2020 Readers’ CHOICE Winners!

The Monitor
BERT OGDEN AUTO GROUP EMPHASIZES A ‘CUSTOMER FIRST’ BUSINESS PHILOSOPHY

By: Benjamin Treviño

What is it about the Bert Ogden Auto Group that has made it a customer favorite through the years? The answer begins with enthusiastic employees who have dedicated themselves to a simple two-word philosophy – Customer First. It’s an ideal that was first instilled by founder, Bert Ogden, when he opened his first dealership in Edinburg in 1973, and continues today under the guidance of Bob and Janet Vackar.

“I can speak for almost each and every coworker when I say it’s a happy customer that makes working at Bert Ogden so very rewarding,” said Marsha Green, Vice President of Marketing at the Bert Ogden Auto Group. “Many of us are willing to be of assistance at all times during the day, the week, and the year. Many of our customers have kept in touch long after they have had a great past experience with their vehicle. Even when a negative situation arises and we turn it around, our customers feel they have been treated well. There’s no better feeling when a person calls and says they were given our name because of how well we took care of their friend!”

Green says one of Bert Ogden’s keys to success is to listen to customers’ requests and concerns and address them as soon as possible. Although face-to-face meetings have presented unique challenges in the age of Covid-19, Bert Ogden has countered that with a strong online presence in an effort to make the process as smooth and easy for the customer as possible.

Thanks to technology, the sales process can mostly be done online. Vehicle delivery can also be done safely. A customer’s keys can be dropped in a mailbox and their new car – clean and sanitized – can be dropped off in the driveway or curb as the customer waits safely inside their home. Service customers also have an extra level of sanitized safety, as vehicles can be dropped off and returned with a minimal amount of physical contact.

“These are very special circumstances right now,” said Green. “Our CEO, Natasha del Barrio, jumped out in front of this trying time immediately and took measures that went above and beyond what local, state, and federal guidelines called for. We have every state of the art process to keep staff and customers safe. We have an expert internet team led by Mike Castillo who has enabled an almost seamless process in helping customers shop and buy and then take delivery curbside or at home any vehicle they want.”

Bert Ogden’s social media pages are filled with stories from satisfied customers. One recent anecdote involves a couple who purchased a new Nissan vehicle for each of their young adult triplets in honor of their high school graduation.

“Because of the pandemic they weren’t allowed a formal graduation,” Green explained. “So, we gathered for the very next best thing: a socially distanced celebration with Mr. and Mrs. Vackar on Facetime, during which they presented the keys and a gift card for each graduate.”

Green added that another rewarding aspect of doing business during a pandemic has been working with first responders.

“Mr. and Mrs. Vackar are strong supporters of our first responders, during these difficult times,” said Green. They have devoted an extra level of care and attention to all police, firemen and the entire medical field of doctors and nurses who have given their time and energy to the safety and well-being of our valley communities.”

The Bert Ogden Auto Group encourages anyone who finds themselves ready or in need of a new or used vehicle to grab a cell phone, laptop, or tablet, and browse what’s available at www.bertogden.com. Customers can choose from 21 different brand names as well as preowned cars, trucks, and SUV’s. Customers can also schedule appointments for auto maintenance services. It’s just another way of putting “Customers First” and another example of why the Bert Ogden Auto Group is The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice for 2020.

“To be voted as The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice is one of the highest honors we can receive,” said Green. “Whether the dealerships have impacted a person by our sales or service practices or from our community involvement, we feel it’s a special distinction, because it is given by personal vote from local Valley residents who have experienced what Bert Ogden is all about.”
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PASSION MAKES VALLEY KIDZ CLINIC OF MCALLEN A READERS’ CHOICE IN PEDIATRICS

By: Benjamin Treviño

Dr. Dr. Riaz Shareef is passionate about taking care of children. His staff at Valley Kidz Clinic in McAllen share his enthusiasm and parents appreciate the comprehensive care with Dr. Shareef’s personal touch.

“Seeing patients respond to therapeutic interventions or treatment is the best part of being a physician,” said Dr. Shareef. “Seeing the smiles return to children who were sick gives me a very good feeling. I am honored and humbled to be chosen as The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice as favorite pediatrician 3 years in a row. It makes us feel good that our hard work is being appreciated in our community. It is a great honor for any business to be told by their customers that they are doing a good job.”

Dr. Shareef is a board-certified pediatrician with more than 15 years of pediatric expertise. He graduated from the Deccan College of Medical sciences in India, and then completed his pediatric specialty residency training at Driscoll Children’s Hospital in Corpus Christi in 2005 after which he immediately moved to the Rio Grande Valley. He has extensive experience in taking care of newborns and children up to 21 years of age. He is also board certified in health care quality management.

“Kids always come first at Valley Kidz Clinic,” said Dr. Shareef. “We treat our patient and their families with utmost courtesy and respect. We recognize that patients and families are core members of the care team and we ensure they are fully informed partners in establishing care plans. We coordinate care with multiple specialists and provide referrals in a timely manner. We have simplified access to care by offering same-day appointments, walk-ins, and Telemedicine visits.”

Valley Kidz Clinic offers a full range of pediatric services, including prenatal visits for expecting parents, well-child check-ups, immunizations, and sick appointments up to the age of 21. Additionally, the clinic has an on-call doctor who receives patients’ calls directly instead of an answering service. This allows patients to speak to a physician when needed without any barriers.

Valley Kidz Clinic strives to minimize office visits for simple ailments like common colds by giving instructions to family on how to provide care. The clinic also provides after-hour Telemedicine service until midnight, Monday to Sunday. Finally, Valley Kidz Clinic provides health care that is relationship-based with an orientation toward the whole person.

Dr. Shareef’s most enthusiastic endorsements come from the families of his patients. For example, Adiel Molina was only six days old when his parents took him to a local emergency room after hours for fever. Adiel was discharged home, but Dr. Shareef referred him to the ER for a second time, because of his concern over a possible life-threatening infection. Dr. Shareef went straight to the ER when he found out that baby was going to be discharged again to make sure all labs were done and the child was admitted. He was then diagnosed with Group B Strep, a life-threatening infection.

“Thanks to God and Dr. Shareef, my son is alive right now,” said Adiel’s father, David Molina. “He was 6 days old when other doctors kept releasing my son. He made sure my child got the proper treatment and in 15 days my son was out of Hospital.”

Margaret Martinez and her husband have been seeing Dr. Shareef since the birth of their child two years ago. They expressed gratitude for Dr. Shareef’s attention to their baby, and for building a relationship with them from the outset.

“Recently, our baby was admitted into the hospital with a very rare and serious skin condition which developed from a staph infection,” said Margaret. “Dr. Shareef took the time to communicate with the ICU doctors, and clarified things that we didn’t understand. As horrific as this event was for us, he was the main one keeping us calm, reassuring us that our baby would be okay. I am 100% grateful for his dedication. Thank you, Dr. Shareef!”

Dr. Shareef says many parents frequently forget to ask questions during the office visit, but he says they can call after their visit to speak to doctors about their concerns. He advises all parents to write down all their concerns and questions so they can be addressed during the office visit itself. He says this is especially important in the era of Covid-19.

“We are going through one of the most difficult times known in recent history due to Covid-19,” said Dr. Shareef. “It is important children be seen for well-child visits and get their required vaccinations during those visits. We cannot afford to have another pandemic due to delays or lack of vaccinations.”

For more information on how Dr. Shareef can help your child, visit: www.valleykidzclinic.com.

The Monitor’s 2020 Readers’ Choice Award Winners • 5
A message to the Rio Grande Valley from J. Gonzalez Law Firm

Thank you, readers of The Monitor, and residents of the Rio Grande Valley, for once again presenting J. Gonzalez Injury Attorneys with The Monitor’s Reader’s Choice Award as your “Favorite Attorney.” This recognition means so much to our team because it symbolizes that our determination to faithfully represent our clients is being recognized by the community. We strive to do right by the people of the Rio Grande Valley and are honored that our efforts are once again being acknowledged.

For nearly 20 years, Jesse Gonzalez has provided superior customer service and quality legal care for individuals who have suffered from a catastrophic personal injury. Whether a car or workplace accident, protecting our clients from “ambulance chasers,” or providing meaningful aid when they face the wrongful death of a loved one, we are always dedicated advocates, and our community has come to trust our commitment to them.

Whether day or night, 24-hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, we make ourselves available. It’s not about what is convenient for our law firm, it’s about being there when a victim needs us. This has earned us a reputation of excellence and dependability. Our clients are even given Jesse’s cell phone number so that they can call him when they need him. We make communication as simple as possible and never take the easy way out when it comes to resolving a case. We fight with everything we have, and the results we obtain for our clients speaks to this tenacity.

The reason we represent our clients with so much spirit and perseverance is because Jesse knows firsthand exactly what it means to be underprivileged and without support. Witnessing hardships and discrimination as a disadvantaged migrant worker, he vowed to be the person in his community who would stand up for those unheard voices. That’s what makes the success of our clients so rewarding.

Knowing that we are giving victims more than a fighting chance to right the wrongs done against them validates the hard work and effort we put forth, especially when our clients get the results they deserve. It’s standing up for those with no voice and giving them hope in the face of tragedy that makes it all worthwhile.

We’re able to deliver exceptional results for our clients, because of the values we have built our law firm on. We have earned our reputation through honesty, integrity, transparency, and a desire to provide high-quality legal services to those who need it most, especially now during such uncertain times. We understand what matters most to our community and clients, and so we follow these ideals to be a better law firm every day.

Of course, you don’t have to just take our word for it. We are privileged to serve clients like Denise Lozoya, who had this to say about us, “Hands down the BEST injury attorney in the RGV! Mr. Gonzalez and his team do whatever it takes to provide the best customer service, and fight to get you what you deserve! Amazing attorney and such a wonderful polite staff!”

When you are facing a daunting legal issue and are in need of a law firm that exhibits commitment, quality service, and dedication to the local community, trust in the reliability of one awarded The Monitor’s Reader’s Choice Award. This respected accolade means that our community trusts our value and appreciates our devotion to protecting their rights when they face a personal injury at the hands of a negligent party. The team at J. Gonzalez Injury Attorneys is proud to have once again been honored with The Monitor’s Reader’s Choice Award for Best Attorney.

If you’ve been injured in an accident that wasn’t your fault, do not hesitate to reach out to J. Gonzalez Injury Attorneys. Our law firm is dedicated to walk you through your entire legal journey to get you the compensation you deserve.

Jesse Gonzalez
Thank You RGV!

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As the owner and principal attorney of the Moore Law Firm, Michael Moore began his practice primarily focused on issues such as serious personal injury, business tort, and medical malpractice. Over his 27-year legal career, Moore has been named a Multi-Million Dollar Advocate, one of the Best Attorneys of America, and he is credited with securing the second-largest products liability verdict in Texas history.

“As a young person I always had a desire to help people through the legal system,” Moore recalled. “I just thought it was fascinating how the process works in terms of resolving disputes in a court of law, and helping people get the justice they deserve. It’s what drove me to the legal profession in the first place.”

Moore still takes on lawsuits involving cases such as wrongful death and defective products liability, but his practice began to expand into insurance claims in 2012 after a devastating hail storm damaged thousands of homes the McAllen area.

“My phone was ringing off the hook with calls from people whose claims were being denied,” said Moore. “People were upset, because adjusters were acting like they never saw any damages. So we migrated from a very busy personal injury law firm into helping all our neighbors and family members in our community through a very significant event. I think probably over 50 percent of our business these days is helping business people and homeowners who are dealing with insurance companies and the process of getting reimbursed for their losses.”

Claims resulting from Hurricane Hanna are a big part of Moore’s practice today. As a former insurance company defense attorney, Moore knows the strategies the companies use to get out of paying a claim. He knows the insurance industry would rather spend money on marketing to new customers than paying claims to their existing clients.

“I felt morally conflicted with that,” said Moore. “That led me to go out on my own and represent the people instead. With Hurricane Hanna, we’ve been hearing from our clients that the insurance companies are refusing to send adjusters out. They’re blaming Covid for a lack of adjusters. That’s not true. That’s why you need somebody on your side and I feel good about helping people in that situation. It’s not about making hitting the lottery, or making a lot of money off a lawsuit. It’s about making sure insurance companies do the right thing.”

Born and raised in McAllen, Moore graduated with honors from Michigan State University College of Law, Cum Laude in 1991, serving two years on the Moot Court trial team. Shortly after, Moore returned home to the Rio Grande Valley on a mission to establish an exceptional, client-first law firm to provide expert legal representation to the members of his community. To Moore, that’s the most gratifying part about his career as an attorney.

“I feel very good about that,” Moore said. “Because I walk into the grocery store and I’ll have people come up to me and thank me for helping them, whether it was getting them a new roof, or helping them get back on their feet again. It happens often, and it makes me feel very proud of what we do here at Moore Law Firm.”

This is the second year in a row that Moore Law Firm has won a Readers’ Choice Award. He won last year as the valley’s Favorite Attorney, and this year he took home the award as the Valley’s Favorite Law Firm.

“I’m honored that I was selected to be the number one law firm here in the Rio Grande Valley,” said Moore. “I’m grateful to my clients and the community at large that they support us and recognize us. I feel real good about helping individuals. We’re doing something good for the community here, so it’s great to be recognized.

For more information on how the Moore Law Firm can help you, call 1-800-444-2780, or visit www.moore-firm.com.
McAllen Valley Roofing Co. is a full-service roofing company, offering residential and commercial roofing services. Our core business values are designed to provide you with an exceptional experience by delivering quality workmanship on every job.

“Our goal has always been to provide all of our customers with the most cost-effective roof repair,” said Brian McSteen. “Our quality roofing solutions provide lasting satisfaction for many years. We are dedicated to providing each and every client with the knowledge and support to make an informed roofing decision. We value your business and look forward to serving you.”

McAllen Valley Roofing Co. brings to the table more than 30 years of combined experience in the roofing industry. From high-rise buildings to residential homes, the company has earned a reputation for building high-quality, well-constructed roofs that are maintenance and worry-free.

McAllen Valley Roofing crews are highly trained, efficient, courteous, and provide professional workmanship. Its foremen are seasoned and detail oriented. They will repair, replace, or build your roof in a safe and conscientious manner.

“Our clients love the quality of our work,” said McSteen. “We will go the extra mile to ensure customer satisfaction and at any cost, even if it means losing money to make it right by the client. No company is perfect by any means, but we strive for it and our customers recognize that effort.”

In the wake of Hurricane Hanna, the professionals at McAllen Valley Roofing Company remind everyone to beware of “fly-by-night” roofers who have swooped into town to make a fast buck. They recommend you hire contractors ONLY if they have general liability insurance and are able to offer manufacturer warranties; not just for materials but for the workmanship! Customers should get any offers in WRITING and check the manufacturer’s websites (Very Important). McAllen Valley Roofing Co. offers unmatched 25-year workmanship warranties backed by the manufacturer. They are constantly fixing other roofers’ mistakes.

“Our company has won the Better Business Bureau’s Mary G. Moad Pinnacle Ethics Award,” said McSteen. “The annual award recognizes companies that have excelled in quality, management, and service, so you know you’re dealing with a reputable company when you deal with us.”

The goal of any business is to do something so well that people take notice and recommend the company to their friends and family. Winning The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Award as the Valley’s favorite roofer is just one more indication people are taking note of McAllen Valley Roofing Company’s quality work.

“There is nothing more rewarding than the community coming together to recognize the hard work and effort that our team puts in,” said McSteen. “One of the best qualities my business partner and I have is ambition. For us, it’s about building a company that delivers on its promise and we do it with exceptional quality. With the right team, culture, values, commitment along with great products and service you will find your way to the top.”

McAllen Valley Roofing is a local, family-owned roofing company. Our sales staff are ready and happy to discuss your roofing project needs. Call today at (956) 587-5806, or you can fill out our online roofing estimate form at www.mcallenvalleyroofing.com
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When you think tires, do you automatically think Pueblo? After nearly 50 years serving South Texas, many people do, and there are good reasons why beyond the company's signature slogan, “Think Tires... Think Pueblo!”

“It’s about integrity,” said Pueblo Tires and Service owner Ricky Ivey. “We’re honest with our customers. And we’re honest with our associates (employees). Our motto has not changed in a very long time, and I don’t think it’ll ever change. Positive growth through honesty – that’s our pledge.”

Pueblo Tires and Service has been a family-owned business since 1972, when Ivey's parents, Charles and Mary Joyce, and a former partner began selling tires out of an old cotton delinting plant in Brownsville, close to where Gladys Porter Zoo now stands. Today, Pueblo Tires and Service has 13 locations in five counties, including two stores in Alice and two in McAllen. From golf cart tires to farm tractor and big rig tires, the Pueblo chain has one of the largest tire inventories in South Texas.

We discovered a long time ago that if you don't have it in inventory, you won't get the sale,” Ivey said. “It’s amazing what we have in stock in order to fill the needs of the community. It's not any one little thing that separates us from the competition, it's everything that we do. It's like a big machine and we have to keep it going.”

To keep the Valley moving, Pueblo provides an array of vehicle maintenance services, including alignments, oil and fluid changes, batteries, brake repairs, belts and hoses, cooling, and electrical systems repair, and much more. In short, Pueblo has just about everything you need to keep your vehicle running at peak performance.

“We love to hear from people after they re-shoe their mule,” Ivey stated. “People will call back and say, ‘It's driving like a brand-new car.’ They’re right. It does drive like new. All you have to do is change the oil, the tires, align the wheels, and do your general maintenance. It makes a tremendous difference.”

As with other companies, Pueblo has had to modify its business practices in the era of Covid-19, though many of its customer service perks which have been in place for years. Pueblo offers appointments, pickup and delivery of your vehicle, and even mobile installation service. Pueblo can install your vehicle's tires in your driveway, or parking lot at work with little to no physical contact. The Pueblo website LIVE CHAT feature allows customers to get the answers to all their questions without having to set foot in the store.

“We’ve been doing this since before Covid-19, and before 2020,” said Ivey. “The only difference is that we have now ‘turned the key’ so to speak by accepting mobile payments. It was kind of a scary step, but we’ve gone ahead and done that as far as expanding the abilities and the use of our website. It’s been a tremendous boost.”

Pueblo has also adapted to financial constraints caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. From mobile payments to financing options, Pueblo has made it easier than ever to get what you need without breaking the bank. “If you don’t qualify for a particular credit card, chances are you’re still going to get financing,” vowed Ivey. “There’s different ways to do this now. It used to be common that people got turned down and they would mope out. That’s just the way it was, but now we’re offering numerous forms of financing that customers can apply for in store or online. It’s a rarity that we can’t work out some kind of payment plan for a customer.”

Pueblo Tires and Service has won The Monitor's Readers' Choice award nearly half a dozen times over the years. Ivey says he has thought about expanding the chain to Houston and San Antonio, but in the end decided to focus on South Texas and the Valley, which he has called home since 1986, when he moved down to take the reins of the family business. Being a Readers' Choice, he says, is very humbling.

“What a great honor for Pueblo, and for myself and for my wife Ana, who so beautifully fixes and decorates the offices and showrooms, and for my whole family,” said Ivey. “We’re excited about winning the Readers’ Choice award. Every year from now on I’ll look forward to winning it. I believe we have finally achieved a place in the market where we can say we're the Valley's true authority in tires and service.”
What is the “Manrique Difference?”

At Manrique Custom Vision, it’s more than just a marketing slogan. It’s about understanding that each individual has specific needs when it comes to their eyes. Dr. Carlos Manrique believes his personalized service is the best way to develop a customized vision plan to suit each patient’s needs. To Dr. Manrique, freeing patients from the inconveniences of glasses or contact lenses is more than just a job.

“When I went into medicine, I went into it as a calling,” explained Dr. Manrique. “This is a gift that I have been given, to be able to help everybody get rid of their contacts or glasses. It’s amazing to see my patients smile after surgery after being stuck with glasses all of their life. It is extremely gratifying to be able to help a fellow human being. It just feels good.”

Now in his 21st year of practice, Dr. Manrique has performed nearly 60-thousand LASIK procedures. He uses only the latest FDA-approved technology, like the WaveLight EX500 Excimer Laser system – the newest and fastest laser on the market. Manrique Custom Vision uses this system to address a wide range of vision issues, including nearsightedness, farsightedness, astigmatism, as well as addressing glare and halo issues at night. The procedure is completely safe, even in the era of COVID-19.

“We make it extremely safe,” said Dr. Manrique. “There’s nothing more important to me than the safety of my patients, and the safety of those who work in my office. We have consistently followed all of the rules and regulations and it has worked because we have been able to safely perform Lasik on many patients during this pandemic.”

Beyond Lasik, Manrique Custom Vision treats a variety of vision-related issues, including cataract surgery, Intacs corneal implants, KAMRA™ Inlay for presbyopia, cross-linking for the treatment of progressive keratoconus, Visian Implantable Collamer Lenses (Visian ICL), Refractive Lens Exchange, and Advanced Surface Ablation (ASA) for patients with conditions such as thin corneas.

“About ten percent of the people are not candidates Lasik,” said Dr. Manrique. “But we can still offer multiple technologies to help them. We have laser technology for cataract surgery. We can also help patients who have had changes to the cornea that are related to other things. So, there’s many different things that we can do.”

The decision to have laser vision correction is an investment not only in the quality of your vision, but in the quality of your life. Manrique Custom Vision provides monthly payment options to fit any budget so you can focus on the wonder of your new vision without worrying about how you can afford it.

“My goal is to make sure everything is affordable,” said Dr. Manrique. “We offer different payment plans to make this easily affordable for our patients. People with glasses or contacts spend a ton of money year after year on eye exams, new glasses and contact lenses, and maintenance. I offer people a chance to get rid of their glasses or contacts for the same or maybe less money than they’re spending now. That’s the way I look at it, they may be saving money in the long-run.”

Dr. Manrique is a dedicated Rio Grande Valley eye doctor who enjoys treating his friends, family, and fellow health professionals. To him, winning The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Award for Favorite Lasik surgeon is an honor.

“I want to thank everybody in the Valley,” said Dr. Manrique. “It has been a joy to have so many people trust their eyes to me and my staff. This is like the tenth year in a row that we have won this award. I think my patients appreciate the fact that we love what we do, and we love to do it for the community, because the results are literally life-changing. It’s definitely an honor.”

Manrique Custom Vision Centers can be found throughout South Texas. Call (956) 661-9000 for our McAllen-Edinburg location, (956) 430-9000 for our Harlingen location, (956) 625-2010 for our Laredo location, (210) 354-2020 for our San Antonio location, or (361) 400-0660 for our Corpus Christi location to schedule your VIP LASIK consultation today! You can also learn more at: www.manriqueeye.com.
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As an experienced McAllen Lasik eye surgeon, Dr. Carlos Manrique de Lara recommends Blade-Free Z-Lasik for his Lasik patients. Lasik eye surgery can treat nearsightedness, farsightedness and astigmatism. Dr. Manrique is a Board-Certified Ophthalmologist and has performed over 50,000 laser vision correction procedures.

Manrique Custom Vision is a state-of-the-art Z-Lasik facility dedicated to providing a high-quality lasik eye surgery experience that meets your comfort, safety and laser vision correction needs. Let us help you enjoy freedom from glasses and contacts.

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MORADO’S #5: THE SECRET TO SUCCESS, SERVING CUSTOMERS LIKE ROYALTY

By: Eryn Reddell Wingert

Eduardo “Morado” Rodriguez has served a presidential candidate, congressmen, and even celebrities during his 27 year career in the restaurant business. Rodriguez, his family, and staff treat them just like they treat any customer who visits Morado’s #5 on 23rd street in McAllen, “like royalty.” He says it’s the secret behind the success of his business.

Ten years ago Rodriguez considered retiring from the restaurant business that he built with his wife Blanca, when the opportunity to buy a restaurant on 23rd Street in McAllen presented itself. “God has a purpose for us,” Rodriguez says. But, Blanca was skeptical about expanding to a bigger building. Rodriguez says he encouraged, “Look at it this way, let’s say a few follow, and a few from the previous owner stay with us, and we make a few more customers. Then, we’ll make it!”

Rodriguez considered naming the new restaurant ‘Blankita’s’ after his wife and daughter. While Blanca may have been initially skeptical about the new venture, he says she knew keeping the well-known name ‘Morado’s’ was key. He says she reminded him, “Everybody knows you as ‘Morado.”

Rodriguez’ has been known as “Morado” since he was a senior at McAllen High School. He recalls the day he acquired the nickname in great detail. While walking home from school he stopped to apply for a job at a new grocery store. Rodriguez was hired on-the-spot and immediately got to work. After repeatedly forgetting his name, a manager dubbed him ‘Morado’ based on the purple shirt Rodriguez happened to be wearing that day. The name stuck.

Rodriguez takes pride in serving customers looking for a hot, fresh breakfast or lunch at Morado’s #5. Customers rave about Morado’s and voters chose the restaurant in The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Awards as ‘Favorite Breakfast’ spot. “My cooks are excellent, I give them all the credit,” Rodriguez says. He also credits his wait staff, “We live for our customers. It’s up to us to take care of them. To me it’s very important.”

During his career Rodriguez has gone above and beyond serving great food to his customers, including saving the lives of not one but two women on separate occasions. He recalls the time a woman visiting from Monterrey, Mexico started choking. He jumped into action, applying C.P.R. training he’d received before going into the restaurant business, and dislodged the chip stuck in her throat. She later returned with her son, he says, and both thanked him for saving her life.

Rodriguez also recalls the time presidential candidate, George H. W. Bush visited his downtown location and ordered a diet coke. Rodriguez pulled out all the stops and served up a meal for the candidate and his entourage. When Bush asked if he could bother him for a soda refill Rodriguez says he told him it was no bother, but in exchange to remember him when he gets to the White House. Rodriguez says, “Sure enough, he sent me an invite for his inaugural address!”

The Rodriguez family has since closed Morado’s restaurants #1 through #4. Today they are dedicated to the success of #5 by continuing to offer fresh, hot food and great customer service. “I try to go and sit down with them, greet them and make them feel at home,” he shares. My wife does the same thing. They love my wife. She’s got this something, like given from God, that’s so sweet with the people, generous and kind.”

As Rodriguez shares stories of his restaurant career spanning nearly 30 years, he often reflects back to his humble beginnings and now, to winning a Readers’ Choice Award for the third consecutive year. “Well, to me, it means the world, because I only have a high school diploma.” He also says while running a popular restaurant is hard work, it’s the simple things about the business; greeting the customers, working with his beloved wife and daughter, and loyal staff - some of whom have been with him for decades - that make it all worthwhile. And, he says that together, “We just try our best.”
ROCKY MOUNTAIN CHOCOLATE FACTORY: A SWEET DISTRACTION FROM THE PANDEMIC

By: Benjamin Treviño

If you’ve done some extra binge eating during the Covid-19 pandemic, you’re not alone. According to the Nielsen Company, chocolates have been the go-to comfort food for many Americans this summer. The global marketing research firm says sales of chocolate products during the 17-week period that ended on June 27, consumers bought $3.7 billion worth of chocolate. That’s a 6.3% increase from the comparable period last year.

“Our customers who were stuck at home were telling us they were craving our apples and chocolates,” said Veronica Barrera, who, along with her sister, Patty, own and operate three Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory stores in the Valley. “We did close for about two weeks in late March, and when we first re-opened it was slow going, but we adapted. I was making deliveries myself, because we don’t have a delivery vehicle. Summer is normally a slow time for us, but June and July turned out to be our best summer months since we opened.”

Dealing with a pandemic was the furthest thing from their minds when Veronica and Patty decided to bring the popular Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory (RMCF) franchise to the Valley. The sisters, who grew up in Weslaco, opened their first store at Rio Grande Valley Premium Outlets in Mercedes in 2006. They opened a second store at Palms Crossing in McAllen in 2007, and a third store at La Plaza Mall in 2017.

“We wanted to do something fun, something different and new,” Barrera recalled. “We didn’t have a lot of unique franchises down here. You had to drive to San Antonio. Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory has 300 varieties of chocolates to choose from, and we have pretty much everything at our stores in Mercedes and at Palms Crossing. The La Plaza Mall location has a limited menu, because our store there is smaller than the others, but it still has the most-popular items.”

Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory’s signature offering is its candy and caramel apples. “Most RMCF stores around the country only carry about 10 varieties of caramel apples,” said Barrera. “Down here we carry almost 40 varieties. Those are our biggest sellers and that’s what we’re known for. We home-make all our caramel apples here. We decorate everything too. We get our apples and strawberries fresh every day. One very popular item is our sal-limon apples, which we created down here in the Valley so it’s been a big hit down here.”

Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory has something for every sweet tooth, including milk chocolate, dark chocolate, fudge, and white confection. It has frozen cheesecake on a stick, frozen bananas, and they all can be rolled in nuts if you want. There are simply too many combinations and choices to list them all here. If you’re diabetic, or just watching your weight, RMCF has a long list of sugar-free items too.

“We use flavored maltitol,” said Barrera. “Maltitol gives you a sweetness that is close to sugar, but without all the calories. It also doesn’t have the unpleasant aftertaste that other sugar substitutes like aspartame tend to have. It’s very popular with people who are diabetic or a special diet.”

The Barreras and Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory also give back to the community through their fundraising partnerships with Valley school organizations. RMCF provides products at a discount to school clubs, which then sell the items to raise money. “I have a lot of friends who are school teachers,” Barrera explained. “The state cut funding for school trips in 2006, and my sister and I wanted to do something to fill the gap. We only recover the cost of the products and the labor costs for doing it. We do it for the teachers who are struggling, the schools that are struggling for money, and especially for the kids who look forward to and enjoy these trips.”

Rocky Mountain Chocolate Factory stores in the Valley are still running on a slightly-curtailed schedule due to the continuing curfew. Customers still have to wear a mask, and they might be asked to wait outside in order to observe occupancy limits. Meanwhile, employees are working extra hard to clean and sanitize the stores, and there’s an increased emphasis on delivery and curb-side pick-up. But, Barrera says she’s happy to take the extra steps to protect her employees and customers who voted her stores as their Readers’ Choice for favorite snacks and sweets.

“There’s a lot of competition out there, so it’s a great honor for us,” said Barrera. “We take a lot of pride in our product as far as making, decorating, and packaging it, but I honestly did not think we would win. When my sister told me, I was like, ‘Wow!’ Our employees are thrilled, too. We really appreciate the support from everyone.”
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We mean it when we say, “We are family.” Our focus is sharp. Our aim is true. Our work is personal. Ours is a safe and nurturing environment where students are valued and cherished as individuals, while they are empowered through programs and schools recognized as among the best in the state and nation.

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In McAllen ISD, there is constant cooperation between the campus and parents to reach incredible game-changing triumphs for the children they serve. This teamwork mentality is a big reason why McAllen ISD has earned the Readers’ Choice Favorite School District award three times in the last four years. This award is a testament to the dedication and hard work of our team: teachers, staff, students, parents, School Board and our community.

It is a formula that has led to many recent recognitions and awards on a state and national level. These accolades include:

• Earning an “A” on the state accountability tests, the highest ranking, for two straight years.
• Earning the state’s distinction for Post-secondary Readiness three consecutive years.
• Earning the Financial Integrity Rating System of Texas (School FIRST) for the 17th time in 18 years with a perfect score the last nine years and perfect scores 14 times overall.
• Having all eligible schools listed among America’s Healthiest Schools by the national Alliance for a Healthier Generation.
• Earning a national Best Community for Music Education designation eight consecutive years.
• Becoming one of just 42 school districts in Texas to earn the Texas Art Education Association 2020 District of Distinction award, placing McAllen ISD in the top four percent of school districts in the state.
• 19 Regional or State Teacher of the Year titles in the past 29 years.
• School Board named a Regional Honor Board in 2020.

In addition, I was blessed to receive the Superintendent of the Year for the Region this summer and am now in the running as one of just five finalists for the state Superintendent of the Year award. Just like our other awards, it would not be possible without contributions from the entire team.

More importantly, I am proud that the hard work of our students has paid off. Here are a few recent accomplishments from this past school year:

• Achieve Early College High setting a school record with 87.6% of graduates earning their Associates Degree through South Texas College.
• National Merit Scholar from Lamar Academy (Memorial).
• International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme setting a district record with 120 graduates.

• A district record $54 million earned in scholarships.
• Dozens of AP Scholars and National Hispanic Scholars.
• Nearly 3,200 professional licenses and certifications earned through our Career Technical Education program.

Our graduates have begun the next chapter of their lives. Many have headed to top universities and colleges including the US Naval Academy, Notre Dame, New York University, Harvard, Cornell, Brown, Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, Rice, Duke, MIT and Stanford among many others.

The men and women who educate and nurture our children immerse themselves in the noble mission of inspiring students and our community to increasingly greater achievement. Our people are excellent educators and staff whose dedication ensures our students lay a foundation that catapults them to triumph in adulthood.

For more information on any of our schools or exciting programs, please call our Student Outreach Department at 956-687-6473. We are determined to continually improve upon the educational offerings that help our students reap a lifetime of success because that is what you do for family.

— Dr. J.A. Gonzalez has served as Superintendent of McAllen ISD since 2016.
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Thank you to the readers and our patients ... it is truly our honor to care for you and the entire Rio Grande Valley. And during this challenging time and always — to our administration, nurses, and staff, as well as physicians and volunteers, we appreciate your commitment to providing an outstanding healthcare experience.

Thank you to the readers and our patients ... it is truly our honor to care for you and the entire Rio Grande Valley. And during this challenging time and always — to our administration, nurses, and staff, as well as physicians and volunteers, we appreciate your commitment to providing an outstanding healthcare experience.

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southtexashealthsystem.com
Thank you readers of The Monitor for voting South Texas Health System (South Texas Health System Behavioral, South Texas Health System Children’s, South Texas Health System Edinburg, South Texas Health System Heart, and South Texas Health System McAllen) as your Favorite Hospital and South Texas Health System ERs (Alamo, McColl, Mission, Monte Cristo, Ware Rd., and Weslaco)) as your Favorite Emergency Room (ER). We are honored to receive these accolades.

South Texas Health System is a regional, integrated system of care comprised of five hospitals, several freestanding ERs, multiple physician practices, and a broad variety of outpatient services. As the largest healthcare system south of San Antonio with more than 600 physicians in more than 26 clinical specialties, we have earned a reputation for excellence. Our common goal is to deliver quality, compassionate care at our network of facilities serving children of all ages throughout the Rio Grande Valley.

INNOVATIVE CARE
In addition to having the area’s only dedicated heart hospital, the only dedicated children’s hospital with separate pediatric Emergency Room (ER), the only freestanding behavioral health center, and the only Level II Trauma Center, we are proud to include the following among our list of firsts:
- First private behavioral health inpatient treatment services in the Rio Grande Valley
- First neonatal surgery center in the Valley
- First designated Level III Trauma Center in Hidalgo County
- First and only freestanding hospital for children in the Rio Grande Valley

NATIONALLY RECOGNIZED AND COMPREHENSIVE CARE
South Texas Health System Edinburg, South Texas Health System Heart, and South Texas Health System McAllen earned Hospital Safety Grade “A” from The Leapfrog Group, a national, independent, watchdog setting the nation’s highest standards for patient safety. Our array of medical services ranges from behavioral health and cardiovascular, to emergency/surgical care and maternity/women’s health, to primary care and more. We also offer multiple specialty programs accredited or certified by leading organizations setting the nation’s highest standards in healthcare including, but not limited to:
- Bariatric Surgery
- Behavioral Health
- Breast Health
- Cancer Treatment
- Chest Pain
- Diabetes
- Heart Care
- Neurosurgery
- Orthopedics
- Pediatrics
- Rehabilitation
- Stroke Care
- Weight Loss
- Wound Care

PRIMARY CARE IN THE COMMUNITY
Primary care doctors are conveniently located throughout the region, addressing acute, non-emergency, and non-life-threatening issues. South Texas Health System Clinics, our affiliated physician group, offers extended hours, online scheduling and visits, and prescription refills. Walk-ins are also welcome!

SPECIALISTS FOR A VARIETY OF ISSUES
Highly trained and experienced physicians ranging from women’s health to cardiothoracic surgery utilize innovative technologies and minimally-invasive techniques to meet healthcare needs from the acute to complex.

CONVENIENT EMERGENCY CARE
Our fully equipped Emergency Departments staffed by physicians and surgeons specialized in treating emergencies are here for you and your loved ones. With the only Level II Trauma Center in Hidalgo County, certified stroke centers and six freestanding ERs, all open 24/7, high-quality emergency care is just minutes away.

To find a doctor and/or make an appointment (in-office or, if possible, virtual), please call the South Texas Health System Reserve and Learn Line at 800-879-1033, Monday through Friday, 7 a.m. - 7 p.m. For more information about our system, award-winning care, Clinics, services, classes and more, visit southtexashealthsystem.com.
CUSTOMER SERVICE EARN BELTONE HEARING AID CENTERS RGV ANOTHER READERS’ CHOICE AWARD

By: Benjamin Treviño

Beltone has been America's most-trusted name in hearing aids since the company was founded in Chicago in 1940. Here in the Valley, John Druley, with the help of his son, John Brian, has overseen Beltone's three offices in McAllen/Pharr, Weslaco, and Harlingen for more than three decades. On the strength of their customer satisfaction, the three stores have combined for nearly a dozen Readers' Choice awards over the years.

"Customer service is really what this industry is really all about," said Druley. "It’s about how well can you take care of your customers so that they continue to come back. When you have a need, we’re going to be there for you. Beltone has always prided itself on customer care. Even when your hearing aid is out of warranty, we can still take care of you."

Druley is certified by the National Board for Certification in Hearing Instrument Sciences, meaning he has demonstrated the highest standards of skill and knowledge for hearing aid specialists. Druley and his staff at Beltone Hearing Aid Centers are dedicated to improving the lives of people with hearing loss and restoring their connection to those around them.

"It’s very rewarding, because you do get to help a lot of people," Druley said, reflecting on his 30 years in the industry. "When a doctor or other specialist has told someone there’s no help for them, but then you do a complete test like the state requires, you see that they do still have some hearing and there is help available for them. Many people are misled about how bad their hearing loss is."

Beltone has the most-advanced research and development in the industry. Typically, anything new that has come out in the last 15-20 years has come through Beltone's research. Beltone developed the first hearing aids that connect directly to the iPhone. When you get a phone call, the audio goes directly from your phone to your hearing aid. Beltone introduced the technology five years before any of its competitors. Beltone's newest innovative hearing aid is slated to hit the market in mid-September.

"It’s called Imagine," said Druley. "What makes it unique is it has three microphones instead of just two, which is the standard now. It’s the first hearing aid that will have the three microphones like this. It’s going to be the closest thing to natural hearing that people with hearing loss have ever heard."

Like many other companies, Beltone of the Rio Grande Valley has had to adjust some of its office practices due to the Covid-19 pandemic, such as requiring face masks and limiting the number of people in its waiting rooms. However, Beltone has remained open throughout the pandemic and many of its health safety practices were in place long before the pandemic arose.

"We have always sanitized after our customers leave anyway, so in that way, sanitizing is not new to us," said Druley. "We always wear a mask. Our waiting room will hold eight to 10 people, but we only let one person at a time. We don’t see anybody that’s running a temperature, or that’s been sick, or has been exposed to someone who has Covid. Some things can be done remotely, depending on what hearing aid device they have."

Druley says he’s honored to win The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice award again this year, and is excited about the future holds for his industry.

"It’s hard to even imagine what’s coming," said Druley. "Ten years ago, we had no idea we would have hearing aids that we could listen to through our smart phones. Now, you can stream a TV program, or listen to music all day long and nobody even knows you’re doing it. This is technology you only used to see on Star Trek, but now it’s real. We were the first company to use the 2.4 gigahertz (GHz) Bluetooth technology, which is the wireless standard. Other companies before were using 900 to 1,200 megahertz. Our Bluetooth connectivity is second to none, and it’s true of all our hearing aids."

For more information on how Beltone can transform the way you hear the world, call the Rio Grande Valley location nearest you:

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Dr. Juan Padilla, The Monitor’s readers’ Choice in neurosurgery, has served as Chief of the Neuroscience Department at DHR Health since 2016. He is board certified by the American Board of Neurological Surgery, and a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons and the American Association of Neurological Surgeons.

Dr. Padilla attended Universidad de Puerto Rico Recinto de Mayagüez in Puerto Rico, where he received his bachelor’s degree. He received his medical degree from Universidad de Puerto Rico Recinto de Ciencias Médicas in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Afterwards, he completed a surgical internship and neurosurgery residency training at Hospital Universitario de Puerto Rico in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

“In medical school I had a professor that taught neurosurgery,” recalled Dr. Padilla. “He was working with patients with hydrocephalus, which causes a buildup of fluid in the brain, resulting in a large head. It occurs more frequently among infants and adults 60 and over. That was the turning point for me, in my first year of medical school.”

Dr. Padilla came to the United States in 2008 after being hired by Valley Baptist Medical Center. After two years, he moved to the Upper Valley and started working with Dr. Gustavo Ramos at Valley Neurological Clinic before taking up his current position at DHR Health in 2016.

“Before I was hired here, we started the stroke program here at DHR,” said Dr. Padilla. “In 2019, we became the first Joint Commission-certified comprehensive stroke center. Level I. I’ve been here doing neurosurgery for almost 10 years. And we do work on the spine, and the brain, basically 70% spine and 30% brain.”

While Dr. Padilla loves his work as a neurosurgeon, he says his first passion lies in his faith in Jesus Christ. He remembers becoming a born-again Christian at the age of 33.

“I didn’t know what to do to serve Him,” Dr. Padilla said. “I was asking, ‘What should I do?’ and suddenly there was an opening for doing missionary work, so I started going to different places, and the first one was Haiti, actually. It’s a beautiful place, but there’s a lot of need there to help people.”

In 2010, Dr. Padilla and several other local physicians and surgeons created an organization called HIMM – Heal International Medical Missions. Its goal is to communicate the message of Jesus Christ by equipping and sending surgical Christian ministry teams around the world. Each year, the team of doctors and support personnel travel to places like Haiti, Guatemala, Kyrgyzstan, Colombia, and Dominican Republic.

“Right now we have 10 places that we usually go yearly,” said Dr. Padilla. “We have several physicians from the area, like Drs. Griego, Peña, Vargas, and several others. It’s been beautiful, and basically it was the Lord who guided me through all this. I consider my skills as a surgeon as a gift from God, but I consider my missionary outreach as me real work. My job is to serve the Lord.”

When asked how he felt about being chosen as The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice for neurosurgeon, Dr. Padilla was almost at a loss for words.

“I don’t know what to say, really,” Dr. Padilla began. “I just want to give thanks to the people of the Valley for trusting me to be their neurosurgeon, and allowing me to help them with their neurological problems. I also want to thank the hospitals here in the Valley, in McAllen, Harlingen, and Brownsville where I have worked. I humbly thank everybody for giving me this honor.”
McAllen – It is not uncommon to drive around the Rio Grande Valley and spot multiple Medcare EMS’ vehicles on their way to provide emergency services. With over thirty emergency vehicles in its fleet and the largest emergency medical service in South Texas, Medcare EMS finds itself continuously rising to emergency occasions all around the RGV, but 2020 has been different.

As the COVID-19 pandemic placed a strain on local emergency departments and responders, Medcare EMS was asked to do more than usual while trying to keep safe. Medcare EMS, CEO, Ronnie Ontiveros acknowledges that grappling with COVID-19 has placed extra stress on the company and personnel. “At Medcare EMS, we make sure to hire, train, and educate quality employees and equip them with superior equipment, but no one could have imagined the amount of pressure we would all be faced with,” Ronnie said.

Like other frontline workers, Medcare EMS has risen to the occasion by performing their jobs while worrying about their safety and their own families’ safety. “On any other year, our employees would have performed their functions with only the patient’s safety and care in mind. Now, our employees are worried about their own health and take extra precautions to make sure they don’t put their families at risk,” Ronnie said. “But even with this added stress, we are confident that our people are true professionals and are always performing at their best.”

Although COVID-19 came as a surprise for many communities, Medcare EMS has long been prepared to take charge in emergencies of this stature. Their staff continuously goes through rigorous education and training and stay updated on public health safety guidelines. “Our staff is highly trained in infectious disease control, and our company provides all the equipment needed. We watched the international and national trends of this pandemic and were able to group and plan very early in the process. Our Medical Director quickly pivoted and changed protocols needed when dealing with COVID-19 patients.”

The RGV has struggled with a high number of positive cases needing hospitalization and emergency transportation. Ronnie explains, “We often found ourselves answering to triple the number of emergency calls compared to any other year. Aside from COVID-19 patients, we still had to answer to emergency calls that included car accidents and other health emergencies.” She is thankful for the local county and city leadership that has placed mandates and recommendations that now seem to be helping with a slight decrease in the number of emergency response needed. Still, the stress for Ronnie and her team will not be over.

Emergency response services often have a revenue shortfall that creates extra financial stress during pandemics like COVID-19. “I don’t think a lot of people are aware that we never turn away a patient, whether they can or cannot pay for our services. We are not funded through local governments or local hospitals,” says Ronnie. This means that Medcare EMS provides these emergency response services upfront in the hopes that they can get paid by the patient’s private insurance, Medicare, or Medicaid. In many cases, ambulance services may bill the patients for services the insurance didn’t cover, but the recovery rate for payment is low. “Regardless of everyone’s situation, Medcare EMS is dedicated to responding to every single emergency in the RGV. Our top priority is providing emergency services quickly and carefully because every patient’s life is important.”

Medcare EMS’ commitment to the health and safety of their community does not go unnoticed. Ronnie just accepted The Monitor’s Reader’s Choice Award for the 8th consecutive year in a row. “Getting this award for the 8th time in a row is extra sweet this year. We win this award because our community votes for us. So, this added stress on our company and personnel makes it worth it. We will continue to rise to the occasion again and again.”
HEART ATTACK WARNING SIGNS

CHEST DISCOMFORT
Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back. It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness or pain.

DISCOMFORT IN OTHER AREAS OF THE UPPER BODY
Symptoms can include pain or discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach.

SHORTNESS OF BREATH
with or without chest discomfort.

OTHER SIGNS
may include breaking out in a cold sweat, nausea or lightheadedness.

STROKE WARNING SIGNS

Spot a stroke F.A.S.T.:

- Face Drooping Does one side of the face droop or is it numb? Ask the person to smile.

- Arm Weakness Is one arm weak or numb? Ask the person to raise both arms. Does one arm drift downward?

- Speech Difficulty Is speech slurred, are they unable to speak, or are they hard to understand? Ask the person to repeat a simple sentence, like “the sky is blue.” Is the sentence repeated correctly?

- Time to call 9-1-1 If the person shows any of these symptoms, even if the symptoms go away, call 9-1-1 and get them to the hospital immediately.

Thank you to all of our Community’s for Voting us 2020 Readers’ Choice Winner Favorite Ambulance Service

We are honored and appreciate your continued support.

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A special thank you to our community, citizens and friends for voting!

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DR. CHRIS FREELS: AN ORTHODONTIST DEDICATED TO THE COMMUNITY HE CALLS HOME

By: Benjamin Treviño

Born and raised in McAllen, and a product of Sharyland schools, Dr. Chris Freels grew up to appreciate the importance of community service from his father, Dr. Billy Freels. The elder Freels was an active member of the community, and following in his footsteps, Chris Freels has served on the boards of the McAllen Boys and Girls Club, and the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. He continues to serve on the board of Rio Grande Regional Hospital.

“My dad and my grandfather, who was a World War II veteran, were both instrumental in instilling a sense of community in me,” said Dr. Freels. “They taught me the value of community involvement, church involvement, and volunteering. My dream had always been to return home after my dental education, and serve the area where I grew up.”

As a board-certified orthodontist, Dr. Freels specializes in correcting bite abnormalities, occlusion (how your teeth come in contact with one another), the straightness of patients’ teeth, and other dental issues. 70 percent of Dr. Freels patients are children. His Grow-and-Guidance Program is offered at no charge for young patients with functional needs.

“I start seeing patients at age seven,” said Dr. Freels. “It’s not that every patient needs work done at age seven, but it’s always good to have a baseline for me to watch their growth. If I see something that is maybe a little out of the ordinary it’s much easier for me to address it at an earlier date as opposed to just waiting until all of their permanent teeth are in and wanting to get their teeth straightened at that point in time.”

Dr. Freels also treats adults, which he says his a “different equation.”

“You’re not dealing with growth,” explained Dr. Freels. “The bones at that point are fairly static, but there are many adults whose quality of life is not great. They’re clenching or grinding their teeth, waking up with headaches, or they have TMJ (temporomandibular joints) pain. We’re able to get them out of pain, and get them to a position to where they not only have a great smile, but they have a good bite that fits and works and functions properly.”

Dr. Freels says patients should not feel worried about having dental work done because of the novel coronavirus pandemic. His office is following all recommended safety guidelines designed to protect both patients and staff. You might have to wait in the parking lot for a chair to open, but Dr. Freels says appointments are still handled expeditiously.

“I’m very conscious of the importance of time,” said Dr. Freels. “My patients’ time is just as important as mine. So you’re not going to come here and waste two hours of your time just to be seen by me, and you’re always going to be seen by me. You’re not going to see some associate. I see every one of my patients. I always make sure that we’re running on time, so that you can get in and out and get on with the rest of your day.”

Dr. Freels says the respect that he provides for patients and the integrity and trustworthiness that he follows are paramount to everything he does.

“I want to build a relationship with all my patients,” said Dr. Freels. “That’s what I enjoy most about my practice — to get to know them, understand them, and it gives me the opportunity to be a better practitioner, because I can adjust to what their concerns are and what’s important to them, and what they’re looking for.”

Located at 3220 Buddy Owens Blvd, Ste. 100 in McAllen, Dr. Freels invites everyone to find out more about the services he offers. His web address is at www.freelsortho.com, and you can find him on Facebook as well. For appointments, call (956) 631-8181. Find out today why Dr. Chris Freels is The Monitor’s 2020 Readers’ Choice orthodontist.

“Being chosen for the Readers’ Choice is a real high honor for me,” said Dr. Freels. “Going forward, I want to thank and appreciate all the people who voted for me, and I look forward to serving them well into the future.”
**NEXTHOME RGV MAKES ITS MARK IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY**

By Yirla R. Gonzalez Nolan

**McAllen** – Entrepreneurs like Ronnie Ontiveros know that the first year of a new business is mostly about surviving. As the sole owner of the one-year-old NextHome RGV, Ronnie never expected making a mark so early in the business game.

NextHome RGV is a progressive real estate franchise committed to leaving a lasting impact on the real estate industry and local communities. Although 2020 has been a challenging year for all, NextHome RGV has created growth in its first year of inception. Ronnie, the Owner/Broker of NextHome RGV, had an impressive 15.6 million in sales through her sole production her first year in business. She led the growth of this real estate company with twenty-eight agents in Texas. “So much planning and strategizing happened before the actual opening of this real estate company. I created a lot of structure and surrounded myself with great team members to create a company that would quickly create residual sales,” Ronnie said. “Having this success in our first year is humbling and unexpected, but I took everything I’ve learned as a Real Estate agent and business owner and applied it to this business framework.”

Although NextHome RGV is relatively new, Ronnie carries over 16 years of Real Estate experience. She holds multiple designations and specializes in home, land, and commercial property. “My favorite part of owning NextHome RGV is the direct impact we have on shaping our communities. I also have the best team one can work with. Every single agent I recruit is equipped with the skills and tools needed to provide superb service to all our clients,” says Ronnie. The RGV agrees.

Ronnie has received The Monitor’s Reader’s Choice Award in 2020 for Favorite Real Estate Agent/Broker. “Within our first year in business, the community has recognized that knowledge, commitment, honesty, expertise, and professionalism is the cornerstone of our business. This award truly humbles me, and I use it as energy in this high-paced industry.” She also attributes the company’s success to the amount of work put into fostering relationships. “This business is relational, and I truly believe in getting to know people. I make it a point to know all my agents, employees, and customers.”

Making a mark in the RGV this early in the business sets the bar higher for NexHome RGV and other real estate companies. “The real estate industry in the Valley has a lot of talented individuals. I have been lucky to collaborate with many of them and know they are as deserving of this award. For now, I will enjoy this honor but will quickly get back to work and do what we do best, making a mark in our community and industry.”
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“For us, winning the Reader’s Choice Award is an honor and represents that we are impacting more lives each day,” said Dr. Amy Garza. “It also motivates us to continue to expand our reach and be able to continue to impact more lives in the future. We believe that our company culture is what makes our business a customer favorite. We pride ourselves on creating a positive experience with our customers and treating everyone like family. The team we have in place is also very diverse and extremely knowledgeable and skillful.”

Pure Physical Therapy is owned by Dr. Amy Garza PT, DPT, and Dr. Frank Garza PT, DPT. As local practitioners, they go out of their way to provide exceptional customer care to their clients throughout the McAllen area. Pure Physical Therapy's services include:

• Pain management
• Sports physical therapy
• Vertigo therapy
• Sciatic nerve physical therapy
• Post Surgical rehabilitation
• Workman’s Compensation
• Shoulder Pain

“We also have experience treating herniated discs, osteoarthritis, and all of the everyday injuries like sprains/strains”, said Dr. Frank Garza. “We go out of our way to identify the root cause of any ongoing pain before offering treatment options, including exercise therapy, laser therapy, Pilates therapy, and even yoga or personal training services. Our attentive and focused staff strives to make our office more accessible by maintaining flexible appointment scheduling throughout the week.

Amy and Frank say the most-rewarding part of what they do is helping people overcome challenges every day – people like Papito Gonzalez, a 26 year professional golfer on the Asian tour. Papito was experiencing back pain, and it was beginning to negatively affect his scores. He reached out to Pure Physical Therapy for a strengthening and stretching program to better his game and prevent future injury.

“I was limited on my back swing because I was so tight in my back,” Gonzalez explained. “I am now able to shift my weight better and have improved my swing which has allowed me to hit the ball longer. Even my coach sees the difference.”

Pure Physical Therapy has impacted the lives of a wide range of individuals, as evidenced by the office’s photo gallery of patients who have placed their trust in Frank and Amy’s hands.

“We had to stop hanging photos, because we ran out of space on our walls,” said Dr. Amy Garza. “Our greatest joy comes from having a patient hug us, and say, ’thank you for empowering me.’ It’s very moving and humbling as a therapist, and even a human being, that we are able to provide people with something money can’t buy.”

At Pure Physical Therapy, Amy and Frank have more than 20 years of combined experience treating issues such as herniated discs, osteoarthritis, back pain, and much more. They go out of their way to identify the root cause of any ongoing pain before offering treatment options, including exercise therapy, laser therapy, Pilates therapy, and even yoga or personal training. Their attentive and focused staff strives to make the office more accessible by maintaining flexible appointment scheduling throughout the week.

And remember, you no longer need a doctor’s referral to see a physical therapist!

Reach out to Pure Physical Therapy today to see if they can empower you to live a healthier life. Email them at: info@pure-physicaltherapy.com, or call (956) 994-8880, or visit their website at: www.pure-physicaltherapy.com. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram as well.
As Americans struggle with the health implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, the experts at Your Tax Service are monitoring the possible tax implications of the economic stimulus initiatives designed to shore up the US economy.

“I can tell you that next year there’s going to be a ton of changes, because of this Corona business,” said Your Tax Service owner, Sal Colmenero. “There’s going to be a lot of questions, so it comes down to working with a tax professional who knows what they’re talking about.”

Two things that Colmenero and his staff are monitoring closely are the government’s economic stimulus checks and the possible suspension of the federal payroll tax.

The first round of stimulus checks went to almost everyone, including workers, retirees, and the disabled. Those checks are not taxable, and will not affect your 2020 taxes. However, the details of second round of stimulus checks have not been hammered out.

“The second round of checks might be taxable, but that’s just my opinion,” said Colmenero. “We don’t know yet, until they approve it and send us the rules. It’s like the PPP (Paycheck Protection Program) loans. They’re still changing everything that was done since April. I would set aside a portion of second check just to make sure. Watch the news for updates, and watch our website, because once we find out what the rules are I update people and let them know.”

Meantime, President Trump wants to hit the “pause” button on workers’ payroll taxes. Such a move would leave more money in people’s and employers’ wallets, but it could also produce headaches for workers and employers when the 2021 tax season rolls around.

“Even if the payroll tax is deferred or suspended, my advice is to leave it there and don’t spend it,” Colmenero said. “I tell my payroll clients the same thing. Make sure they save it, don’t spend it, because if it doesn’t go through or it doesn’t turn out as planned, and you have to pay back some or all of it, then you’ll be liable for that amount.”

Colmenero says these and other possible changes still under consideration underscore the advantages of getting professional help with your 2020 taxes. Now celebrating its 20th anniversary and its seventh straight year as The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice for tax services, Your Tax Service offers professional help with an array of financial specialties, including:

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- Investment Strategies

“We take our time with each client to make sure they keep as much of their money as possible,” said Colmenero. “Our customers like the service that we provide. We’re here for them all year, not just during tax season. We’re knowledgeable in all the new changes, especially this year there are going to be a ton of changes, and my employees and I are up to date on all those changes. Finally, they like our prices compared to the competition.”

For more information on how Your Tax Service can help you stake out your financial well-being, visit: www.yourtaxservicergv.com, or call them today at (956) 661-1800.
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READERS’ CHOICE CAKE BAKER URGES CUSTOMERS TO PLAN AHEAD FOR MAJOR EVENTS

By: Benjamin Treviño

With most large events and social gatherings canceled or postponed, 2020 has been a difficult year for Cynthia Ebrom and Cynthia’s Cakes of Edinburg.

“I would say 90% of the weddings we had on the books this year have been postponed to next year,” said Ebrom. “Catering to weddings is our specialty, but lately, because of Covid, most people aren’t buying anything more than a 20-piece cake. We’re used to doing these gigantic five and six-tier cakes, so it has impacted us tremendously.”

Ebrom has had to change her practices because of the pandemic. She’s not doing any in-person appointments for the time being, even though she has long felt that was the best way to ensure her clients get exactly what they want in a custom cake. Her in-house tasting events have also been temporarily suspended.

“Times have changed, and you have to change with the times,” Ebrom said. “Nowadays customers are asked to send correspondence via text messages that include images of something they like and we will provide options with input for the final design. That’s how we’re working it right now, because we’re not letting anybody come into the shop, not yet.”

In lieu of in-house tasting events, Cynthia’s Cakes can prepare a batch of samples with an assortment of her different cake and icing flavors. It’s a new way of doing business and Ebrom says it’s been a hit with her customers.

“It’s a 12-pack, which has a great variety of the flavors we offer,” Ebrom explained. “They can take it home, and sample the different flavors and frostings at their leisure, and they can share their thoughts with each other, and then they can call us back and say, ‘Okay, I like this, that, and the other,’ and that’s how it goes. It works great. Everybody loves it.”

Custom cakes have always been the cornerstone of Cynthia’s Cakes’ popularity, but now she’s offering a selection of smaller “Grab and Go” cakes due to the pandemic.

“A lot of people just wanted to eat some cake,” said Ebrom. “We do small cakes like 6-inch and 8-inch rounds. With grab and go, we decorate it the way our artists want to do it that day. It has really helped us get through this pandemic, especially those first months.”

Ebrom became fascinated with artistic cake design as a little girl when she attended a wedding reception with her parents. She became enthralled with the intricate art work of the swirls, flowers, and other design details. In 1983, Cynthia, who was a single mom at the time, began decorating cakes as a way to make extra money.

“I didn’t have anything,” Ebrom recalled. “So I would tell people, ‘Hey, buy me a pan and I’ll bake you a cake,’ and that’s how I collected a lot of my supplies like pans, and tips, and things of that nature. Looking back, it was probably the worst way to start a business, but something just clicked in me and I loved it. I got lost in the art of cake decorating.”

Adapting to her customers’ wishes is one of the things that has made Cynthia’s Cakes a perennial Readers’ Choice for the last 10 years. For example, when people began asking her to incorporate fresh flowers on their cake designs, Cynthia attended the prestigious Shelton-White School of Floral Design in Memphis to study floral design.

“I was petrified at first to do fresh flowers to tell you the truth,” said Ebrom. “I didn’t know what I was doing, or even if a certain flower was poisonous or any of that stuff. When I came back from school I was very confident about using fresh flowers.”

Ebrom urges the public to visit her website (www.cynthiascakesllc.com) and to follow her on Facebook and Instagram to see photos of her work. She also reminds potential customers that it’s best to order a custom cake at least six to eight months in advance. Meantime, she expressed gratitude to everyone who voted for Cynthia’s Cakes as their Readers’ Choice.

“It means so much every year we’ve won, it’s like I can’t believe it,” said Ebrom. “There are so many good decorators out there, that it’s hard to put into words how it feels to be chosen every year like that. It’s not easy to decorate cakes, but we try our best to have some type of perfection involved with it, and for people to like it every year, it’s just like icing on the cake.”
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Thank You, Rio Grande Valley for voting Aguilar’s Meat Market as The Monitor’s 2020 Reader’s Choice Award for your Favorite Meat Market! We are humbled and privileged to hold this honor for the past 12 years in a row.

Founded in 1984 by Irineo Aguilar, Sr. and his wife Elida V. Aguilar, Aguilar’s Meat Market started as a small meat market at the corner of 22nd Ave. and E. University Dr. in Edinburg, TX. Aguilar’s Meat Market is a full service, “old-fashioned” meat market providing quality meats and personal friendly service to the entire Rio Grande Valley with two locations in Edinburg, TX. Today, Aguilar’s Meat Market is owned and operated by Irineo “Eddie” Aguilar Jr. and his family. The Aguilar family has used their four decades of retail experience to build a successful business with a loyal clientele.

Aguilar’s Meat Market’s goal is to supply a large variety of fresh high-quality meats to their customers. Aguilar’s carries U.S.D.A. Choice Angus steaks, fajitas, and ribs served to you by an experienced staff to meet every customer needs and specifications. Aguilar’s Meat Market also carries fresh all-natural poultry and pork items for a great eating experience. All Aguilar’s employees are trained to cut all meat items at the customer’s request with freezer packaging available. Aguilar’s offers a wide variety of pre-marinated products seasoned in house with their own special blends.

Aguilar’s Meat Market also carries a large variety of fresh produce sourced locally and at reasonable prices. You will find local Valley fruits such as watermelons, and honey dews during Summer and a wide variety of Fresh Valley Citrus during Winter. Ready to grill produce such as Vegetable-ka-bobs, Stuffed Mushrooms, and Zucchini Stir Fries are available daily at Aguilar’s Meat Market.

Aguilar’s Meat Market provides catering services for their customers with all foods being cooked in house daily. Smoked Brisket, Chicken, and Sausage are among theavorites that customers order, but Mexican style dishes such as Carne Guisada, Charro beans, and Rice are also available. On weekend mornings, at Aguilar’s Meat Market you can find hot Barbacoa, Carnitas, and Menudo that was slowly cooked fresh that night for a traditional Mexican breakfast.

Make sure to try some of the store brand products made in house. Homemade pico de gallo, guacamole, salsas and dips are among the delights that Aguilar’s Meat Market has spent generations perfecting. Aguilar’s freshly made Jalapeno and Cheddar Sausage are a necessity at every pit master’s grill. Jalapeno Poppers (a.k.a. Ratones), Chicken Wraps, and Bacon Wrapped Franks are some of the delicacies that are made by hand by the Aguilar’s butchers for their customers. Other items such as Carbon Mexicano, Tostadas, and Tortillas are branded with the Aguilar logo to ensure high quality standards in store.

On any given day you can still find Eddie Aguilar, Marco Aguilar, or Jason Rabago Aguilar behind the meat counter working diligently to ensure only the best quality cuts, meats, and customer service for their clientele. You can find Elizabeth C. Aguilar, and Alyssa Aguilar ensuring the front of store is up to customer expectations.

To conclude, Aguilar’s Meat Market, Edinburg, TX and the Aguilar family would like to first thank God for its many blessings. Once again, a MILLION THANKS go out to the Rio Grande Valley and Employees. Your loyalty, dedication, perseverance and determination go unnoticed. You all are simply AWESOME!

We stand behind our slogan, Aguilar’s Meat Market, Edinburg, TX - “Your Family Butcher Shop!”
Founders
Mr. Irineo † (1928-1992)
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There are many things that make McAllen a popular destination for travelers and locals alike - it boasts the Valley’s busiest airport, the McAllen Performing Arts Center is the largest of its kind in South Texas, and retail venues such as La Plaza Mall and Palms Crossing have made McAllen a hub for shoppers from across the Valley and Mexico. But, if you ask Mayor Jim Darling why he thinks McAllen was chosen as The Monitor's Readers’ Choice favorite city, he believes it comes down to teamwork.

“I think we appreciate the importance of being team players in the county,” said Darling. “For instance, during Hurricane Hanna, we sent out some of our equipment and personnel to help other cities. I think a lot has to do with our fire department, our police department, our public works, etc. They look at being involved in the community as including the county as a whole, not just the city itself.”

McAllen’s ability to forge productive partnerships with other local government entities paid dividends earlier this year when the city joined forces with the McAllen Economic Development Corporation, and the McAllen School District to bring free Wi-Fi service to 16 neighborhoods across the city. The $2.4 million dollar investment was crucial to ensuring low-income children would be able to meet the challenge of distance learning in the era of COVID-19.

“I don’t think we’re ever going to get back to normal with distance learning and distance working,” said Darling. “So the ability to get Wi-Fi available to everybody is hugely important to me. This week we’ll have pretty close to 500 nodes in neighborhoods. It’s not exactly cheap, but it’s cheaper than anything we’ve tried, and certainly more effective in providing Internet in people’s neighborhoods than having people go to hot spots, etc.”

According to Darling, one thing that sets McAllen apart from other Valley cities is that candidates for city office don’t run on slates or tickets. Everybody runs independently, and Darling says that has fostered a certain stability even when one administration hands over the reins to the next.

“When people run on tickets, they often want to make a lot of changes,” said Darling. “In McAllen, we run independently so you don’t necessarily have some of that publicity after an election regarding shakeups at city hall, changing the city manager, and the city engineer, and everybody else. So I think the continuity of leadership and the continuity of their institutional experience helps McAllen from a certain standpoint.”

The Valley’s cultural penchant for Friday Night Football does help foster a spirit of competitiveness between the area’s cities, and municipalities often find themselves vying with one another for job-creating development. However, Darling sees these types of competition as healthy for all cities in the long-run.

“It’s always nice to have people appreciate you,” Darling said. “So, we really appreciate everybody who voted for McAllen. We try to work as a region together. Sometimes it’s a contest pitting cities against each other, but we think it’s in good spirit and so we hope that’s what it is. I think Edinburg got it last year and we congratulate them. It’s good that the Valley competes, but at the end of the day we all need to be working together. We accept The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Award in the spirit in which it was given, and we hope that everybody feels their hometown is also their favorite city.”
This year, this honor means more than anyone could ever imagine.

Our community, our region...the entire world...we have all been through so much and we’re not only still standing, we are also walking and moving forward.

This is a testament to the single-minded focus of the administrators and staff of the City of McAllen, to do their very best every day and to do what is right for our city, our residents, our employees and anyone else who comes into McAllen.

We don’t know what tomorrow or next year will bring, but our City of McAllen will continue to plan to keep our city safe, healthy and prosperous, today and every day.

That is the City of McAllen way.

Thank you for once again selecting the City of McAllen as the Best City in the 2020 The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Awards.
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From its modest beginnings in a small church in Pharr in 2001, Vanguard Academy’s student population has grown from just 32 children in two Sunday school classrooms to more than 5,000 students today. From the outset, its mission has been to prepare students to be successful in their education, and in their careers, by emphasizing responsibility and respect. The public has evidently taken note, selecting Vanguard Academy as The Monitor’s 2020 Readers’ Choice as the area’s favorite charter school.

“I believe it’s because we’re very intentional in engaging our students and our parents,” said Vanguard Superintendent Dr. Narciso Garcia. “I attribute it to that – our intentionality of building a community with our families. We also have great teachers – some of the best teachers in the world, and I’m not just saying it. I have seen it, having worked in several other school systems.”

Vanguard Academy currently operates seven elementary and secondary school campuses, including Rembrandt Elementary, Rembrandt Secondary, and Picasso Elementary in Pharr, Mozart Elementary and Mozart Secondary in Alamo, and Beethoven Elementary and Beethoven Secondary in Edinburg. By naming its campuses after great masters of art, Vanguard signals to the world that it places fine arts instruction on equal footing with academic instruction.

“We believe the fine arts provide that extra enrichment that every child needs,” said Dr. Garcia, who has headed Vanguard since 2017. “Our job is to strengthen the left brain and the right brain. We believe it leads them to being successful not just in academics, but it makes them successful in life, because they have both sides of the brain developed. We develop the whole child, not just half the child.”

The results speak for themselves. Vanguard Academy has been among the top three or four school systems in the state of Texas with regard to accountability in academics. Vanguard schools have received an “A” rating of a 96 and a 97 in the last two years that student achievement was measured through assessment tests such as STAAR and TELPAS.

“We’ve been the #1 charter school in Region One for the last couple of years,” Dr. Garcia stated. “Our graduation rate for high school is 100%. We also have 90% of our kids go to college, and they stay engaged. They don’t drop out of college, they stay connected. The Region One average for students attending college is between 56 - 60%, and Vanguard Academy is 90%.”

Like other schools, Vanguard is facing the health and safety challenges presented by the novel coronavirus pandemic. Vanguard’s response began at the outset when it provided more than one million meals to its families from March to June. Through a partnership with the RGV Food Bank, Vanguard provided an additional 40-thousand pounds of chicken to its families. Vanguard also teamed up with HEB to provide backpacks and school supplies for every student, and through its own resources, Vanguard provided each student and teacher with either a laptop or a tablet to address the “new normal” of distance learning.

“It’s been a lot of work,” said Dr. Garcia. “We’ve been planning and working toward all this since March. It represents a lot of preparation, a lot of time. None of us really had a summer, because we were here, working to ensure we had a great start to our 2020-21 school year.”

Dr. Garcia says Vanguard is also preparing for the inevitable return to on-campus learning, which he hopes will happen by next spring. All Vanguard schools are changing out their water fountains, they’re placing sneeze guards on every desk, and all buildings are being disinfected and sanitized regularly.

Vanguard’s selection as The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Charter School is accepted with gratitude, and as an incentive to keep improving in the future.

“Thank you for believing in Vanguard,” Dr. Garcia said of the selection. “Thank you for entrusting your children to us. Thank you for supporting Vanguard Academy as parents and community members. This distinction is going to push Vanguard Academy to do even better, because we’re going to take what we’ve learned and use it to become stronger as educators, which we take very seriously. And, in closing, Vanguard Academy wants to give all the honor and glory to God.”
An estimated 12 million Americans who are infirm, chronically ill, or disabled depend on some form of in-home care, according to the National Association for Home Care and Hospice. Many are 65 or older, and have serious underlying medical conditions, putting them at high-risk for contracting the novel coronavirus.

But physical distancing is especially difficult during in-home care, which requires close contact for nursing care, therapy, and tasks like bathing, grooming and feeding.

In order to continue in-home care, nurses and attendants at Health Care Unlimited (HCU) are taking extra safety precautions to mitigate the risks of transmission and keep their patients and themselves as safe as possible.

"Home Health has had its challenges over the years, but nothing like in 2020," said HCU Clinical Director Nilda Sanchez, who oversees the agency's skilled nurses and therapists. "Just walking into a patient's front door takes longer. The nurse calls ahead to pre-screen the patient on the phone. We ask the patient a few questions such as: Has the patient been or resides with anyone who has travelled internationally outside the United States within the last 14 days? And if they've had any symptoms like fever, sore throat, etc."

HCU nurses wear full Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) from head to toe when they visit a patient that is positive for COVID-19. That includes head covers, N-95 masks, face shields, gowns, and even shoe covers.

"Our clients are the most vulnerable members of our community," said HCU Vice President for Community Care and Chief Compliance Officer, Ana Solis. "Especially during this pandemic, it's our job to keep everyone healthy and safe. We cannot do some things in person like we've become accustomed to while social distancing, so we're having to think outside the box and use technology such as remote patient monitoring and mass text messaging to keep everyone informed and up to date."

Above all, HCU patients do not have to worry that their nurse, therapist, or attendant has been in contact with a COVID-19 positive patient prior to entering their home.

"We have a special COVID team that sees only COVID patients," Sanchez explained. "We screen all our patients during the intake process. If they have been confirmed to have COVID, they are seen only by the nurses on this team, and other nurses treat the non-diagnosed COVID-19 patients, so there's no cross-contamination."

Sanchez has been with HCU for 19 years, while Solis has been with the agency for 20 years. Such longevity is rare in a stressful profession like home health, but they say they wouldn't want to work anywhere else.

"I am treated with respect and professionalism, and we work together confidently as an amazing team" said Sanchez. "I enjoy going to work every day and prepare myself for new challenges in this New World of healthcare. HCU provides for our safety and ensures that we have what we need to do our jobs. The environment here really makes us feel safe."

"Every day is a different day," Solis added. "Things can change rapidly even in the same day and that peaks my interest. HCU sets the bar very high every year and working to achieve that is something that I strive for every day. It's great to work for a company like HCU."

Now in its 30th year, HCU has been Joint Commission accredited for the last 22, a difficult task, given the commission's strict standards. HCU has also earned the prestigious Five-Star rating by the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services six years running – a distinction based on positive patient outcomes and patient satisfaction with their home care experience.

Additionally, HCU has been The Monitor's Reader's Choice in home health six times – another indication of its high patient approval rating.

"We're very elated about being the Readers' Choice," said HCU Director of Marketing, Johnny Oliva. "We have always done all that we possibly can with one thing in mind, the care of our patients. Making sure they get the highest standards of care. That's what matters to the patient and their families. It's an honor to be recognized by our patients once again."

"It's wonderful," said Sanchez. "There are a lot of home health agencies here in the Valley, and so we're blessed that we were selected for this recognition."

Welcome Home
Health Care Unlimited is here to provide Home Health Services for people of all ages! Now accepting Covid-19 Patients
An estimated 12 million Americans who are infirm, chronically ill, or disabled depend on some form of in-home care, according to the National Association for Home Care and Hospice. Many are 65 or older, and have serious underlying medical conditions, putting them at high-risk for contracting the novel coronavirus.

But physical distancing is especially difficult during in-home care, which requires close contact for nursing care, therapy, and tasks like bathing, grooming and feeding.

In order to continue in-home care, nurses and attendants at Health Care Unlimited (HCU) are taking extra safety precautions to mitigate the risks of transmission and keep their patients and themselves as safe as possible.

“Home Health has had its challenges over the years, but nothing like in 2020,” said HCU Clinical Director Nilda Sanchez, who oversees the agency’s skilled nurses and therapists. “Just walking into a patient’s front door takes longer. The nurse calls ahead to pre-screen the patient on the phone. We ask the patient a few questions such as: Has the patient been or resides with anyone who has travelled internationally outside the United States within the last 14 days? And if they’ve had any symptoms like fever, sore throat, etc.”

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Thank You!

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WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT EYE CARE DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC (COVID-19)

By: Benjamin Treviño

You might feel nervous about venturing out during the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19). However, you shouldn't neglect your eye care needs during these times of restricted movement. Ophthalmologists like Dr. Richard Gillett at Buena Vista Optical in McAllen are following strict hygiene and disinfection guidelines laid out by the American Academy of Ophthalmologists. Similar to guidelines at other businesses, the precautions begin with wearing a mask.

“If someone arrives without a mask, we give them one,” said Dr. Gillett. “We may ask you to wait outside, so that the waiting room doesn't get too full. We're restricted to 50% of our normal patient load. We maintain six feet of space between patients. They get their temperature checked. If you have a cough or fever, we ask that you postpone your visit and return home until you're well.

If you have a cough or a fever, or have been in close contact with someone who has these symptoms, you should call your eye doctor's office ahead of time and let them know. If your visit is not an emergency, you may need to stay home.

If you need to cough or sneeze during your exam, move back from the slit lamp microscope machine. Bury your face in the crook of your arm or cover your face with a tissue. Wash your hands with soap and water right away.

If you have an urgent problem that cannot wait to be seen, you will be asked to wait in a special room away from other patients. The clinic staff and your physician may wear additional protective equipment, such as gowns and gloves.

“Urgent cases include loss of vision, trauma, infection, and pain in the eye,” said Dr. Gillett. “I had someone call me just last Saturday when we were closed. He was complaining of severe pain in his eye. I didn't want to send him home, so I came in and saw him and took care of him. Something like that we take care of immediately. If you ever have a sudden loss of vision, red eye, anything that causes discomfort or pain, you should see a doctor as soon as possible.”

Conjunctivitis, also known as ‘pink eye,’ is one possible side effect caused by Covid-19. However, it has occurred in only one to three percent of cases. It is still not known if Covid-19 can be passed by infected droplets contacting the eye, but Dr. Gillett says it's best to be cautious anyway.

“It's a mucus membrane like your nose, and your mouth, and that's where it goes through. We don't know if Covid-19 can be transmitted through droplets in the eyes. I just read an article last night, and it say the bio load is so low that it probably doesn't, but I would pretend that it does because if you wait another two weeks, we may find out that it does.”

In the US, diabetes is the most-common cause of blindness. Diabetes, according to Dr. Gillett, is “the scourge of the Rio Grande Valley.” Dr. Gillett has treated, without charge, more than three thousand patients with laser surgery who have diabetes, but do not have health insurance or money. He believes that the “helper high” he gets is payment enough.

Originally from San Antonio, Dr. Gillett is a graduate of UCLA Medical School, and has been an ophthalmologist since he founded Buena Vista Optical 25 years ago. As an active member of the community, Dr. Gillett serves as Vice President of both the Rio Grande Valley Diabetes Association, and CASA (Court Appointed Special Advocates), which provides volunteer advocacy in the courtroom for abused and neglected child in the community. Last year, Dr. Gillett also finished first place in the charity event, RGV Dancing with the Stars, which raised $75,000 for the Rio Grande Valley Diabetes Association. This the 10th year in a row that Buena Vista Optical has won The Monitor's Readers' Choice award, a distinction that Dr. Gillett accepts with gratitude.

“It's very rewarding,” said Dr. Gillett. “This profession gives me the biggest bang for the buck in terms of happy patients. I guess my patients are happy, because they keep coming back. To them, I say stay healthy, be happy, and be safe. Everything can change in the blink of an eye. One minute you're doing well, and then a week later you're standing in a long line trying to buy a roll of toilet paper. So, you have to roll with the punches in life.”

Buena Vista Optical is open Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. Walk-in patients are still welcome, but it's best to make an appointment ahead of time. To schedule an examination, call Buena Vista Optical at (956) 631-3002 or visit their website at www.buenavistaoptical.org.
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McAllen Police Department mission is to provide quality community oriented services and to enhance public safety and instill confidence of all citizens by partnerships with our citizens to prevent crime and enhance the quality of life throughout our community always treating people with dignity, fairness, and respect.

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Our Mission at Willow Bend Mortgage McAllen is to earn the trust of our customers, build long lasting relationships with and treat every customer as the family that they are.

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Willow Bend Mortgage-McAllen: Putting Mortgage Services to Work for You

By: Benjamin Treviño

Willow Bend Mortgage-McAllen is a full service mortgage banker with an experienced staff offering expertise in every area of mortgage lending. Our loan specialists are dedicated to finding the right funding for your needs – from purchase, to refinance, to construction lending.

Willow Bend has access to a full range of mortgage sources, with the best rates, terms and costs. But that’s just the beginning of Willow Bend’s services. Throughout the lending process, you’ll receive regular loan updates, and progress reports so you always know the status of your loan. So, what makes Willow Bend Mortgage-McAllen the 2020 Readers’ Choice Mortgage Lender?

“It’s the personal touch that we offer,” said Office Manager Tanya Chapa. “It’s our availability after 5:00 pm and on the weekends. We never lose sight of the realtor, the builder, and of course our customers. It’s our hard work that will keep us here.”

At the corporate level, Willow Bend Mortgage is celebrating 25 years of serving its customers. They have established themselves as a top mortgage company in the state of Texas. The corporate mission is to be the best mortgage company to work with and to work for. This begins and ends with employing the best team in the industry. The professionals at Willow Bend have one common goal – to provide their customers with the best possible experience in financing their dreams.

Willow Bend Mortgage is a community-based, relationship lender; however, they provide an industry-leading technology platform that is second to none. This gives them the unique ability to guide their clients through the ever-changing challenges of the mortgage business. They are extremely proud and even more thankful for the relationships they have made with the customers they have served over the last 25 years.

Together with the assistance of an experienced loan officer, Willow Bend Mortgage-McAllen serves as the Valley’s personal guide through the often difficult and confusing process of choosing and getting the exact loan to meet your specific needs. If you can’t come to our office, Willow Bend Mortgage-McAllen also offers the best mortgage tools available on the Internet. They’re easy, convenient, and online shoppers can find the best loan programs and most current rates available.

Willow Bend’s online Monthly Payment Calculator helps you determine how much home you can afford. There are many important things to consider throughout the process, especially if you’re a first-time homebuyer, so Willow Bend also features a homebuyer guide with information that will keep you on track.

Willow Bend Mortgage-McAllen has helped thousands of Valley families obtain the home of their dreams – people like Oscar Mares of McAllen.

“After having a hard time with the home purchasing process, we were able to assist Mr. Mares with his mortgage,” Chapa explained. “He said a prayer before coming into the office with his wife, and told us at the very end that we were the miracle workers that got him through those doors. His file was not the easiest to put together, but with diligence we were able to make his dream come true.”

At Willow Bend Mortgage-McAllen, the most rewarding aspect of lending is seeing clients’ smiles and tears of joy as they finally achieve The American Dream. Winning The Monitor’s Reader’s Choice Award as Favorite Mortgage Lender is just one indication that Willow Bend is doing things right.

“This is an absolute honor for us,” said Chapa. “We are extremely humbled that fellow citizens have voted us their favorite.”

Mortgage rates are incredibly low right now, so there’s no better time to pursue the American Dream. Call Willow Bend Mortgage-McAllen today at (956) 271-0360, or visit their website at: www.wbm.com/branches/mcallen.
DR. GISELA SAENZ: COMMUNITY PRIDE IS KEY

By: Eryn Redddell Wingert

Teaching kindergarten at Benavides Elementary in Sullivan City was not quite where Saenz ever saw herself. Previously she was a cosmetics company sales representative, a job which involved a lot of travel. However, a longing to serve within her home community led her to pursue a career in education, she says, “I believe education is one of the things that can transform a student, family and a community.”

Saenz thrived in her new-found career. Today she serves as La Joya Independent School District’s superintendent. “I’m blessed to be able to serve in this capacity now,” she shares enthusiastically.

Saenz’ enormous pride in her community is matched by that of her district staff. In 2019 - her first year as superintendent - she and her leadership team, along with central office staff developed a slogan to set the tone for the new school year. ‘Pride’ was the central theme, and the decided on: Shine Bright and Show Your La Joya Pride. The fuller meaning behind the slogan: work with pride, teach with pride, learn with pride.

When Saenz learned she was the recipient of The Monitor’s 2020 Readers’ Choice Award for Best Superintendent, she realized the message had not only been put into practice by her students and staff, it had reached beyond the classrooms, “I didn't see it as a personal award, but a district award, she says. I think our parents and our community know that our staff is working tirelessly to continue to give kids the best education.”

A challenging task for all school districts in this day and age. Expanding on the sense of unity at La Joya I.S.D., Dr. Saenz shares how Pack Stadium served as a touchstone for graduating seniors and their families. Instead of the traditional auditorium or arena setting for commencement ceremonies, 2020 graduations were held at Pack Stadium. Saenz says despite the change the feedback was positive. “Bringing them back to the stadium in June made them remember the good times,” she shares.

Pack Stadium is also a recipient of Readers’ Choice Award, as Best Stadium. Saenz once again attributes communal pride for the stadium’s win, “Anytime you are at our football games there’s a lot of pride - even more so when two of our high schools play each other. Our parent support both teams, so it’s very exciting to be in the stadium then, it’s like one football team on the field.”

School pride is typically kicked off with the excitement and anticipation of the first day of school and is fueled through school mascots and colors, sport events, cheers, theme days, and group activities. But with an unprecedented school year ahead, Saenz and her team went back to the drawing board for a new slogan.

The challenge was to create a slogan that according to Saenz maintained “being prideful in our district in the time we are living in.” Not knowing how long virtual instruction would take place, the resulting slogan, which sets the tone for the academic year, encompasses distance and in-person learning: Together or apart we shine bright at La Joya I.S.D.

While the first day of school was very different from any other, an element that remained the same was the enthusiasm of students, teachers, and staff. La Joya I.S.D. pride is evident from the first day of school video shared on the district’s social media pages. Set to an upbeat tune, the video showcases educators offering messages of encouragement, patience and support and smiling students sharing their enthusiasm for the new year, “It’s different, its modern, and I think this is the future!”, exclaims 7th grader Jose A. Galvan, who appears on screen swiveling in a high-backed desk chair with a fresh haircut and ear-covering headphones.

Also evident on the district’s social media sites is support for Dr. Gisela Saenz on winning the Readers’ Choice Award. Marlene Garcia Sauceda writes, “Congratulations Dr. Saenz!!! You are the reason I am who I am today!” Which demonstrates that Saenz is putting into practice the same support she received from her mentor, Willy Garcia. Saenz credits Garcia with encouraging her throughout her educational career, “He always had this dream of me being a superintendent,” she says, I have to thank him for being my lifelong mentor. I’m very happy I made that decision.”
TOGETHER OR APART, WE SHINE BRIGHT
AT LA JOYA ISD!

Thank you for voting

Dr. Gisela Saenz
as your Favorite Superintendent

and

La Joya I.S.D. Stadium
as your Favorite Sports Stadium

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At Kumori Sushi and Teppanyaki, we are blessed to be nominated for The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Award, and to win it means much more. It is through the daily dedication of all of our team members that made this happen. While I am very thankful for the award, I am even more excited to share it with our team.

We put a lot of effort into training our staff. Each sushi expert spends at least two months working side by side with someone, learning how to perfect his/her skills. The part of the business that our diners enjoy is the consistency. We do everything we can to ensure that what the Fiji Roll at our Nolana location looks and tastes just like the Fiji Roll at our Palms Crossing location.

The ultimate reward that any of our guests can give us is a simple smile. We enjoy reading all of the feedback that is sent to us, but when I walk through a dining room and I see all of our guest smiling and enjoying their time with us makes me feel great about what we do.

For the past 24 years we have taken great pride in being in a position to provide the highest-quality ingredients that we can find, and delivering it to our loyal guests at an affordable price. That is just one part of the value that we pass on to our community, but also during this pandemic we have had to learn a lot about how to deliver our highly-demanded, hand-rolled menu items in a safe environment. The extra steps that are taken in our buildings, along with the quality of the product we serve definitely add to the value that our guests have grown to expect and appreciate from Kumori.

We have seen everything from birthdays, to anniversaries, to graduations inside our restaurants. I find it very humbling to know that people have chosen to spend their special moments with us. The special moment that always makes me smile is when someone asks us to be a part of their marriage proposal. We have hidden their engagement rings in many creative ways, and they have always said “Yes!”

So, if you are planning a special proposal, we would love to help you ‘pop the question!’

We have always tried to support our community and the people who live here in any way we can. Just last year we were awarded with the “Local Employer of Excellence” award from the Texas Work Force Commission. We were able to solidify this accomplishment through employing people who are veterans, people with special needs, or even someone in the local work force who is simply trying to get their start in our industry. All of us at Kumori pride ourselves in giving anyone the opportunity to achieve their goals. When we are given the chance to help someone that may need our support, we are always happy to do so. This has a lasting impact on both the employee and us as operators.

One common question we get is, “How do you make your food look like art?” The answer is simple. We love what we do and we only want to provide the best of the best to our guests!

In acceptance of the Readers’ Choice Award, I would like for all of our supportive community to come join us at our newest concept located at La Plaza Mall. One year ago we opened up Mori Japanese Grill. In our words it is a “Kumori PLUS.” All of your Kumori favorites are available at Mori, like our Beef Yakimeshi, and California Roll. The additional menu items that we have added include Japanese Wagyu Beef, graded at an A10 marbling, and Grilled Octopus. We have a private dining room for any memorable moment that you would like to have with us. The Large bar and cocktail area is equipped with plenty of flat screens to enjoy any sporting event, but the best part is sitting on our covered patio enjoying a Cucumber Martini and the Bone Marrow appetizer. We at Kumori are grateful to be a proud member of the RGV community. We look forward to meeting many new faces at Mori and would appreciate all of our loyal Kumori fan base to come celebrate our one year anniversary with us!

With thanks and warmest regards from Francisco Paez/owner.
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When The Monitor’s readers are voting for their favorite business or a favorite industry consultant, they are testifying to genuine, personalized, unbiased acclamation for service that exceeds just normal satisfaction. These readers highly recommend certain establishments and personnel because exceptional service is becoming more difficult to find!

At North Park Lexus Rio Grande Valley, we believe our consistently friendly & attentive service makes our dealership a customer favorite. In our industry, humility, and a servant’s heart are hard to find. Also, transparency and a genuine inclination to truly TAKE CARE of our guests are rare traits in the auto sales and service world. We are often, truly, a breath of fresh air for our guests!

Our organization, rooted in integrity and guest satisfaction, gives us the tools to empower ourselves within a business model designed to mold itself around the priorities of our guests. Genuine guest fulfillment from what we provide is rewarding and special on every different occasion. We are encouraged to embrace WHATEVER we need to accommodate our guests consistently, rendering A+ experiences.

We are not just sales personnel at North Park Lexus. We are true consultants. We consider the best interests of our clients before our own agendas. Within our industry, it’s rare to find selfless sales consultants truly looking out for their guests like we do. We strive to establish long-term relationships, putting People First!

Our reviews on Google, Facebook, and other social media platforms are a testament to our guest satisfaction. The abundance of excellent reviews fuels our drive to exceed in all we do professionally, continuously providing amazing guest experiences for our drivers. “Omotensahi,” Japanese for hospitality, is our guiding principle!

At North Park Lexus, we also understand that transportation needs, even luxury transportation needs, become a dire essential on those rare occasions when something goes wrong. Our guests rely on us for quick action when they are in need, and we strive to meet that need promptly and professionally.

Around for only two years in the Rio Grande Valley Area, North Park Lexus RGV has surprised the marketplace with an incredible product and a truly passionate staff who aims to put you, our guest, first! PEOPLE FIRST is our mantra, and it’s truly OUR PLEASURE to humbly find gratitude in serving our guests! Visit us today in person or online to see what the buzz is all about.
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Barn White is the Rio Grande Valley’s leading specialty shop, with a great selection of beautiful gifts, exciting home décor, and an extensive bridal registry service.

Barn White celebrates over 32 years in business and has grown to become one of McAllen’s most prestigious, family-owned gift shops in town.

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Monday-Saturday 10 am to 4 pm
Barn White was established in 1988 in McAllen by Sadie Friedrichs and her two daughters, Leslie and Page. From the outset, Barn White's mission has been to provide superb gift items for the people of the Rio Grande Valley.

Over the years, Barn White has grown to become one of McAllen's most prestigious, family-owned gift shops. Even its building has become a familiar fixture in north McAllen. Friedrichs and her family converted a unique 50-year-old home on North 10th St, converting it into a “white barn.” The façade has become something of a landmark in the neighborhood, and inside, the elegantly-appointed interior evokes a comfortable aesthetic that makes customers feel right at home.

Walking into Barn White is like a breath of fresh air. From the bottomless coffee pot, to the incredible fragrances that linger throughout the store, to the one-of-a-kind finds, and gourmet foods, it really is a great place to find something special. Barn White has long been known for its unique holiday décor, and it changes with the seasons, even if it's 100 degrees outside!

Traveling to many markets, visiting glass artists in Mexico, and working with creative local artists, Barn White continuously strives to bring together a wonderful selection of fine gifts, jewelry, and home décor for the discriminating customer and the people on their gift list.

At Barn White, shoppers can find an amazing selection of fine accessories for the home, including exquisite tabletop pieces, fine china, and crystal. Barn White is excited to help its shoppers start their own family traditions with a “pain-free” registry process that's easily customizable. It’s no wonder Barn White's bridal registry is the most-popular in town.

Barn White is proud to be part of the Rio Grande Valley community, which is why it donates yearly to several charitable functions that take place here. Whether it's an auction item for the STARS program that gives scholarships to students, or being a drop-off point for Yoplait lids for Breast Cancer Awareness, Barn White loves giving back to the community.

Barn White also brings in artisans to showcase their work. It's a great experience that allows customers to meet and get to know the people who create their favorite items, and provide input as well.

Barn White is the Valley’s leading specialty shop, with a great selection of beautiful gifts, exciting home décor, and an extensive bridal registry service. The store has a reputation for providing excellent customer service, whether customers choose to shop in-house, or online.

People not only visit Barn White to shop, they sometimes come just to lift their spirits. Even if they leave empty-handed, Barn White customers always leave with a smile on their face. Barn White's customer service has fostered lasting friendships over the years with wonderful people.

During the COVID crisis, Barn White has offered, and continues to offer customers curbside service and in-store shopping and customers have been happy to have a choice.

"Being a small business, we appreciate our customers even more and hope that everyone will continue to support small businesses in the Valley,” said Page Moore. “Winning The Monitor’s Reader’s Choice Award means so very much to us, because it is our loyal customers that made this happen. It shows us that our customers love our store as much as we do and continue to support us in many ways. Shop local!”

From the Barn White family to yours, we truly hope that you enjoy your shopping experience. We are excited to share our store with you! Be sure to check out Barn White’s Facebook and Instagram pages for new arrivals and store specials.

If you have any questions or need any assistance with anything, please feel free to contact us toll free at: 1-800-890-7637. You can also email us at: barnwhiteinc@gmail.com.
Supporting local businesses through marketing and networking opportunities is the purpose of a chamber of commerce. In this new era, while the support continues it looks very different in this new era. Recent months have been a learning experience for Edinburg Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau, Executive Director Ronnie Larralde and his team. But, he says, they are taking what they have learned in recent months and putting the “good” to practice.

It appears to be working. The Edinburg Chamber of Commerce was chosen as ‘Best Chamber of Commerce’ in The Monitor’s 2020 Readers’ Choice Awards. In addition to his staff and board of trustees, Larralde credits the win to a partnership with the city government and the Edinburg Economic Development Corporation, “I’ve always looked at us as a team in a race, similar to a relay. I just think we are a very connected community.”

The task of connecting businesses to a community became more challenging in the past year. Larralde says he found support and inspiration from local chamber of commerce counterparts, “It was unchartered waters,” he said, we’ve communicated more with each other. The other chambers are wonderful.”

Larralde says adapting helped uncover new ways to better serve chamber members, even offering a new kind of support by becoming a resource for information. “We went out and swam in all that information. We tried to help not only members, but assisted anyone that asked for help. We did everything in our power to help businesses succeed.”

One way was to flip the original model of bringing people to a business and instead, bring the business to the people. Larralde explains it has become about telling the story of a member. For example, previously each month the chamber would profile a business with a photo and information. Now, they showcase member organizations with a 5-minute video which is then shared via e-mail blasts, YouTube, and social media; providing opportunity to learn about a business remotely.

The chamber also shares information about how a member’s operation may have changed in recent months and what new services might be offered, which comes in handy for residents and visitors who want to ‘Experience Edinburg.’

“Experience Edinburg” is a tab on the chamber’s website, edinburg.com. When asked how one might experience the city in today’s current reality Larralde says, “Experience Edinburg right now means enjoying the outdoors, history, and wildlife.” Starting with a stop at the historic 1927 train depot building that houses the chamber of commerce. He says it’s worth seeing even if just from the outside. Once the office re-opens, visitors can stop by for a staff member-led tour.

To further his point Larralde says, “Edinburg is a very active community. I’ve seen more people out running, exercising, riding bikes, and using our trails.” He goes on to mention the Edinburg Scenic Wetlands, the Tejano Walk of Fame, and the historic Sal del Rey, just north of the city, referring to them as ‘gems’ that can go unnoticed in the hustle and bustle of daily life.

And, bustling it is. On any given business day Edinburg’s population of just over 90,000 potentially doubles in part to the University of Texas RGV, the Hidalgo County Courthouse, and the hospital corridor. Prior to 2020, the city’s event calendar was full. Larralde believes that when it is safe to gather again community events will be more popular than ever.

When it’s safe to start adding events to the calendar again, Larralde has no doubt the local community organizations and the chamber’s strong volunteer base, citing the chamber’s board and ambassador program, will step up and help, “Edinburg is a very prideful town. We take a lot of pride in our city and events.”

There are some things that haven’t changed for the chamber, including the continuation of a veteran’s Texas Cook’Em scholarship program which provided eight $1,000 scholarships for veterans attending UTRGV through it’s partnership with H-E-B. And, the continuation of Leadership Edinburg with the formation of the 32nd class this September.

In spite of the changes and adaptations, the Edinburg Chamber of Commerce continues to serve its members and its community. Larralde is grateful to those who acknowledged the chamber’s efforts in the Readers’ Choice Awards, “Thank you for voting for us, believing in us, and supporting us. We’re here to get a job done. We live here and we want to make sure you know we’re in this together.”
<table>
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<th>Winner</th>
<th>Contact Information</th>
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<tr>
<td>Favorite Golf Course</td>
<td>Los Lagos Golf Club</td>
<td>(956) 360-0444</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorite Happy Hour</td>
<td>Applebee's Grill &amp; Bar</td>
<td>(956) 994-3378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorite Local Sport Team</td>
<td>Vipers</td>
<td>(956) 972-1144</td>
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<td>Favorite LASIK Eye Surgeon</td>
<td>Manrique Custom Vision Center</td>
<td>(956) 661-9000</td>
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<td>Favorite Chicken</td>
<td>Chick-fil-A</td>
<td>(956) 992-9027</td>
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<td>Favorite Children's Restaurant</td>
<td>Peter Piper Pizza</td>
<td>(956) 380-6666</td>
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<td>Favorite New Dealership</td>
<td>Berto Godden DEALERSHIPS</td>
<td>(956) 287-3654</td>
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<td>Favorite Fajitas</td>
<td>TACO Palenque</td>
<td>(956) 682-6048</td>
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<td>Favorite Ice Cream</td>
<td>DQ</td>
<td>(956) 787-8770</td>
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<td>Favorite Meat Market</td>
<td>Aguilar's</td>
<td>(956) 383-2231</td>
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<td>Favorite Tamales</td>
<td>Delia's</td>
<td>(956) 380-2700</td>
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<td>Favorite Supermarket</td>
<td>H-E-B</td>
<td>(956) 383-4083</td>
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<td>Favorite Assisted Living</td>
<td>Bridges</td>
<td>(956) 782-9882</td>
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<td>Lone Star National Bank</td>
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<td>BlueWave</td>
<td>(956) 380-2700</td>
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<td>Favorite Credit Union</td>
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<td>(800) 749-9732</td>
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<td>Favorite Dry Cleaners</td>
<td>D&amp;M Cleaners</td>
<td>(956) 383-2472</td>
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<td>Favorite Funeral Home</td>
<td>Legacy</td>
<td>(956) 618-5900</td>
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<td>Favorite Hospital</td>
<td>South Texas Health System</td>
<td>(956) 388-6000</td>
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<td>Favorite Sports Medicine</td>
<td>DHR-Health</td>
<td>(956) 362-6683</td>
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<td>Favorite University</td>
<td>UTRGV</td>
<td>(888) 882-4026</td>
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<td>Favorite Used Dealership</td>
<td>Berto Godden DEALERSHIPS</td>
<td>(956) 287-3654</td>
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<tr>
<td>Favorite Fast Food</td>
<td>Raising Cane's Chicken Fingers</td>
<td>(956) 386-4656</td>
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Reconstructive Oral & Maxillofacial Surgery is the Valley’s oral surgery leader and now The Monitors’ Readers’ Choice 2020 “Favorite Oral Surgeon”

We would like to Thank everyone that voted for us. Dr. Carlos Villarreal and his team are dedicated to delivering the most advanced treatments to their patients in a compassionate, attentive, and professional environment.

Carlos J. Villarreal D.D.S.

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956-664-1695
By: Benjamin Treviño

B orn in Matamoros, and raised in Monterrey, Dr. Carlos Villarreal set out to pursue a career in dental medicine at the age of 20. After obtaining his degree in Monterrey at Universidad Autonoma de Nuevo Leon, he moved to Puerto Rico where he trained as an oral-maxillofacial surgeon for four years.

“When I was in dental school I didn’t see myself doing anything else but surgery,” said Dr. Villarreal. “That was the only thing that I wanted to do. It took me a while to get accepted into the university that I wanted but I finally got accepted and ever since 1994 I’ve been doing maxillofacial surgery only.”

Dr. Villarreal moved to the Rio Grande valley in November 1997, and opened his first practice while simultaneously pursuing a one-year fellowship on dental implants at the UT Health School of Dentistry in Houston. He also was a member of the faculty there for three years. In 2000, he became a naturalized American citizen. He has since joined forces with other oral surgeons to create Valley OMS, which includes Dr. Carlos Cruz (founder), Dr. Karl Frey, Dr. Luciano Stroia, Dr. Omel Cardenas, Dr. Gary Schwartz, and Dr. Villarreal to better serve our community.

Dr. Villarreal was particularly fascinated by the origins of oral-maxillofacial surgery, which was actually the forebear of modern plastic surgery. The medical specialty was born out of the horrific injuries that resulted from the brutal trench warfare of World War I.

“Maxillofacial surgery came even before plastic surgery,” explained Dr. Villarreal. “The soldiers who fought in the trenches, their trauma was not so much to the body, but to their faces, which were exposed to small arms fire and shrapnel. There was a group of dentists who were sent to support the British Army and their specialized treatment marked the beginning of maxillofacial surgery.”

Dr. Villarreal performs an array of dental services at his office at 2601 Trenton Road in Edinburg. They include wisdom teeth extractions, difficult extractions, and dental implants. He performs more-complicated procedures in the hospital setting.

“For example, facial fractures, motor vehicle accidents, and other traumas,” said Dr. Villarreal. “The maxillofacial surgery area is like a hybrid. It has a lot of medical training. In the profession itself there's like four years that we actually train, three of those years are in the hospital environment.”

Oral and maxillofacial surgeons like Dr. Villarreal are the only dental specialists recognized by the American Dental Association who are surgically trained in a hospital-based residency program for a minimum of four years. They train alongside medical residents in internal medicine, general surgery and anesthesiology, and spend time in otolaryngology (ear, nose and throat), plastic surgery, emergency medicine and other specialty areas. This training focuses almost completely on the bone, skin and muscle of the face, mouth and jaw.

The result of such extensive training is a surgeon who is prepared to:
• Manage disease of the teeth and surrounding tissues
• Extract infected, impacted, or diseased teeth
• Place dental implants
• Perform corrective jaw surgery to reconstruct inadequate structures
• Treat facial trauma, including lacerations and other facial injuries
• Perform cleft lip and palate surgery
• Diagnose and treat facial pain

Like other medical professionals, Dr. Villarreal has had to adjust his office policies and protocols because of the Covid-19 pandemic. He and his staff meticulously follow all guidelines laid out by the US Centers for Disease Control, the American Dental Association, and his fellow oral-maxillofacial surgeons.

“All our staff are wearing N-95 masks, face shields, and full-body Patient Protection Equipment (PPE),” said Dr. Villarreal. “When a patient arrives, they come and sign in and then go back to their cars so we don’t have more than two people at a time in the waiting room. We’re just following all the procedures and recommendations. We sanitize our office after each patient, as well as at the end of the day.”

Besides working with patients here in the Valley, Dr. Villarreal is passionate about doing medical missionary work. He has traveled with other colleagues from Doctors Hospital at Renaissance to provide free medical care in underdeveloped countries.

“I love going on these missions,” said Dr. Villarreal. “When there was an earthquake in Haiti, DHR sent a lot of doctors, and I was part of it and it was a great experience. You see things very differently after you see what we take for granted here. It’s unbelievable how much people are suffering and how little they have and they are still happy, they still find a way to smile.”

This is Dr. Villarreal’s first Readers’ Choice award, and while he’s happy about the honor, he admits he was a little surprised by his selection.

“To me, it’s a privilege, because all my peers, my colleagues, are extremely good surgeons,” Dr. Villarreal said. “We all have good relations, and we get along really, really well. So it’s honestly an honor and a privilege. I feel that others would have deserved this as well, because they’re all extremely good surgeons.”

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DAI-TUNG OFFERS UNIQUE AND AUTHENTIC CHINESE FUSION DISHES

By: Benjamin Treviño

If you Google Chinese restaurants in the Rio Grande Valley, you'll likely end up with more pins than a seamstress. It's almost as if there's one on every street corner. But if you're looking for one that stands out among the rest, look no further than Dai-Tung in McAllen's Nolana Tower Plaza.

“Our restaurant has been a family business for 22 years,” said Dai-Tung co-owner Luanne Lu. “I am the second generation owner along with my brother, Luke, who is also our head chef. He was trained and certified in Taiwan and still learns something new every day to make sure everything is authentic and delicious.”

While most Chinese restaurants feature dishes from just two Chinese provinces (Canton and Sichuan), Dai-Tung offers a much broader fusion of dishes from those regions as well as entrees from Mongolia, Vietnam, Korea, and Taiwan. The Dai-Tung menu is so expansive that there are 46 items on the lunch specials alone, which means you can order something different every day of the month and not have the same dish twice!

What makes Dai-Tung different? Let's begin with the basics – their chicken dishes.

“General Tso’s chicken is the number one Chinese dish in America and in our restaurant as well,” said Luke, head chef. “But what makes our General Tso’s chicken so special is our sauce. It’s our own proprietary recipe. Then there’s our sesame chicken, and orange chicken. Each of these dishes all have their own sauce. We don’t use the same sauce for all of them like you find in other Chinese restaurants. They’re sweet, a little bit spicy, and tangy. They’re not too sour, and not too sweet. It’s the right combination of both.”

Noodles are another item that many people take for granted and they’re somewhat of an afterthought at many Chinese restaurants – not at Dai-Tung. The Lus’ and their staff hand make and steam their own noodles, including hard-to-find Ho Fan noodles, fresh every day.

“We make all our own dumplings and noodles fresh in our restaurant,” said Luke. “All our pasta dishes are very popular, like our pot stickers, which are like fried dumplings. We wrap them around our specially-made meats, which are also cooked in our own special sauces. They’re tasty, crispy, and juicy. The texture is very different than other restaurants that use machine-made noodles. Our method takes a little bit more time, but it’s definitely worth it.”

There’s an old myth that Chinese dishes always leave you wanting for more, but that’s not the case at Dai-Tung. Whether it’s their popular Korean seafood noodle soup, or exotic entrees like basil shrimp from Vietnam, Dai-Tung’s portions can feed two to four people. Moreover, Dai-Tung’s prices have remained the same for the last five years!

“Our price is very reasonable and the quantity is generous,” said Luanne. “A lot of other restaurants have been raising their prices. In many places a simple hamburger is more expensive than our lunch specials. Our servings are so generous that most of the time, you can’t even finish it by yourself. My customers end up taking half of it home to eat later. We suffer a little of the profit, but it’s a better value for the customers.”

In case you’re wondering, ‘Dai-Tung’ is an ancient Chinese phrase which, roughly translated, means “We are the world.” It is spoken as a greeting, signifying peace, love, and unity. Luanne and Luke would like to share that greeting with everyone who voted their restaurant as the 2020 Readers’ Choice Favorite Chinese Restaurant.

“We want to say thank you to all our loyal customers who have supported our restaurant for so many years,” said Luanne and Luke. “We have won this award at least five times, so we are very grateful. We really appreciate it and we will do our best to continue pleasing our local customers. Thank you.”

For more on Dai-Tung's menu, visit: www.daitungtogo.com.
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For more on Dai-Tung’s menu, visit: www.daitungtogo.com.
Dear Monitor Readers,
Thank you for selecting BT.CHURCH as the “Best Place to Worship” for 2020!

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1207 N CAMERON Alice, TX 78332
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SUNDAY @ 9:30AM & 11AM

FIND US ONLINE AT BT.CHURCH // INFO@BT.CHURCH // 956-686-5296
By: Eryn Reddell Wingert

Previously known as Baptist Temple, BT Church has been sharing the Word of God for 35 years. “BT is and strives to be an environment of celebration because we have the best news out there,” says Senior Pastor Chris Dupree. Located in South Texas, BT Church has expanded to a multi-site model which includes campuses in McAllen, Edinburg, Sharyland, and Alice, Texas. As the operation has grown, so has its reach and impact.

Earlier this year, as the world withdrew, the leadership at BT Church focused attention to its online presence. Dupree says while BT has been streaming on-line for years they reevaluated the ministry to better serve its congregation, “We’ve met more often this year on-line than in person,” he says. The renewed focus garnered a wider audience of viewership, showing engagement from Central America, Africa, and a little closer to home, New York City.

Dupree recalls the story of a woman in Brooklyn who reached out for help after watching an on-line service. At the time, she was unable to leave her home and didn’t have any food. Dupree says they were able to connect the woman to a church in Queens that provided her support. “No matter what you are going through, you are not alone,” Dupree shares. You are always welcome at BT Church to find hope and healing through the message of Jesus.

Pastor Dupree estimates with the on-line expansion the church is ministering from 3,000 to 3,500 people. Even though the congregation is growing, he says, BT strives to make parishioners and visitors feel at home by inviting them to participate in a ministry. “Finding their place is finding their community, he says. “We are created on purpose, for a purpose,” says Dupree, We are better together.” This is the thought behind a BT program called the Dream Team. Made up of approximately 300 volunteers serving across a multitude of ministries from music to welcoming first-time guests. “The more people that find their place and purpose, the more successful we are at reaching others.”

The practice of reaching out to others is extended to serving the broader community, “I feel we’ve striven to have a community impact. We try to be available to love our community beyond those who call BT Church home,” Dupree shares. He goes on to share examples including serving the needs of first responders, teachers and beyond the local community through projects like Operation Christmas Child. “We get to be an agent of hope here in South Texas,” says Dupree. It’s not just something we say we want to do, but it’s felt.”

The community has taken notice, voting BT Church ‘Best Place of Worship’ in The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Awards. Dupree says, “It’s really humbling, because this being the readers’ choice is not something we created internally, it’s recognition by the community.”

Pastor Dupree shares an internal story that illustrates why BT selected as a favorite, citing the time the church performed a mass wedding. “We really encouraged people in our church to take seriously the commitment of marriage,” he says. Recognizing such factors as lack of funds can inhibit a couple from planning a ceremony, the church as Pastor Dupree puts it, put their money where their mouth is, providing marriage counseling, cake, a photographer, and the facility. Eighteen couples stepped up to take part.

On a smaller scale, BT is committed to directly reaching individuals in need. “We made a commitment that we will visit anyone in the hospital whether or not they attend BT,” says Dupree. However, the pandemic made this nearly impossible. But, that didn’t stop the BT pastoral team. Dupree says, once again turned to technology, connecting virtually.

The mission statement of BT Church is to glorify God by leading people to live transformed lives through biblical teaching, relevant worship, global concern, and authentic community. Every service, ministry, and one-on-one support offered by BT Church adheres to these four pillars even as the ministry grows. “At the end of the day, we offer hope and we offer a belief that we can get through difficult times,” shared Dupree. But above those things we offer a sense of peace for people that have big questions about faith.”
Since 1986, Mattress Firm has been delivering better sleep by matching its customers with their perfect mattress at the perfect price. Mattress Firm offers top-rated brands like Sealy, Stearns & Foster, Tempur-Pedic and more. Finding your ideal mattress with a sleep expert in-store, online, or by phone has never been easier.

Mattress Firm has grown to become America’s largest mattress retailer with more than 2,600 neighborhood stores in 49 states. Perez Mattress Firm is the oldest locally-owned franchise and includes stores in Brownsville, Harlingen and four locations in the Mission-McAllen-Edinburg metroplex. These locations have been chosen as The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice for favorite mattress company.

“Winning this award means everything to us at Mattress Firm,” said Christopher Dunn, Mattress Firm Executive Vice President of Marketing. “We are passionate about what we do and the health benefits we can provide to our customers in the Rio Grande Valley.”

Mattress Firm South Texas has been in the Valley since 2004 and part of the nation’s largest mattress retailer. Four generations, and nearly 80 years later, the Perez family is still passionate about helping South Texas get a great night’s sleep.

“We live here, and we love it here,” said Dunn. “The most-rewarding part of our job is knowing that we can help each guest get a great night’s sleep at a price they can afford. We also carry sheets, pillows, mattress protectors, and more. We can now assist with even more sleep products that are essential to having a healthy sleep environment.”

We encourage everyone to read our online reviews. You’ll find dozens of satisfied customers whose lives have been transformed by their new mattress from Mattress Firm.

“Great selection, they’re very helpful,” said Manuel Segovia, who gave Mattress Firm a 5-Star Google review.

“Great customer service,” added Brenda Zuniga, who also gave Mattress Firm the highest Google review possible.

Mattress Firm wants to let you know that your safety and well-being are our top priority. We’ve decided to take precautionary measures to ensure you have a stress-free shopping experience by:
• Limiting the number of people in our showroom to 10 people or less.
• Practicing social distancing by adhering to the 6 feet rule.
• Boosting the use of hand sanitizer and disinfectant wipes to help keep a clean and sterile showroom.
• Providing customers the opportunity to schedule personal shopping times by appointment.

Currently, Mattress Firm remains open during normal business hours, which are Monday-Saturday 10:00am – 7:00 pm and Sunday 12:00pm - 6:00pm. We plan to continue to monitor this situation and abide by government and health officials’ recommendations.

Mattress Firm believes it is important to make sleep a priority. You need quality products that will contribute to your health and wellness. Let us help you find the right pillow, the correct comfort level of your mattress, even the best type of sheets and the mattress protector you prefer. We also want to remind you that your sleep environment is also important. Things like the temperature of the room, watching TV, or spending time on your mobile devices before bed can all affect the quality of your sleep.

Visit your locally-owned Mattress Firm today. You can shop safely at all locations with our Clean Shop Promise. We have mattress shields and pillows shields, masks for guests if needed and maintain social distance at all times. Visit us during our Save Big Sale Event. We carry many products in-stock for same day delivery. Follow us on Facebook or Instagram at Mattress Firm South Texas, or visit our website at mattressfirmsouthtexas.com.
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RICO PEDIATRICS: TREATING CHILDREN AS INDIVIDUALS

By: Benjamin Treviño

At Rico Pediatrics, treating children as individuals means appreciating each child’s unique characteristics. Dr. Daniella Rodriguez-Rico is committed to providing individualized, high-quality pediatric care for children, and she does that in partnership with parents.

“We love to develop a relationship with both the parent and the child,” said Dr. Rico. “It’s important that the children and the parents feel safe here and feel comfortable. What I love most about being a pediatrician is watching my patients grow up. I often see them for the first time as newborns in the hospital, and I love witnessing their increasing intelligence, and watching their personalities develop over the years. I love seeing generations of family members, and I love seeing the transformation of the whole family.”

Dr. Rico is a board-certified pediatrician who has been in practice since 2009. She opened her doors to her own clinic, Rico Pediatrics, on June 3, 2019. Although she was born in Mexico, she came to the Valley with her family at the age of two, so she considers herself a Valley native. After graduating from McAllen Memorial High School, Dr. Rico studied medicine in Monterrey. She then attended Penn State Children’s Hospital in Hershey Pennsylvania for her pediatric residency.

Additionally, Dr. Rico completed clerkships in Pediatric Urology at Harvard Medical School in Boston, Massachusetts, and Cardiology Transplant at The Methodist Hospital Research Institute in Houston. During her residency, Dr. Rico completed a clerkship in Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility at the University of Miami School of Medicine.

“I guess my personality and my temperament made me a good fit to be a doctor,” said Dr. Rico. “I have always been calm when faced with unsettling circumstances.”

Dr. Rico was awarded The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice “Favorite Pediatrician” in 2016, but this year she was voted as the Valley’s “Favorite Medical Clinic.” Her services include preventative check-ups, immunization, free prenatal visits, hearing tests, vision tests, ear piercing, newborn screening tests, asthma visits, ADHD visits, and more. Her clinic’s kid-friendly environment puts children at ease, and keeps them healthy through all stages of infancy, childhood and early adolescence.

“I think what makes Rico Pediatrics thrive above others is our authenticity,” Dr. Rico explained. “I have a great team. Everybody here is wholeheartedly dedicated to our patients. They are genuinely concerned about each child and each family that we serve. As a mother of three myself, I know it’s very difficult to entrust somebody with your child, and so it’s a great privilege that parents give me.”

While Rico Pediatrics has had to modify its schedule and its patient protocols due COVID-19, Dr. Rico’s office has remained open throughout the pandemic. She sees newborns and does her well-baby checkups in the morning, and she reserves the afternoon for sick patient visits and telemedicine consultations.

“At the beginning we were hesitant, but we have learned that telemedicine is very helpful for certain situations,” said Dr. Rico. “For example, during the hurricane we found that a lot of people were having problems with electricity, or with food, with flooding inside the house, with infections, and so forth. Telemedicine gives us a glimpse into the family/home dynamic. We see some difficulties they face or disadvantages they might have compared to other people.”

Dr. Rico says, because of the pandemic, it’s more important than ever to continue with a child’s vaccination and immunization schedule. She also says children and parents and children alike should get a flu shot this season. Providing continuity of care is just one more reason Rico Pediatrics is this year’s Readers’ Choice Medical Clinic.

“It’s an honor to be selected as favorite medical clinic,” said Dr. Rico. “My whole team here is humble, from our staff, to our medical assistants, to the lab, to our billing department. The whole team is thrilled to win this award. It’s very nice to be recognized, and especially by the people of the Valley.”
Since its creation in 1919, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District has strived to be a state and national leader in creating more academic opportunities for all students. As a tri-city public school district offering a pre-kindergarten through twelfth-grade curriculum, PSJA caters to a 32,000 student body and is focused on preparing every student to participate, compete, and excel in a global society to foster multigenerational prosperity!

The Pharr-San Juan-Alamo School District is proud to have been selected for three of The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Awards in 2020:
- Favorite Middle School – Kennedy Middle School (KMS)
- Favorite Elementary School – McKeever Elementary School
- Favorite Principal – Susana Arredondo, McKeever Elementary School

At Kennedy Middle School, our goal is to provide an extremely welcoming and nurturing learning environment for our students. We love to work with parents, students, and the community at large to ensure that our children continue to excel in a global society while fostering multigenerational prosperity.

Our success is measured one child at a time, and we’re elated when we get positive feedback from KMS parents like Mrs. N. Ramirez:

“My son loves this school. He loves the environment, always feels safe, and he has loved his teachers every year. His teachers have always been extremely helpful, and they have always made him feel welcomed. As a parent of a student at Kennedy Middle School, I have always loved the professionalism of the staff, and the welcoming environment as well.”

The John McKeever Elementary School family is also honored to have been chosen for a Readers’ Choice Award. It is rewarding to see that our community values our dedication and commitment to our students. At McKeever Elementary, we know it is not about what we say or think, but rather how our parents and community feel about us. These are just a few of the rave reviews we’ve received from McKeever Elementary School parents:

“Amazing staff, and they help their students as much as they can. Everyone is great.” – Dulce Aguilar

“Amazing school! The office staff is friendly and helpful. They always greet you with a smile and they even greet you by name! The teachers are the best. They truly care about students. They always go above and beyond. Also, they have a great librarian.” – Brenda Vidales

“My daughter and I love this school! Every morning she gets off the truck in such great spirits and skips off into school with a smile! She loves her classmates and her teachers! This is our second year attending and hopefully until she’s off to high school!” – Ericka Hernandez

PSJA ISD also congratulates McKeever Elementary School Principal, Susana Arredondo, on her selection as The Monitor’s readers’ Choice for Favorite Principal.

“I’m excited and thrilled,” said Arredondo. “I think the parents like the family atmosphere we have created here on our campus. I love working with all the parents and being available for them all the time. Even during the pandemic, parents were texting me with their thoughts and concerns. I’m honored that the parents and the community see how hard we all work, because I see this as not my award, but the campus’ award.”

PSJA ISD is leading the region, state, and nation in the percent of students graduating from High School with college hours and or credentials, with approximately 3,500 High School students enrolled in college courses every semester through dual and concurrent enrollment programs in partnership with South Texas College, and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

As educational leaders, the PSJA team is engaged and empowered to connect all students with innovative instruction, outstanding facilities, technology, skills, and social-emotional support while prioritizing health and safety for all – from early childhood through their chosen career.

As one PSJA family, we build on our legacy of academic excellence, renowned college and career readiness, biliteracy and extracurricular programs, and our multicultural heritage to ensure every student has the experiences and resources necessary to achieve the highest levels of success.
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John McKeever Elementary, Best Elementary School

Susana Arredondo, Best Principal
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The Covid-19 pandemic arguably has presented the most-serious challenge to small businesses and banks in nearly a century. However, as soon as local businesses were mandated to shut their doors in April, Lone Star National Bank’s focus has been to lessen the social and economic fallout on the region. This, even though the bank itself was forced to shut down its lobbies for four weeks.

“Our focus has always been to be here for the small business customer,” said Lone Star National Bank President, David Deanda. “We believe that in dire times you need your banker there, and it’s not going to work on the phone, and it’s not going to work with return calls, it’s only going to work by seeing the customer, and figuring out together a strategic operating plan that will work for them and the bank.”

The lifeline for many small businesses came in the form of the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP). The federal loan program was designed to provide a direct incentive for small businesses to keep their workers on the payroll, by offering SBA loan forgiveness as long as employee retention criteria were met, and the funds are used for eligible expenses. Deanda announced new figures that show Lone Star National Bank was the largest PPP lender in the Valley.

“We provided $185 million in PPP loans,” Deanda stated. “This was cited in a report done by UTRGV, using data collected directly from the SBA. I knew our customers couldn’t survive without these funds. So, we took a leap of faith and we went out and we didn’t look back. We were working seven days a week, probably 7:00 am to 8:00 or 9:00 pm, trying to get everyone funded.”

Lone Star National Bank has also been working to respond to the Valley community’s social needs during the pandemic. The bank held a contest in which its employees brought in detergents, hand sanitizers, and disinfectants, which the bank then donated to people in need. Lone Star’s popular mascot, Cowboy Cash, and his horse, Penny, are featured in a video on the bank’s website, teaching children how to wash their hands.

These Covid-19 initiatives are in addition to Lone Star National Bank’s ongoing community service commitments to organizations such as the VAMOS scholarship program, Monica’s and Maggie’s House for abused children, and its financial support of youth sports programs.

“We take pride in being part of this community’s life, success, and growth,” said Deanda. “During this pandemic time, our staff has really stepped up to help more people by giving back. It’s just part of our culture here at the organization. We give back and teach others to give back. You can’t just live the dream, you have to help others build their own.”

For customers who are still cautious about their social interactions with others, Lone Star National Bank offers the latest in technology to help make financial transactions with little to no personal contact. “We have what’s called Person to Person, P2P, that works just like all the other cash transfer applications,” said Deanda. “Every online service that’s out there, we offer it. We have internet banking. We have mobile banking. You can transfer funds from your savings account to your checking account. You can pay your bills. You can transfer money from our bank to another bank. We have all the bells and whistles that the big banks do.”

With 31 locations across South Texas and new locations in the works for Rio Grande City and the Port of Brownsville, Lone Star National Bank is committed to being the leader in banking for the Rio Grande Valley. As a multi-year winner of The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Award, Deanda says the bank remains committed to earning the distinction every day.

“We treat our customers by name, not account number,” said Deanda. “We take pride in knowing our customers as individuals, being part of their life, success, and growth. I would say that our customers also know that we give back to our community and we give back in more ways than any other bank in the Rio Grande Valley. I’m certain that our customers know that we feel pride in being their bank and making a difference in their life.”
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Dr. Luis M. Rios Jr. and staff have once again received The Monitor’s Readers Choice Awards for Favorite Plastic Surgeon in 2020. Since its inception, The Monitor Readers’ Choice Award for Favorite Plastic Surgeon has been given to the Rios Center for Plastic Surgery. We would like to thank our patients and friends for this wonderful award.

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Between Hurricane Hanna and Covid-19, it has been a trying summer for the people of Rio Grande Valley. At Atlas Electrical, Air Conditioning, Refrigeration, & Plumbing Services, the phones have been ringing off the hook for two items in particular – generators and air purifiers.

Because of the way air conditioners work, the hotter it is outside, the more the indoor air is recirculated. If conditions are right, this can lead to an increased risk of passing contagions from one person to another, including Covid-19.

One solution is the APCO-X air treatment system offered by Atlas. The system uses two UV lights to kill contagions as they flow through the air conditioner’s coils. Atlas owner, Sarah Sagredo-Hammond believes in the product so much that she bought 40 units and had them installed in her employees’ homes.

“The system uses an EverCarbon filter, and two UV lights,” said Sagredo-Hammond. “It has one UV light above the coil and one underneath it. You want to have a system that’s going to clean the air coming in and going out, and one that keeps your coil free and clear of mold and other pathogens. It’s a win all the way around.”

Atlas has also been inundated with calls for generators in the wake of Hurricane Hanna. Portable power plants can be purchased at many retailers, but the professionals at Atlas ensure their generators are installed properly for maximum safety.

“A Valley family just passed away recently, because of an improperly-used generator. It’s tragic,” said Sagredo-Hammond. “You need somebody who is certified and licensed, and we are certified with Generac – the most-popular and widely-purchased commercial and home backup power generators in the USA.”

Founded in December 1982 by Rogelio and Yolanda Sagredo, Atlas Electrical, Air Conditioning, Refrigeration, & Plumbing Services has been a perennial winner of The Monitor’s Readers’ Choice Award since 2008, but this is the first year the company has won recognition for its plumbing services, which was added to the company’s repertoire in 2014. Sagredo-Hammond believes her company’s community leadership and the sense of gratitude it gets from its customers are the main reasons Atlas keeps winning the award.

“It just motivates me to do more for the community,” Sagredo-Hammond said of the distinction. “We are very invested in the community. I sit on several boards, and we do a lot of community outreach. Knowing that the Valley supports us the way they do and honoring us with this gift, it just makes us more invested in the Valley and we just want to do everything we can to keep the Valley strong.”

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