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April 2026



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Explore Harlingen
Magazine Online



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From the Editor

This is Lisa from Explore Harlingen. Welcome to the 30th issue of the Explore Harlingen Magazine: A Local's Guide to Harlingen, an entertainment magazine about Harlingen, Texas!

For 12 years, I have been informing locals and visitors about current events, activities, and family-owned businesses in Harlingen primarily on Facebook (www.facebook.com/ExploreHarlingen). I also have an online presence with my website, www.exploreharlingenblog.com, and social media accounts on Instagram and TikTok (@[exploreharlingen](https://www.instagram.com/exploreharlingen)).

In this issue, we discuss a local student who won a \$25,000 scholarship from Chick-fil-A, a nonprofit



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photography

organization that spreads joy by painting rocks for others to find, an adult soccer league, and more.

The Explore Harlingen Magazine is available digitally on my website at www.exploreharlingenblog.com/magazine (see QR code on the cover). Or you can pick up a copy at the first of every month locally around town.

Additionally, you can contact Victor Moreno to purchase a subscription, which allows you to receive the monthly magazine in the mail. ♦

Lisa Campos
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A Remarkable Future for Jose Davila



Courtesy of Caleb Jones Photography

By Lisa Campos

On February 24, Jose Davila's life changed forever. Frank Castellanos, operator of both Chick-fil-A franchises in Harlingen, and Jose's boss, asked Jose to come to Chick-fil-A Sunshine Strip under false pretenses. He told Jose that a mandatory trainers' meeting was being held. Jose remembered that one of his leads had told him the previous weekend that the CEO would be visiting the restaurant on the 24th for an inspection.

Jose, an employee of Chick-fil-A for the past three years, assumed the meeting was connected to the CEO's visit. "Up until the day of the surprise, I had absolutely no suspicion that anything

unusual was being planned," he said. Suggestions by Mr. Castellanos for Jose to wear his Sunday best and his parents for Jose to get a haircut did not raise any flags for Jose. "I simply assumed they wanted me to look presentable for the meeting and the CEO's visit," Jose reflected.

Outside the restaurant on February 24, the Harlingen Fire Department parked a fire truck in the curbside parking zone. Some passersby feared there had been an accident at the restaurant and avoided the area. However, inside the restaurant, excitement was brewing for a surprise even



Courtesy of Caleb Jones Photography



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

the invited guests did not know about.

One week prior, the Castellanos family invited community leaders such as Harlingen Consolidated

Independent School District (HCISD) Superintendent Dr. Veronica Kortan, members of the RGV Hispanic Chamber, Explore Harlingen, and others to

come to the restaurant for a surprise. All the guests were told was that a member of the Chick-fil-A, Inc. founding family was coming from Atlanta, Georgia on February 24 to recognize the restaurant on Sunshine Strip.

The invited guests were gathered in the restaurant where the atmosphere was buzzing. Photographers and videographers were filming the crowd and cheerfully decorated interior. We then waited outside in a neighboring parking lot for the arrival of CEO Andrew Cathy, who had been delayed on his arrival at Valley International Airport.

Finally, it was time to reveal the big surprise: Mr. Cathy presented Jose with a check for \$25,000, a Remarkable Futures™

scholarship! Jose had tears in his eyes as he accepted the check. His family looked on, full of pride. A parade of costumed Cow characters and bystanders cheered on Jose, waving cutouts of his kindergarten graduation picture on sticks.

When asked what it meant to Jose to not only receive a scholarship from CEO Mr. Cathy, but the largest scholarship offered, Jose stated, "To me, this scholarship represents far more than financial support—it represents belief, opportunity, and a responsibility to continue striving toward the goals I have set for myself. This recognition means so much to me because of where I come from. I am the son of hardworking immigrants



Courtesy of Caleb Jones Photography

who sacrificed comfort, stability, and familiarity so their children could have opportunities they never had. Receiving this scholarship makes their sacrifices feel even more meaningful, because it shows that the risks they took and the hard work they endured were not in vain.”

Jose continued, “It also means a great deal to represent my Hispanic roots and my community in the Rio Grande Valley (the “Valley”). Growing up in the Valley taught me the importance of faith, humility, hard work, and supporting one another. As a first-generation college student, moments like these carry a deeper meaning. They are not just personal achievements, but reflections of the families, mentors, and communities that helped shape who we are.”

This is Jose’s second scholarship from Chick-fil-A. His first was for \$2,500 last year. Jose had his older sister Genoveva to look up to and motivate him. She was also a Chick-fil-A employee in Harlingen who received scholarships from Chick-fil-A for four consecutive years.

Through the Remarkable Futures scholarship program, launched in 1973, Chick-fil-A has donated more than \$215 million to award more than 122,000 Team Member scholarships to help them pursue a higher education, per the Chick-fil-A website.

Each year, Chick-fil-A selects Team Member applicants who meet the established criteria and awards them scholarships in the amounts of \$1,000, \$2,500, and for a chosen

few such as Jose Davila, \$25,000. Jose is the only Team Member from the state of Texas to receive that amount. Only 13 Team Members nationwide received the maximum scholarship in 2025.

Castellanos proudly remarked, “At a tender age (of 19), Jose’s a self-starter who is already accepting more responsibility and growth. He’s the embodiment of what we want in a Chick-fil-A employee: he has a strong work ethic, integrity, and a heart of service.”

Beyond the base criteria, \$25,000 scholarship winners must have a minimum cumulative grade point average of 3.0 on a 4.0 scale, demonstrate financial need, and share how they made an impact on their community, friends, and family over the previous 12 months, both inside and outside of the restaurant.

Andrew Cathy, who insists on announcing the \$25,000 scholarships in person to the winners all over the country said, “Creating greater access to education is one of the best ways Chick-fil-A serves communities. Our long-standing commitment to investing in the future dreams and aspirations of restaurant Team Members remains at the forefront of Chick-fil-A’s efforts to have a positive impact on the lives of others.”

Jose is a graduate of University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) Harlingen Collegiate High School. His alma mater congratulated him on Facebook, commenting that “Jose continues to represent Owl Nation with excellence,

and this achievement is a testament to his dedication both in the workplace and in his educational journey.”

He is in his first year at UTRGV, majoring in Biology. Jose plans on continuing to work at Chick-fil-A in Harlingen for most of his undergraduate years due to the flexible hours, the “unwavering support” he receives from his Team Members and leads, and future scholarship opportunities.

Jose lamented, “More than anything, this scholarship motivates me to continue pursuing my dream of becoming a dentist. Knowing that leaders like Mr. Cathy believe in my potential gives me even greater confidence to keep pushing forward. I hope

to one day give back to communities like the one that raised me and inspire other students from similar backgrounds to believe that their goals are possible, too.”

Outside the restaurant that fateful night on February 24, the Harlingen Fire Department firefighters who had been patiently waiting atop the fire truck crane for the program to end threw confetti and stuffed cow toys with tiny parachutes down to Jose and the crowd as he exited the building. Mariachi music filled the air and the costumed Cows danced along just as the sun was setting. It was a beautiful ending to a glorious, life-changing evening, and I’m sure Jose and his family will never forget it. ♦



Courtesy of Litzy Garcia

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Local
Flavors

A Dad's Blessing –

Don Gollito Restaurant



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

By Laisa Chavez Macias

It goes without saying that Harlingen has some amazing restauranteurs: owners who take pride in what they are building daily for their community; the smaller locations, with kitchens that thrive on old family recipes,

a staff that makes every customer feel welcome, and food that feels like good ole home cooking.

Fred Uribe, co-owner of Don Gollito Restaurant, is a perfect example. Fred was raised in Harlingen, graduated from Harlingen High School,

and went on to college at the University of Texas at Brownsville. After graduating, he worked at Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District (HCISD) for a few years and eventually went on to work for the Texas Department of Health for the next 22 years as a computer specialist.

So how does someone go from computers to the kitchen? I wondered the same thing!

Fred grew up learning to cook from his mom. She wanted to make sure that if nothing else, once he was married, that he would be able to cook for his family. Till this day he said that he still makes the same foods that she taught him. But that's not the only reason he felt drawn to the food industry. Fred's dad, Gregorio Uribe, was a big

inspiration in his decision to open a restaurant. One of the things his father would say was, "there are three things in life you should always enjoy: what you eat, the bed you sleep in, and where you work."

Wise words from a wise man. After 22 years of sitting behind a computer desk, Fred knew he was ready for a change. Then on April 1, 2019, as he drove by a vacant building on Van Buren, something stopped him, literally. He got out of the car, walked up to the building, called the number on the FOR RENT sign, and walked into his new life. He said that as soon as he stood inside the building, he could just feel it. I like to call that feeling "a hug": confirmation in your soul. That same evening, he signed the lease.



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

Before that day, the most Fred had ever thought about a restaurant was when he was writing a business proposal for a class in college. Since then, the one thing that never changed was the name he had given it. Don Gollito Restaurant, after his father. Growing up, Fred and his family would travel up north

to work the fields. He always heard people calling his dad Golle or Gollito (it's how you pronounce Greg or Gregorio in Spanish). Mr. Gollito would often tell Fred, "You know what miijo (son)? If you ever opened a restaurant, I know you would do good. God will bless you."

Thankfully, Fred was not alone on this new venture, because although his mom had taught him well, he did NOT have any real experience in the restaurant business. Rick Silva, co-owner, had years of experience working restaurant floors and kitchens, and knew exactly what Harlingen customers looked for.

Together, they created a menu with tried-and-true Mexican favorites such as enchiladas Mexicanas, chili relleno, and carne guisada, as well as breakfast all day. With that, Don Gollito Restaurant opened its doors for business. 2019 was an amazing year for the team. Everything was going smoothly as they rolled into



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

April 2026

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Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

2020, and well, we all know what happened next.

For most businesses in general, and especially restaurants, COVID was a very make-it-or-break-it time. Fred and Rick started to really

think outside the box. They introduced BBQ chicken and brisket to the entrées as well as potato salad as a side. Fred had already made his mom's homemade corn tortillas a staple as well. These changes,

although small, really helped them to stand out, and the customer base continued to grow amidst the lockdown. By the time restaurants were able to reopen their doors, Don Gollito Restaurant had regulars

lined up to come back, as well as new customers who had previously only had takeout, eager to finally dine-in. The words once spoken by his dad, "God will Bless you," never rang truer.

They will celebrate seven years in business on April 1, 2026, and what a ride it has been. Since Covid, Harlingen has also been through a couple of freezes and a few floods that have made history. Through it all Don Gollito Restaurant has continued to serve its faithful customers and community. Fred and Rick have revamped the back patio to offer beautiful outdoor seating. They also have a small cocktail bar available. They still serve breakfast all day, AND they also serve barbacoa and menudo daily, not just on the weekends. Don Gollito Restaurant also offers catering for events and is available for parties after hours.

Happy anniversary, guys! You are building one of our town's next restaurant landmarks, congratulations! And cheers to many more celebrations!

Signing off until next time, your friendly local foodie, Laisa :)

Don Gollito Restaurant
417 West Van Buren Ave.,
Harlingen, TX 78550
956-659-0717

Hours of operation:
Wednesday 7 am-2:30 pm
Thursday 7 am-2:30 pm
Friday 7 am-2:30 pm
Saturday 7 am-3 pm
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Event Spotlight

A Birthday Road Trip for a 100-Year-Old Car

By Abigail Muniz-Garcia

Moses Mendoza carefully unfolds his Texas map and lays it out on his desk in his garage. A route, highlighted in yellow, indicates the state-long journey he is about to embark on. Green circles drawn along the route show the possible rest stops Mendoza has planned out. His journey will take him from Texhoma, Texas, a twin city divided by the Oklahoma-Texas state line, to the Brownsville & Matamoros International Bridge. The plan for such a journey began to take shape about seven months ago, when Mendoza started planning a birthday celebration with his family. Only this celebration wasn't going

to be for a person but for a car. A car that is turning 100 years old this year: Mendoza's 1926 Ford Model T.

"It's a ragtop, the only convertible I've owned in my life. Most of the time I keep it up. It came into our life around 2010," Mendoza, who is a car collector, said. "The reason I'm doing this... it's 100 years old this year. I want to prove that the car can mechanically still go on long drives."

Mendoza's love for cars began many years ago. He says his passion began "a good 25 years ago or longer" as he started attending car shows and hanging around with "good people" in the



Courtesy of Abigail Muñiz-Garcia

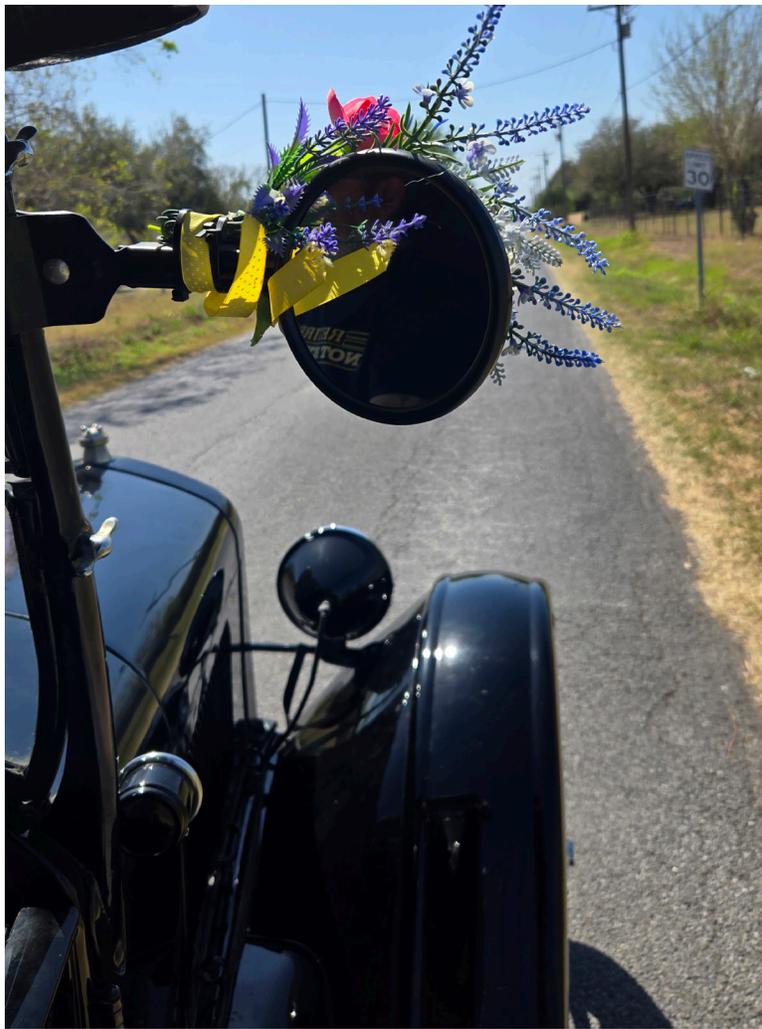


Courtesy of Moses Mendoza

Rio Grande Valley (the "Valley"). He also still owns the first vehicle he bought with his wife, Claudia, in 1978 – a black 1954 Chevrolet Bel Air that he later restored and modernized. He owns a few others, and it is apparent that the retired educator and veteran has a deep appreciation for antique vehicles and the

process of restoring and bringing them back to life. He's involved with the Antique Automobile Club of America Rio Grande Valley Chapter and bought the Model T from one of the members.

The sleek, black, four-cylinder, which seats two, has a long journey ahead. Mendoza will begin the



Courtesy of Abigail Muñoz-Garcia

drive from Texhoma on Monday, April 6, having first driven from Harlingen to Texhoma in his Dodge Ram, which will pull an enclosed trailer with the Model T in it. The trailer will be a travel mechanic's garage. He plans on covering about 220 miles a day, roughly five to six hours a day. The Model T will travel at about 38 miles an hour through country roads. By Friday afternoon, April 10, Mendoza hopes to be "somewhere in the Valley."

"I will be, according to my map," Mendoza says with confidence.

Saturday morning, April 11, he will travel the last leg of the journey to the bridge before returning home for a celebration in honor of the feat the centenarian (car) undertook.

He has planned for the trip by making sure he has extra tires, tubes, water hoses, and will carry extra fuel since the Model T holds 10 gallons, among other preparations.

"I am not a mechanic. I've just learned by putting my hands on that engine," Mendoza said of the time he worked on the Model

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T when he first bought it. “I’m looking at all kinds of angles just using my experience of going on different car tours.”

Mendoza has previously driven the Model T 600 miles in five days. That was two years ago. Since then, he has learned from vehicle breakdowns it has had and arranged to have equipment on hand that he may need for repairs.

“And also, (I’ve) prepared myself mentally,” he said.

Bad weather is something that they may experience, but he says they are ready, come what may.

“I have a windshield wiper, one – and it goes as fast as my wife can turn the handle,” he said, chuckling as he jokes about possibly being caught in the rain with his travel companion, his wife. “Yes, we have been caught in thunderstorms and yes, we have long rain jackets. We’ve learned our lesson.”

But that won’t discourage the car enthusiast who has drafted the plans, prepared himself, his century-old car, and patiently awaits the day he will hand-crank and rev the engine for its birthday journey. ♦



Courtesy of Moses Mendoza



Courtesy of Abigail Muñiz-Garcia



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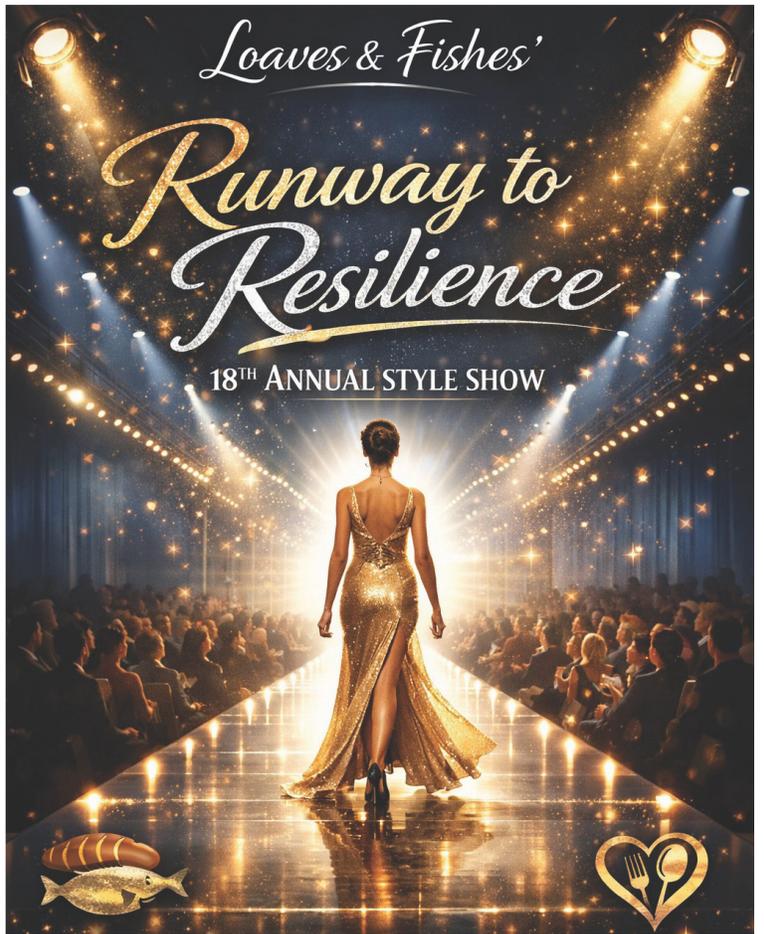
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Event Spotlight

Handmade with Purpose: Students Showcase Skills at Transition Academy Market Day



Courtesy of Transition Academy

By Abigail Muniz-Garcia

Beaming smiles greet you from behind the tables laden with handmade items created by students from Transition Academy. Teamwork, entrepreneurship, and customer interaction are just a few of the skills the students acquire from markets such as the Transition Academy Market

Day on April 29, which will happen from 4 pm to 6 pm at the school, located at 2000 N. 21st Street in Harlingen.

Maira Gutierrez, special education teacher at Transition Academy, says that the market allows students to experience real-world opportunities to

practice employability and life skills.

“The market provides an authentic learning environment where students can apply the skills they learn in the classroom in a real-life setting,” she said. “Events like these allow us to showcase the

incredible abilities of our students while helping them build confidence and independence as they prepare for life after high school.”

Transition Academy is a Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District (HCISD) educational



Courtesy of Transition Academy

facility that focuses on preparing students with special needs for life after high school. Gutierrez mentions that students not only create the items that will be sold at the market, but they have a hand in the different areas of the market organization.

“Students are involved in every step of the process. They research trending items to see what types of products people may be interested in purchasing,” she said. “They also help consider the cost of materials, stay within a budget, and determine pricing for the items.”

Students also prepare the displays, help package items, help with set-up, and greet customers and guests. Some of the items that will be for sale at the market include wreaths, bracelets, art canvases, and baked goods the students make themselves after following recipes and learning food preparation skills.



Courtesy of Transition Academy

“This experience also teaches them about product presentation, quality, and customer satisfaction,” she said.

Gutierrez says community support plays an important role in making the market meaningful for the students.

“My hope is that this event continues to grow and provide even more opportunities for our students to practice real-world skills,” Gutierrez said. “I hope visitors leave feeling inspired by the creativity and effort our students put into their

work. This market is a wonderful opportunity for the community to see the talents and abilities our students have developed.”

This year’s market holds special significance as students will be

► **CONTINUED ON PAGE 20**



Courtesy of Transition Academy

April 2026

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Reoccurring Events

Downtown Market Days
First Saturday (April 4), 9 am to 3 pm
Jackson Street and Centennial Plaza

The Market at Wild August Nursery and Flower Farm
Every Friday night
(April 3, 10, 17, and 24)
6 pm to 9 pm
16802 Garrett Road

Valle Vista Mall Market Days
Every 2nd Saturday (April 11),
11 am to 7 pm

Downtown at Sundown
Every 3rd Saturday (March through August) (April 18), 7 pm to 10 pm
Downtown Harlingen

Harlingen Art Night
Last Friday (April 24), 7 pm to 10 pm
“A” Street and Jackson

April Special Events

Knights of Columbus Annual Good Friday Fish Fry
April 3, 11 am to 2 pm

Knights of Columbus Community Easter EGGstravaganza
April 4, 10 am 12 noon
Windsor Nursing and Rehabilitation Center of Harlingen

First Methodist Church Community Easter Egg Hunt
April 4, 12:30 pm to 2 pm
First Methodist Church

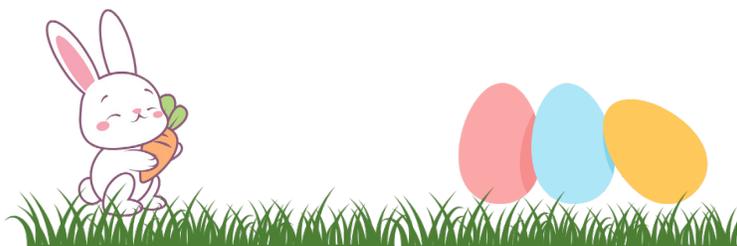
Valley Coast Customz Car Club 2nd Annual Egg Hunt
April 4, 5 pm
1101 Rangerville Road

10th Annual Texas Best High School Conjunto Competition
April 10-11
Harlingen Municipal Auditorium and Casa de Amistad

Junior League of Harlingen KidFit
April 11, 8 am to 11 am
Lon C. Hill Park

Harlingen Board of Realtors Barbecue Cookoff
April 11
Harlingen Sports Complex

The Literacy Center of Harlingen Return of the Burn 40th Anniversary Celebrity Roast
April 15, 6 pm
Casa de Amistad



**3rd Annual Cameron County
Summer Activities Expo
April 18, 2 pm to 4 pm
Harlingen Public Library**

**4th Annual Run for Rio
April 25, 7 am
Rio Grande State Center**

**Transition Academy Market Day
April 29, 4 pm to 9 pm
Transition Academy**

**Loaves & Fishes of the RGV
Runway to Resilience
18th Annual Style Show
April 30, 6 pm to 9 pm
TSTC Cultural Arts Center**

Beyond Harlingen

**The B Ranch Backyard Easter Fest
Free BBQ Class
April 3, 7 pm to 11 pm
April 4, 10 am to 4 pm
Xtreme Outdoors (La Feria)**

**Barking for Eggs
April 4, 10 am
C.M. Cabler Park (Brownsville)**

**First Annual Birding Festival
April 11-12
Gladys Porter Zoo (Brownsville)**

**Cameron County Master Gardeners
Spring Plant Sale
April 11, 9 am to 12 noon
Education Garden (San Benito)**



**In a Pickle Festival
April 18 and 19
Rio Grande Valley Livestock
Showgrounds (Mercedes)**

**Run for Rotary
April 19, 7 am
Brownsville Events Center**

**Honey Fest 2026
Earth Day Silent Auction
April 20**

**First Annual Market & Honey Festival
April 25-26
The Hive (Combes)**

**Spring Feast Taste of Texas
April 25, 7 pm to 10 pm
Valley Nature Center (Weslaco)**



Events subject to change.

***Check Explore Harlingen on
Facebook for the latest updates.***

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 17

commemorating and honoring a former life skills teacher.

“This year’s market is especially meaningful because we are honoring the memory of one of our beloved life skills teachers, Lizette Sandoval from Harlingen High School South. In her honor, our students will feature “Lizette’s Lemonade.” It is a special way for us to celebrate her impact and continue the spirit of kindness and dedication she brought to our students,” she said.

Gutierrez invites the public to go and support the hard work students have put into preparing for the market.

“We are incredibly proud of our students and the work they have put into this event. We hope the community will come out to support them and celebrate their talents, creativity, and dedication,” she said.

For more information and for any other updates, please follow Transition Academy on Facebook. ♦

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TRANSITION ACADEMY
 ACHIEVING INDEPENDENCE TOGETHER



Courtesy of Transition Academy

Community Easter Eggstravaganza

Saturday April 4, 2026
10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.
Egg Hunt Starts at 10:15 a.m.
Age Groups: 0–3 year olds, 4–7 year olds, and 8–13 year olds

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For more information, please call Sughey at 956-857-4056.

Prizes are open and offered only to attendees of the event and at the time of the event to win. Must be 18 years or older to enter or win. No purchase is necessary to enter or win. Prizes are non-refundable and there is no cash alternative. All games are for fun only – no real money will be won or exchanged.

3rd Annual Cameron County Summer Activities Expo

April 18th 2 - 4 PM

Hosted by the Harlingen Public Library
410 '76 Drive, Harlingen

Learn about all your options for kid, teen, and adult summer activities throughout Cameron County in one afternoon!!

Harlingen Public Library
 Youth Services Department
 410 '76 Drive
 Harlingen, TX 78550
 (956) 216-5819

April 2026

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Friday, April 17th, 2026

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Explore Harlingen Magazine | 21

Moves, Adds, and Changes



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

By Lisa Campos

This column discusses business-related updates in Harlingen.

Announcements
Harlingen Consultant
Dr. Ben Clinton's new book Teaching What Every



Courtesy of Dr. Ben Clinton

Employer Wants reached #1 on Amazon's Best Sellers list in Education & Teaching on March 2, plus #1 in three additional categories.

Jarmain Walton of Glizze's Food Hut has published his new book, The Food Trailer. It's about best friends who own a hot dog trailer who get caught up in a battle between the cartel and the feds. Parts 2 and 3 are being written. It's available on Amazon.

New Businesses

G's Epic Arcade opened in February. They offer an "all you can play" rate and are available for parties and special events. They are



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

located at 212 N. "A" Street.

On February 21, Border Town opened its newest store in Primera. The 15th store is located at 16357 Wilson Road.

New Cafés and Restaurants

Reach for the Sky Bakeshop of San Benito is opening a second location in Harlingen in



Courtesy of Reach for the Sky BakeShop

the former Paris Bakery location at the Harlingen Heights Plaza in front of Sam's Club. They left a series of cryptic and clever messages on their windows to keep passersby guessing: "Relax ... it's not another taqueria. Not a car wash or a loan place. It pairs perfectly with late Sam's runs. Harlingen, we heard you! Think you know? Make your guess..." Their signage was installed on March 13 and 16. They plan on opening in early June.

Yummy's Mini Donuts and Harlingen Donut Shop opened a joint venture storefront on March 12. On their first day open, they served donuts, kolaches, croissant sandwiches, and their famous cinnamon rolls. More menu items will be added after the soft opening. They are located at 1801 S. 77 Sunshine Strip in the space formerly occupied by Brain Freeze frozen yogurt.

Stephanie's Cheesecakes of Los Fresnos opened a new location in San Benito on March 10. This store, conveniently located at 801 Zillock Rd. on the frontage road going from Harlingen to San Benito, sells four signature cheesecake flavors: original, strawberry, Oreo, and turtle. More baked goods will come after the soft opening.

Rustic Tap Bar & Grill is opening soon in the El Mercado shopping center. The owner previously ran



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

a San Benito restaurant called La Mesa Del Mar. They are hiring for all positions.

Moves

KK's Closet moved to its new location in downtown Harlingen on March 5. This much larger location with 2,708 square feet enables them to expand their inventory, increase space for hosting special events, and allow them to participate in downtown events such as Market

Days and Downtown at Sundown. Their new

shop is located at 222 E. Jackson. ♦

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Harlingen Rocks: A Movement of Kindness



Courtesy of Gary and Norma Petito

By **Beth Marie Cantu**
Ensign

On any given day in Harlingen, a small, hand-painted rock might be waiting quietly along a park trail, near a library walkway, or tucked beside a bench. On it might be a simple message—smile, you matter, you are enough. To the person who finds it, that tiny note can turn an ordinary moment into something unexpectedly meaningful.

Led by Norma and Gary Petito, Harlingen Rocks is a community-driven nonprofit organization dedicated to spreading positivity and smiles throughout the city through painted stones hidden to find on purpose or by happenstance.

The idea began with a chance discovery during a walk.

“I found a rock when I was taking a stroll at Hugh Ramsey Park,” Norma

recalled. “It just said something like ‘smile’ on it. It was a simple little rock, and it just made me really happy to find it.”

Inspired by the experience, Norma searched online hoping to find a local group to join and help create more mini pieces of art—but nothing appeared.

“I searched and I didn’t find anything. So, I thought, well, I want to start one then.”

From that moment, the concept was simple: paint rocks with positive messages, hide them throughout the community, and wait to see if someone finds them and shares the moment online.

It took a few weeks before the first discovery appeared.

“Somebody finally posted a rock on our Facebook that they found when they went to work,” said Norma. “They said that it just made their day. They were having a bad week, and they found this little rock, and it made them smile.”

That first found rock—painted with the words Best Buds—went on to become the group’s logo, symbolizing the unexpected joy the project can bring.

While the activity may seem small, the intention behind it has always been larger. Over time, those small moments have multiplied. What began with a handful of painted stones has grown into a community effort



Courtesy of Gary and Norma Petito



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involving thousands of participants.

After five years, the Harlingen Rocks Facebook group now includes nearly 2,700 members who paint, hide, and search for rocks across the city.

As the group grew, something even more meaningful began to happen—more people started painting rocks.

“The very first time that I realized somebody else was painting rocks for the group was really kind of amazing to me,” said Norma. “But we do have several people that paint rocks on behalf of Harlingen Rocks and leave them out for people to find.”

Today, the rocks appear in parks, along walking trails, near schools, and in public spaces throughout the city. Some are placed during organized “rock drops,” where the group announces a location and invites families to search together. But often, the most powerful moments come when someone discovers a rock by accident.

Once found, the discoverer can either keep the rock or hide it again for someone else to enjoy.

The messages themselves range from playful drawings to heartfelt affirmations.

“Some of the messages that I feel like are the most impactful are the ones that say, ‘you matter’ or ‘you are enough,’” shared Norma.

“My favorite one is ‘smile,’” added Gary.

Sometimes, the meaning behind a rock becomes something far deeper than its creator intended.

Norma recalled painting a rock with three small birds.

“Someone found it on one of the trails, and she said that her symbol for three little birds had been with her for several years because she lost her husband and two sons... and that little rock just made her feel happy to find that.”

Moments like that have become reminders that kindness often arrives exactly when it’s needed.



Courtesy of Gary and Norma Petito

The group format itself is intentionally informal. Anyone can participate simply by painting a rock and hiding it somewhere for someone else to discover.

Recently, Harlingen Rocks officially became a nonprofit, allowing the group to expand its outreach through partnerships and community events.

Despite the new nonprofit status, the mission remains unchanged: spreading kindness in simple, accessible ways.

Norma and Gary regularly host painting events where

families and community members can create rocks together. They also partner with organizations like the Girl Scouts to introduce children to the idea of kindness through creativity.

Looking ahead, the Petitos hope to expand the project even further. One idea in development is a community-wide kindness event.

“One of the things that I’m thinking about is having a kindness fair... hopefully on World Kindness Day,” Norma shared, excitedly. “Where the kids can come in and do



Courtesy of Gary and Norma Petito



Courtesy of Gary and Norma Petito

different activities, and we talk to them about kindness and how to spread kindness.”

For those interested in participating, getting started

is simple. Rocks can be purchased from craft stores, home improvement stores, or even online, and decorated with acrylic paint, markers,

or any materials on hand—because perfection isn’t the goal.

“I don’t think anybody has to go out and buy anything

special,” Norma said. “I’ve made rocks with just crayons... and even markers.”

What matters most is the message—because in a world where negativity can often feel overwhelming, Harlingen Rocks offers a reminder that small gestures still matter.

“Really the goal is just to make somebody feel good... even if it’s just for a minute or two,” Norma shared.

“The impact could be little; it could be big. We don’t always know, but I think it’s important we keep trying to make those positive messages out there and spread kindness,” added Gary.

And sometimes, that little message is all it takes to brighten someone’s day.

Community members interested in participating can simply paint a rock with a positive message, write a small note on the back encouraging the finder to

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FREE RAFFLES/GIVEAWAYS

post a photo to the Harlingen Rocks page, and hide it somewhere for someone else to discover. The organization also hosts occasional community painting events and welcomes partnerships with other local groups.

You can find Harlingen Rocks on Facebook, where members share photos of the rocks they've created and the ones they've discovered

around the city. Those interested in hosting an event or getting involved can also reach the group by email at harlingenrocks@gmail.com.

For those who would like to support the organization's supplies and community events, donations can also be made through Cash App at \$artandsoul956. ♦

Lolly Burns

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Artist of the Month

Beyond the Needle with Jason Kim

By Beth Marie Cantu Ensign

Every tattoo artist has a story that begins long before their first needle ever touches skin. For tattoo artist Jason Kim, that story stretches across continents, cultures, and years of dedication to mastering both art and craft.

Jaehun “Jason” Kim’s journey into tattooing was anything but conventional. Growing up in South Korea, he later spent several years living in the Philippines during high school, where he first learned to speak English. After completing military service, he moved again—this time to Australia. It was there that his casual habit of sketching began to evolve into something more serious.

“I was doodling on a sketchbook and everything, and then suddenly I thought, what about starting to do tattoos?” he recalled.

At 24, Kim returned to Korea to pursue tattooing professionally, beginning a formal apprenticeship that would shape the foundation of his career. The training required patience, discipline, and time—two full years before he was allowed to tattoo on skin.

When that moment finally arrived, the memory stuck with him.

“I remember it very clearly. It was both exciting and



Courtesy of Jason Kim

nerve-wracking at the same time. Tattooing felt very different from drawing on paper because the skin moves and the work becomes permanent. That moment made me realize how much responsibility tattooing carries, and it motivated me to take the craft seriously and keep improving.”

Those early years were defined by constant learning. Kim studied at art school while also working in a tattoo studio, refining his technical skills and artistic voice. His earliest influences came from mentors who specialized in very different tattoo traditions.

After years of travel—including working in multiple countries and attending international tattoo conventions—Kim eventually made his way to South Texas. When he first arrived in the Rio Grande Valley (the “Valley”), the cultural landscape immediately stood out.

“I came over here and I saw all the taco restaurants and everything, and then I realized this is like a border town... and I fell in love with it.”

Today the Valley has become part of his story as an artist— a place where he continues to grow his craft and connect with clients from diverse backgrounds.

Many of his clients come to him with ideas connected to family, personal memories, or important life events—stories that can leave a lasting impression on the artist as well.

Kim reflected on how meaningful those connections can become.

“When they come in, they’re just a client, but after that we become friends,” he said with a gentle laugh. “Because I listen to all their stories.”

Those stories often shape the tattoos themselves, pushing Kim to create art that captures both emotion and realism. That sense of

connection continues to influence the tattoos he creates.

“My style is primarily black and grey realism. I focus on depth, emotion, and smooth tonal transitions to create tattoos that feel natural and timeless. I also pay a lot of attention to how the design flows with the body, so the tattoo feels like it belongs to the person wearing it.”

For Kim, tattooing isn’t simply about placing an image onto skin. Each design is carefully constructed to move with the body’s natural shape and structure.

During the design process, he begins by learning the story behind the tattoo.

“I begin by listening carefully to the client’s story and understanding the meaning behind their idea. Then I gather references, develop it, and design the piece so that it flows naturally with the body.”



Courtesy of Jason Kim

That collaborative approach allows him to create deeply personal pieces for each client.

Looking back on his career so far, Kim sees tattooing as something far

deeper than a job and believes every tattoo represents more than an image—it’s a story permanently carried by the person who wears it. “To me, tattooing is more than a profession. It is a lifelong artistic practice and a way of connecting with people through their stories.”

And in a profession built on permanence, that personal connection is exactly what makes art endure.

Those interested in viewing Kim’s work can find him on Instagram (@jasonkim.tattoo) or contact him via email at crazyjasontattoo@gmail.com. ♦



Courtesy of Jason Kim

League in Harlingen



Courtesy of Misael Cacique

By Roel Rodriguez

Soccer enthusiasts in Harlingen have a new playing opportunity with the launch of the Harlingen Adult Soccer League (HASL) beginning this Spring.

The HASL will consist of 14 to 16 coed teams competing in a 9v9 division with games held every Sunday at 5 pm at Vestal Park. Six males and three females will be on the field at all times. Vestal Park, located at 501 Lafayette Avenue near Zavala Elementary, offers spacious playing fields with great lighting, bleachers, and brand-new soccer goalposts.

HASL is a nonprofit organization operating as part of HC Athletics and offering an opportunity for co-ed teams for players ranging from 15 years of age and older to compete in their league.

HASL President, Misael Cacique, advised that their league is Transylvania Adult Soccer Association (TASA) certified under USA Soccer and all coaches are National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) Certified for Sport® or “com sports” certified, bringing an elite level of soccer to Harlingen.

HASL began operations with the purpose of providing the community soccer options that could lead to opportunities

because of their soccer affiliations. For example, high school players and coaches may be able to utilize their time and experience at HASL to attain college soccer scholarships or to enhance their soccer playing/coaching resumes.

As per President Cacique, the HASL purpose is simple: offer a soccer league that is open and equal to all. All inclusive. Where teams, players, and spectators can enjoy the game in a family-friendly environment and provide entertainment the whole family can enjoy.

As a nonprofit organization, HASL utilizes sponsor contributions to support league operations, such as a concession stand, and to further the development of the league. HASL also plans to introduce additional divisions in the future as they grow, including youth soccer as well as separate men’s and women’s divisions.

Individuals who wish to participate need to pay

the registration fee to be eligible for competition.

If you are interested in supporting HASL through donations or sponsorship, please contact the Sponsor Coordinator at 956-200-5626.

For additional information and updates, please follow Harlingen Adult Soccer League on Facebook.

On behalf of the HASL Board of Directors, they extend their sincere appreciation to all sponsors for their valuable support, with special thanks to the City of Harlingen for its assistance in launching this initiative. ♦



Courtesy of Harlingen Adult Soccer League

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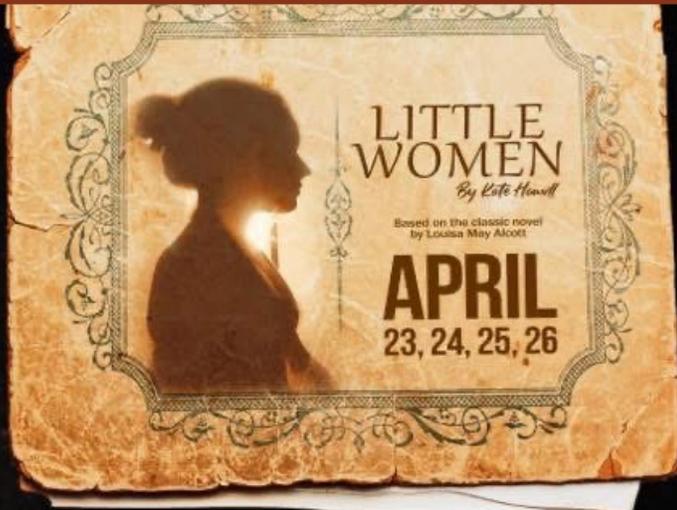
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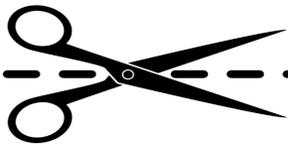
Community Easter Egg Hunt

Sat., April 4th 12:30-2pm

Celebration



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