Collier organizes summer supper clubs for the converted Texans. She also hosts symbolic naturalization ceremonies where the once seasonal tourists make public commitments to their adopted state.

“It’s important to recognize them,” she said. “They are just as important to the Valley as Winter Texans.”

“The work they do and the contributions they make to the Valley are immeasurable,” Collier said. “The Valley still doesn’t fully understand all the things Winter Texans bring to the table.”



*Kristi Collier, the CEO of Welcome Home RGV, center, enjoys spending time with Winter Texans. (Courtesy)*

*Kristi Collier, center, and her Welcome Home RGV staff enjoy getting out into the community to meet with Winter Texans (Courtesy)*



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# Artist Walks Into “Bubble” & Creates Visual World

By Ricardo D. Cavazos, *Content Editor*

Manuel Hinojosa walks between the exhibit rooms of the Brownsville Museum of Fine Art, the faces of his sports heroes looking back at him.

Many are childhood heroes – the boys of summer – be it Mickey Mantle or Willie Mays, with current stars like Jose Altuve of the Houston Astros included among the baseball greats. Hinojosa himself is wearing an Astros cap, as he often does, a smile underneath in giving a tour of 200 paintings hanging at the Brownsville museum.

Hinojosa painted everything on display, with many more at his Port Isabel home. The boy from Mission who “liked to doodle a lot” grew up to become a city manager, an architect, and as can be abundantly seen at the museum, an artist. He started painting in grade school. Hinojosa hasn’t stopped since then. His wide scope of art work includes paintings of athletes, historical and entertainment figures, book illustrations and battlefield scenes.

Hinojosa’s journey is an eventful one. The story of his art began with lessons as a youngster in Mission. An undergraduate degree in art would then follow after high school. There would be diversions away from art during a multi-faceted career, but painting has been a constant in his life. His devotion to it has never wavered. In the process, he ultimately created “The Art-world of Manuel Hinojosa,” with a sign in front of the museum making it official.

The Hinojosa artistic display began on April 8 with an evening reception that attracted hundreds of admirers. It will continue through May 28 at the fine art museum. Just before the early April reception arrived, Hinojosa walked the museum floors with his paintings all around him, describing what it meant to him.

“To see all of these paintings up, this is my lifetime work,” he said.

## Going Into A Zone

It started with a school teacher in Mission who noticed the obvious.

Manuel Hinojosa could really draw.

His parents were called to alert them of their son’s talents, with a recommendation that young Manuel receive dedicated instruction. Starting in fifth grade and through his high school years, Hinojo-

sa had weekly art instruction in learning essential skills and techniques. An undergraduate art degree from Pan American University in Edinburg was the next step in his development as an artist.

Hinojosa then spent a stretch of his working life in municipal government. He worked in urban renewal programs in

the 1960s. There would be stints as a city manager in San Benito and Port Isabel, a community he and his wife took a liking to, and where they live still today.

Hinojosa was also drawn to architecture, studying it at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. He would ultimately go on to enjoy a successful career in the field.



*A display at the Brownsville Museum of Fine Art features Manuel Hinojosa's love of sports, especially baseball. (VBR)*



He is currently a district architect for the Brownsville Independent School District.

His true passion, however, is evident in the 200 paintings on display at the museum. Through all of the years of working in other endeavors, he has always painted, "walking into the bubble," as he put it.

"You go into a zone and paint," Hinojosa said. "You sit down on a Saturday and you don't get up. You're creating something from nothing. It's a feeling you can't get anywhere else."

### Cast Of Characters

Muhammed Ali held up an artistic likeness of him in the early 1990s, peering at it, and was suitably impressed.

"You did this?" he asked the artist. "What's your name?"

The artist stated his name and the legendary boxer signed the painting, "To Manuel Hinojosa From Muhammed, 1-16-92."

The signatory flourish with a cloud-looking bubble around it was more than Hinojosa wanted on his painting.

"What could I say?" Hinojosa recalled "It was Muhammed Ali."

Ali is among the hundreds of famous athletes Hinojosa has met over the years, as he has asked them to put their signatures on his paintings. Some of the athletes he has painted, like Mays, Mantle and Hank Aaron, have disappointed when asking for their signatures in person. Others like Mr. Cub, Chicago's Ernie Banks, were delights to meet, as was Ali.

Hinojosa has successfully gotten the signatures of nearly every famous athlete he has painted, be it in person at card shows and events, or through mailed requests. It's



Muhammad Ali was impressed by Manuel Hinojosa's depiction of him and signed a special message on the painting. (VBR)



A collection of 200 Manuel Hinojosa will be on display until May 28 at the Brownsville Museum of Fine Art. (VBR)



Manuel Hinojosa looks over a painting of Major League Baseball's Triple Crown winners. (VBR)

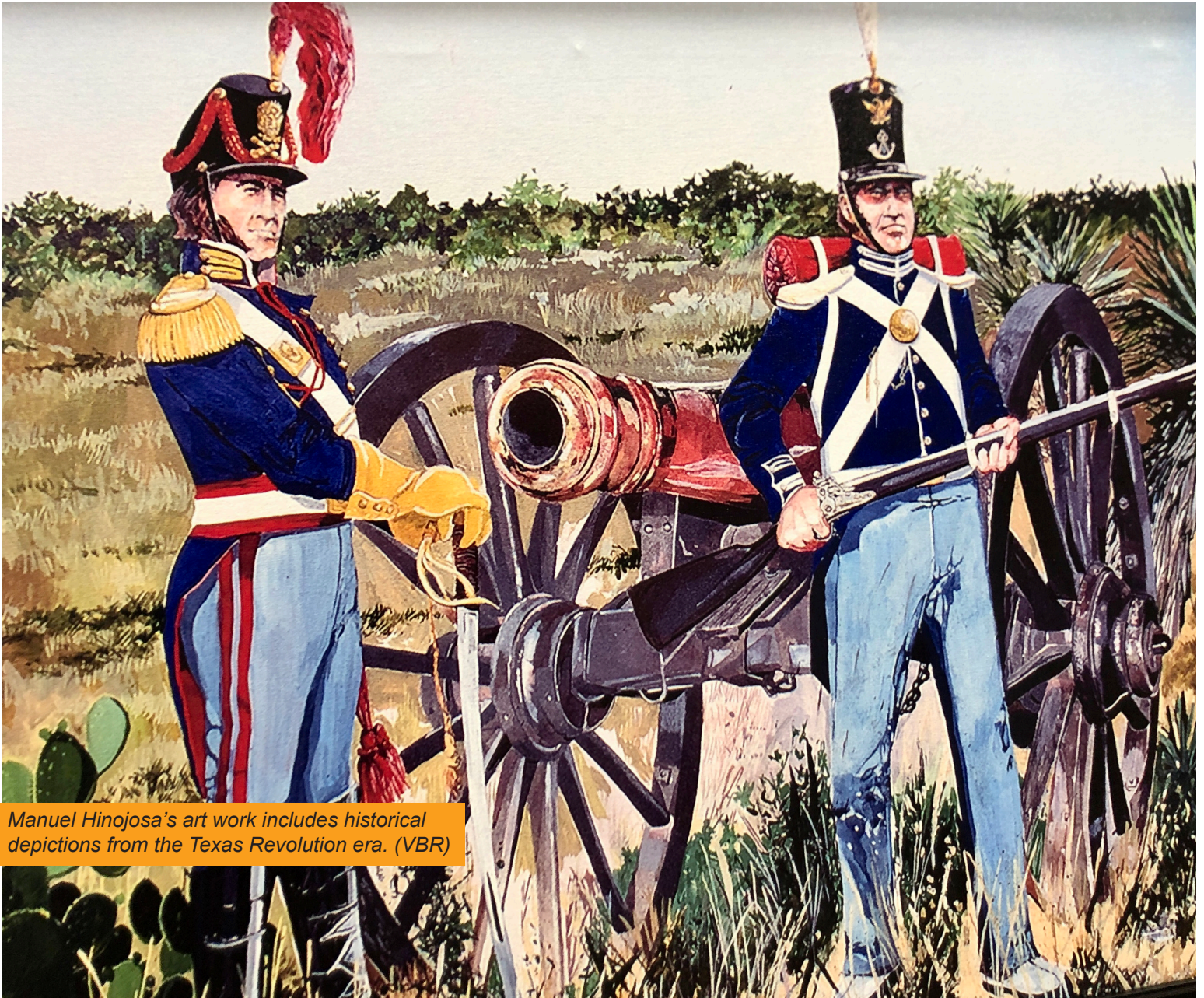


not only the well-known athletes who have intrigued him. He spoke fondly of Herbie Hinojosa, a Brownsville native and horse jockey, who in his 1960s heyday, raced in Triple Crown races and won over 3,000 races.

Hinojosa's art display includes a striking portrait of the jockey, wearing black boots, white pants and a crimson red vest. The diminutive horse jockey is but one character among the hundreds Hinojosa has studied and then painted. Seeing his museum display is a peek into his bubble, imagining what it has taken to create so much art work over so many years. The boy who loved to doodle created a world all his own.



*The Artworld of Manuel Hinojosa is currently on display at the Brownsville Museum of Fine Art. (VBR)*



*Manuel Hinojosa's art work includes historical depictions from the Texas Revolution era. (VBR)*



# McAllen Pitches Youth World Series

By Chris Ardis

Windmills don't normally dot the landscape of McAllen, but for four days this July, they will be in full swing when pitchers take the mound at the 2022 PONY Softball International World Series Travel Select Tournament - College Showcase.

That's a mighty long name, but this is a mighty big deal.

"We will have teams from Mexico, possibly Australia, Louisiana, New Mexico, San Diego and across Texas," said Debbie Falcon, the PONY's south zone division director for softball.

Organizers are expecting more than 120 teams and over 3,000 attendees for a tournament to run July 20-24. The event includes a college showcase.

"Last year, 15 college coaches showed up," Falcon said. "This resulted in college scholarships being awarded to softball players they scouted."

## A Multi-Site Event

There will be four separate showcases of batting, catching, fielding and pitching. Following will be a question-and-answer session with the coaches. The IWS kicks off with opening ceremonies on July 20 at 3 p.m. Following that evening, international teams will play in exhibition games, as will athletes in the McAllen Champions League, designed for youth with special needs. Official tournament games begin at 8 a.m. July 21.

"All teams are guaranteed at least five games," Falcon said.

Three "pool" games, per team, will result in team seeding for bracket play in the double-elimination tournament. The IWS includes teams from 6U to 18U. All events are open to the public. Games take place at the McAllen Youth Baseball Complex on 29th and Auburn, the Municipal Softball Complex on Bicentennial and Tamarack, and the Westside Softball Complex on South Ware Road.

"The cost for tickets will be under \$10, and we will have weekly wristbands available," said Boys & Girls Club of McAllen CEO Dalinda Alcantar-Gonzalez.

Revenues will benefit the organization. (More information will be available closer to the event. Tournament details are on PONY's website at [south.pony.org](http://south.pony.org) under "Tournaments.")

Falcon is thrilled that Rio Sports will provide the official live streaming.

"We haven't been able to get the softball

games broadcast before," she said. "Many thanks to Rio Sports for stepping up and taking this on."

## Building A Relationship

McAllen solidified its reputation as a sports-tourism destination when residents passed a \$15-million bond issue in 2013. This allowed for the creation of the 12-field complex on 29th and also the conversion of Municipal's baseball fields to softball fields.

The Texas Parks & Wildlife Department awarded the City of McAllen a 2015 Non-Urban Outdoor Recreation Grant for the complex on 29th. (McAllen also boasts a bevy of soccer fields.)

Alex Arevalo, interim director of Visit McAllen, said Boys & Girls Club of McAllen led the effort to host the IWS. There certainly is a reason for that, Gonzalez-Alcantar said.

"We have had a relationship with PONY softball for over 20 years, and we've always been one of the larger PONY programs in the state," she said.

PONY is an acronym for Protect Our Nation's

Youth.

"Our mission is the same," she said "We know athletics saves kids."

## Making McAllen A Destination

Gonzalez-Alcantar also gave much of the credit to Jorge Leal. The club's former athletic director now works for the City of McAllen.

"He is to be commended for building our softball and baseball programs and for fostering the relationship with PONY," she said.

Falcon confirmed that the relationship with communities invested in PONY plays an integral role when the organization looks for host cities.

"When we approach a city, they have so many questions and concerns," she said. "From the time we contacted McAllen, though, it has all been so positive and refreshing."

That positivity is indeed citywide.

"The City of McAllen is excited about this opportunity to not only showcase our facilities but also the talent we have here," said Denny Meline, Parks and Recreation director for the City of McAllen. "PONY is such a prestigious

*Dalinda Gonzalez-Alcantar, CEO of Boys and Girls Club of McAllen, speaks at the April 6, 2022, press conference announcing that the 2022 PONY Softball International World Series Travel Select Tournament - College Showcase will be held in McAllen July 20-24. (Photo courtesy of BGC McAllen)*





organization; we are grateful to be hosting this important event.”

### Economic Benefits

Arevalo of Visit McAllen lauded the economic impact the event will obviously have.

“Our conservative estimate is a little over \$1.3 million,” she said. “We look at the mean average of hotel room nights and the average amount each attendee will spend, including meals, gasoline, and retail and leisure spending.”

Arevalo said a successful tournament will certainly bring future opportunities.

“For the bigger picture,” she said, “we look at what this event will bring down the line. A successful event often leads to other sports associations looking at the city, trusting both the community and its resources.”

Alcantar-Gonzalez, of the Boys & Girls Club, said this economic impact also affects relationships.

“As a nonprofit, we are always looking to our business community for help, donations, and support,” she said. “These relationships need to be reciprocated, so why not create opportunities that also provide a significant economic impact?”



*The 2021 PONY Softball International World Series Travel Select Tournament - College Showcase Pinto 8U division winners and runners up pose with their coaches. (Photo courtesy of PONY Softball)*

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