



Free Magazine

January 2026



Explore Harlingen
Magazine Online



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From the Editor



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

By Lisa Campos

This is Lisa from Explore Harlingen. Welcome to the 27th 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 the 25th anniversary of Market Days, the Marine Military Academy state

champion football team, 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. ♦

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Courtesy of Lisa Campos

January 2026



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On the
Cover

Market Days Turns 25



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

By Abigail Muñiz-Garcia

June Ramirez remembers. She remembers how different downtown Harlingen looked when she opened the Antique & Artisan Emporium in 1991.

“There were a lot of buildings boarded up,” she said.

Back then, 25 years ago, business downtown wasn’t necessarily booming yet.

That’s when a few local merchants and downtown business owners came up with an idea to get more foot traffic downtown: Market Days was born.

“Business had really dropped, you know and so we needed to get people downtown,” Ramirez, who is also a dedicated member of the Market Days Committee, said. “It’s been an adventure.”

For 25 years, one of the Rio Grande Valley’s (the “Valley’s”) most beloved and longest-standing community market traditions, Market Days, has made its mark. Jackson Street transforms into a buzzing outdoor marketplace where attendees can find anything from antiques to handmade goods, food trucks, artwork, live music, and much more. The energetic buzz

of visitors and friendly vendors is something that attendees can surely look forward to. What began as a handful of vendors on Jackson Street between 4th Street and Commerce expanded to Centennial Park and W. Van Buren to accommodate another 80 vendors in 2021.

“About a year in, there were probably two blocks, which was maybe 20 vendors. It would depend

on how many we could get in a block. And we started out doing two blocks here and two blocks there because we wanted merchants to be able to have the Market Days in front of their stores so it would bring more people,” Ramirez said. “But that’s how it started out.”

Now, Market Days boasts more than 160 vendors on the original Market Days side plus the Centennial Park expansion that Downtown Harlingen runs.

“We have vendors come and go,” Ramirez said. “But most of them have been here 25 years. You know it’s amazing that you can keep people for that long.”

Lorena Rodriguez of Silly Dillys, a pickle vendor,

has been selling at Market Days for a year. She says she prefers this market over others in the Valley.

“We just recently turned about a year being a vendor there. That’s my favorite market to do... Market Days is always a hit,” she said.

Rodriguez and her husband Matthew, from Rio Hondo, are in the works of opening a storefront in Harlingen but don’t see themselves slowing down any time soon as they hope to stay on as vendors at Market Days as well.

“It’s very special because you see people from towns (from) all over the Valley here,” Rodriguez said.

Market Days has become more than just

a shopping event – it’s where commerce meets community.

Market Days occurs monthly on the first Saturday of the month from 9 am to 3 pm. It is a family- and pet-friendly event and a platform for small businesses.

For information on becoming a vendor, see

the registration link on the Downtown Harlingen page on Facebook, which is usually shared on the Monday after Market Days for the following month’s market. Call 956-216-5951 for questions on food truck spaces. Contact June Ramirez at 956-423-4041 with informational booth questions. ♦

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17, 18, 24, 25

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SCAN FOR TICKETS

Follow Me to the Other Room



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

By Laisa Chavez Macias

After a couple of months of meeting with some of Harlingen's most established restaurants, I was very excited about getting to sit down, chat, and hopefully share some of that knowledge with one of our newest entrepreneurs, Gilberto Lucio, owner of The Other Room Wine Bar.

A Little Bit about the Owners

Gilberto aka Gilbert, Gil, and even Lucio to some, grew up in our neighboring city of San Benito. He left the Rio Grande Valley (the "Valley") in 1982 after joining the military, eventually settling in Denver and transitioning to the Reserves. Lucio then began his career as a police officer, quickly working his way up the ranks to detective. As fate would have it, a girl

from the Bronx, New York happened to be living in Denver during that same time. Lourdes and Gilbert, "Lindo" to her, would meet, tie the knot, move down to the Valley, and eventually open a wine bar.

Inspiration and the Name

Before his time in Denver, Gilbert had spent many years in the military living abroad in all parts of the world. Once married, he and Lourdes continued to travel, and still enjoy visiting new places regularly. So now as first-time small business owners I had to ask, why a wine bar?

The answer was simple. They wanted to offer something special. Something that resonated with them personally. They wanted to help create memories. Anytime Gilbert and Lourdes travel, the one constant was a visit to the

local wine bar in whatever city they visited. It was a time to relax and reflect on their time together. So that is exactly what they built.

My next question? You guessed it! Where did the name come from?

There's always something special when it comes to naming a business, especially if it's your first one, and when I heard the story behind this one, it all made sense.

Gilbert said it all came together for him when he met up with a friend he hadn't seen in years. After trying to talk through loud music and rambunctious kids running around a restaurant, they finally moved to another room where it was quieter with less distractions.

This got him thinking, he remembered being around family, and how often adults would move to another

room to talk. I'm sure it's the same in every culture, but especially in Mexican culture, get-togethers and events tend to be a little on the loud side. You often hear "Vamos al otro cuarto (Let's go to the other room)" or, somewhere quieter that we can talk and catch up. Or somewhere just a little more private. Gilbert said, "It's where the real connections happen." It was exactly the experience he and his wife had time and time again during their travels. After a long day spent in the hustle and bustle, they would find a relaxing wine venue where they could just sit and catch up, and that's how The Other Room Wine Bar got its name.

The Venue and its Menu

In December, our little Explore Harlingen Magazine crew met up at The Other Room Wine Bar



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

Speaking of the wine: there are more than 60 different wine options available to choose from. With new wines arriving weekly, they offer a rotating wine menu, allowing you to try something new each time you visit. On the first Friday of every month, you can enjoy a complimentary wine tasting. Gilbert describes these tastings as taking a journey from Italy, to Spain, and back to

were both hearty and delicious! We also enjoyed the pepperoni/cheese and margherita flatbreads that totally hit the spot and paired perfectly with our wine tasting and secret menu item, the Prosecco punch.

It was the ideal place to start the evening and just enjoy spending time together.

In addition to their monthly wine tastings, The

Other Room Wine Bar does offer classes such as charcuterie board classes, and sip and paint sessions. Starting in January 2026 they will begin offering Wine 101 classes for those who are new to wine. The venue is available for special event bookings.

My takeaway

Even if you don't drink wine, a visit to The Other Room Wine Bar is a MUST. It really is the perfect addition to what downtown Harlingen has to offer: a low-key vibe right heart of the city.

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

The Other Room Wine Bar
119 W Van Buren Ave.,
Suite 7
Harlingen, TX 78550

720-980-1156
info@theotherroomtx.com
Instagram @theotherroomtx
Facebook The Other Room Wine Bar

A +21 establishment

Hours of operation:

Tuesday, Wednesday 3 pm to 10 pm

Thursday-Saturday 3 pm to 12 am

Sunday Reserved for special events/bookings

Closed Monday



Courtesy of Juan Macias of J Macias Photographer

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Moves, Adds, and Changes

By Lisa Campos

This column discusses business-related updates in Harlingen.



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

Elections

A swearing-in ceremony was held at City Hall on November 17 for re-elected Mayor Norma Sepulveda, newly elected District #1 Commissioner Delia Cavazos-Gamez, and re-elected District #2 Commissioner Daniel N. Lopez. Former Commissioner Ford Kinsley was also honored for his service.

Announcements

Thanks to an anonymous donor, 70 Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District (HCISD) middle schoolers were given the opportunity to shop for Christmas gifts at Target before the store opened to the public on December 13. The Rotary Club of Harlingen coordinated the effort with HCISD. Each child was given \$175 to spend on themselves or family members.



Courtesy of Lisa Campos



Courtesy of Rene Rivera

Mirai Event Venue has announced its grand opening for January 11, from 3 pm to 6 pm. It is located at 4501 Hale Ave.

The owners of Diamond Moon Events are opening Majestic Event Center. An opening date has not been announced yet. It will be located at 302 N. Commerce.

Achievements

The Harlingen Cardinals football team, Class 6A DII Bi-District Champions, advanced to the Area Playoffs, which were held in Corpus Christi on November 21. They were defeated by the Medina Valley Panthers.

New Cafés and Restaurants

El Maiz Dorado, a new locally owned Mexican food restaurant, opened on November 10. They offer a



Courtesy of El Maiz Dorado

weekday lunch buffet for \$10.99, which includes coffee or tea and tortillas. They are located at 318 W. Jackson in downtown Harlingen.

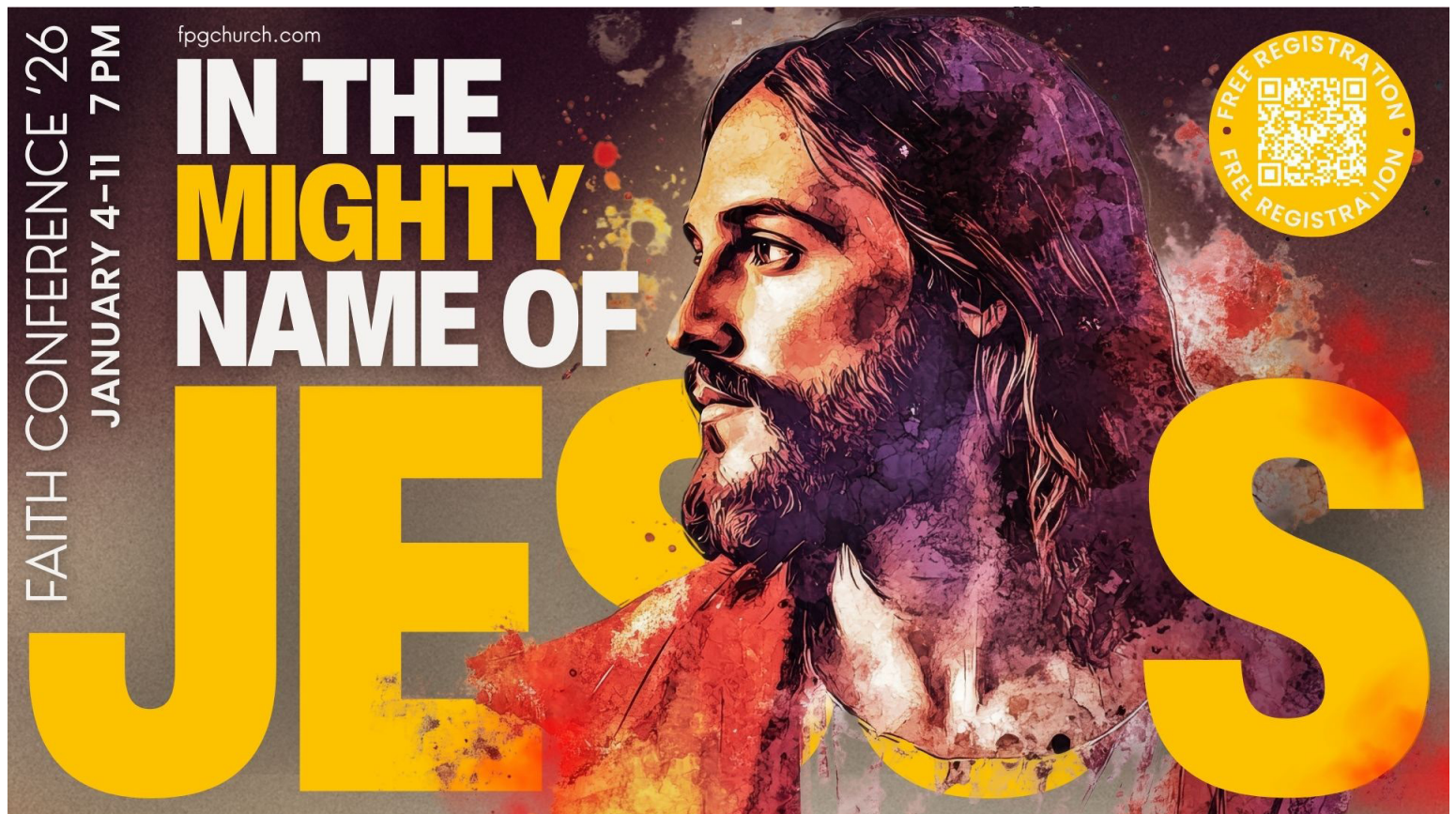
The new Wendy's being constructed at 902 N. 77 Sunshine Strip started hiring for positions in early December.



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

New Businesses

Border Town opened on November 20 at 16357 Wilson Rd. in Harlingen (Primera). Border Town is a grocery store with a total of 15 Rio Grande Valley locations. ♦



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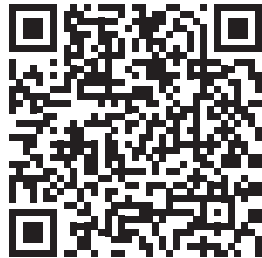
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Reoccurring Events

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

The Market at Wild August Nursery and
Flower Farm

Every Saturday morning
(January 10, 17, 24, and 31),
9:30 am to 1 pm
16802 Garrett Road

Valle Vista Mall Market Days
Every 2nd Saturday (January 10),
11 am to 7 pm

Harlingen Art Night
Last Friday (January 30), 7 pm to 10 pm
"A" Street and Jackson

Happy
New Year



January Special Events

In the Mighty Name of Jesus
Faith Conference
January 4-11, 7 pm
Faith Pleases God Church

Harlingen Hoop Shoot
January 4, 2 pm
Harlingen Boys & Girls Club

Craft Show
January 8, 9 am to 12 noon
Tropic Winds RV Park

3K Rise Up & Praise Run/Walk
Wellness & Health Fair
January 10, 8 am
Arroyo Park

2026 Bob Salmeron Memorial
Table Tennis Tournament
January 10, 8 am
Harlingen Community Center

Rotary Club of North Harlingen
4th Annual Family Comedy Night
January 17, 7 pm
Harlingen Community Theatre

Women Who Rock
January 17, 8 pm
Hop Shop

Harlingen Concert Association Presents
Pianomania!
January 20, 7:30 pm
Christian Fellowship Church

Garage Sale
January 22, 8 am
Tropic Winds RV Park

WGA Invitational 2026 "The Sweet Spot"
January 28, 9 am
Harlingen Country Club

Beyond Harlingen

Full Moon Market
January 3, 6 pm to 10 pm
Feather & Sage Apothecary (San Benito)

Big Red Ministries Presents
Christmas in January
January 17, 18, 24, and 25
Stadium 43:19 (Rio Hondo)

Monster Truck Wars
January 17, 12 noon
Rio Grande Valley Livestock Show
(Mercedes)
Winter Texan Expo
January 20-21

McAllen Convention Center
January 22
Brownsville Event Center
SPI Market Days
January 23-24, 9 am to 5 pm
January 25, 10 am to 4 pm
SPI Convention Center (South Padre Island)



Sea Turtle Inc. Foundation
Enchantment Under the Sea
January 31, 6:30 pm
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Events subject to change.

Check Explore Harlingen on Facebook for the latest updates.

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MARKET DAYS

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of the Month

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- Treasures



Event Spotlight

Start the Year Strong with Rise Up & Fuel: 3K Wellness & Health Fair

By Abigail Muñiz-Garcia

Carolina Garces wears many hats. She is a mother, a small business owner, a certified personal trainer, and a nutritionist. She has a passion for fitness and

health, which is apparent to anyone who speaks to her even if just for a few minutes. Her faith is also important to her. In August 2025, she started planning an event that would combine the two – the Rise Up &

Fuel: 3K Wellness & Health Fair.

The free community fair will be happening on January 10, 2026, at Arroyo Park. It will kick off with a run at 8 am for those who sign up for it for a \$25 fee. After the 3K, everyone is free to join for worship and praise time from 9:30 am to 10 am. The Wellness & Health Fair will then follow from 10 am to 1 pm.

Hosted by Garces' women's fitness studio, Limitless Studio by CBoss Beauty, the event will also have a free Zumba session,



Courtesy of Carolina Garces

local wellness and health vendors, as well as gyms and trainers on site. There will also be raffles and giveaways.

FREE COMMUNITY FAIR

RISE UP & FUEL: 3K WELLNESS & HEALTH FAIR
10AM - 1PM

JANUARY 10TH, 2026
ARROYO PARK, HARLINGEN TX

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RUN 8:00 AM - 9:30 AM \$25 FEE ALL AGES FUN
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ALL WELCOME WORSHIP & PRAISE
9:30 AM - 10:00 AM

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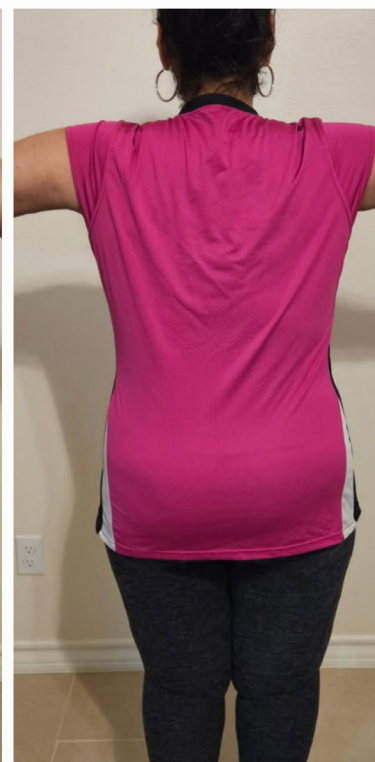
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Courtesy of Carolina Garces

Garces mentions that it wasn't easy putting the event together. After some roadblocks with the original site, another location was chosen and set. Overall, Garces was happy with how things worked out and that it will now be at Arroyo Park.

"I actually went to go check it out and map the run," she said. "I feel like it was meant to be, and I really enjoyed the space. It's great! The trail is awesome."

Garces' positivity radiates when she speaks about the event and her experience helping women at her studio as she highlights the

importance of wellness but not just physical wellness.

"We not only are here for the physical, but we are here to strengthen the body, mind, and spirit," she said. "Yes, we all want to look great, but we are all here fighting our mental battles, too. Some days we wanna quit and say that we aren't good enough. It all has to do with faith, believing in yourself and gratitude."

The event aims to blend physical health and spiritual encouragement.

"That's the main focus," Garces said.

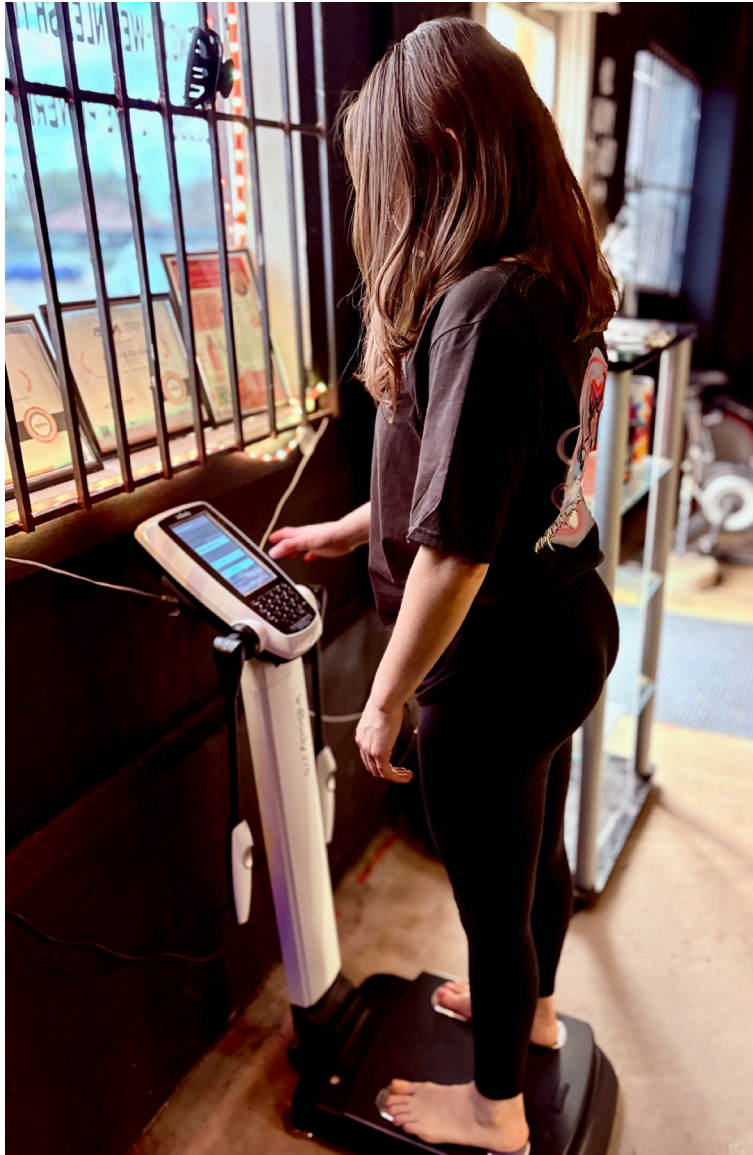


Courtesy of Carolina Garces

She has plans in the future to keep the event going annually and to possibly evolve it and include something for everyone: Zumba, yoga, weight training, CrossFit, etc. In the meantime, she's grateful for

the opportunity to bring this event to life this new year.

For more information about the event, check out Limitless Studio BY CBoss Beauty on Facebook. ♦



Courtesy of Carolina Garces
January 2026

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**Notable
Nonprofits**

Second Chance Thrift Store: Serving the Community, One Sale at a Time



Courtesy of Beth Marie Cantu Ensign

By Beth Marie Cantu Ensign

On Saturday mornings, the doors of Second Chance Thrift Store open to more than just bargain hunters. They open to a community built on a sense of purpose that goes far beyond making a sale. Dena Herrera, the store's manager and volunteer, is usually right in the middle of it all, thriving in what she calls the "hustle and bustle" of the space.

Dena's journey with Second Chance began simply. "I love thrift stores. I walked in. They said, 'We need volunteers,' so the next Saturday I started." Eight months later, the store needed a manager. Despite not being a member of First Methodist Church, Dena was encouraged to step into

the role due to her passion for the project.

Second Chance Thrift Store itself was also born out of opportunity. The space that houses the store was donated to the church. However, it remained empty for a few years before church volunteers decided to turn it into a donation-based thrift



Courtesy of Beth Marie Cantu Ensign

shop to help the community. What started as an idea soon became a massive ministry project of First Methodist Church.

The name "Second Chance" reflects the heart of the store's mission. "The ladies that started the store wanted to give items that were donated a second

chance to help other people," Dena said.

What sets the store apart from other thrifts in the area is a combination of affordability, quality, and purpose.

As it is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit entity, proceeds from the thrift store are reinvested locally,



Courtesy of Lisa Campos

supporting church needs as well as ministries and charities throughout the city of Harlingen. However, Dena emphasized that the store operates independently. She estimates about two thirds of the volunteers do not go to the church, highlighting how the store has grown into a community-wide effort.

Second Chance also serves as a place of connection. "We see customers every week... we know a lot of them by name," Dena said.

With approximately 27 rooms, the work is constant. "[Volunteers] sort the stuff... we tag the clothes... organize, hang up, put the items out for sale," Dena said. Saturdays, especially during Market Days and summer months, are when help is needed most.

Looking ahead, Dena hopes to continue improving



Courtesy of Beth Marie Cantu Ensign

the store for customers so the cycle of giving can continue. "We want to continue bettering the store for customers so that they keep coming back and

we can keep giving to the community," she said.

At Second Chance Thrift Store, every item, every volunteer, and every shopper

plays a role in a mission rooted in service—proof that sometimes the most meaningful impact comes from giving something a second chance. ♦

Lolly Burns

322 East Tyler
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Artist of the Month

Me Vale Creations: Conchas, Chanclas, y Cultura



Courtesy of Me Vale Creations

By Beth Marie Cantu Ensign

For Sarah Lee Soria, art has not been just about aesthetics — it is about survival, memory, and shared cultural experiences.

Her business, Me Vale Creations, is instantly recognizable across the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). The recuerdos woven into her work resonate with many Chicano millennials who feel her designs were lifted straight from Mama's cocina or Welita's living room. Behind the humor and nostalgia, however, is a story rooted in resilience.

Nearly a decade ago, Sarah and her husband were laid off. Bills piled up, and stability felt out of

reach. Around the same time, her grandmother died, leaving behind arts and crafts supplies that would unknowingly become the foundation of a new business.

"I remember I sat there and I wanted to sculpt, and I said, 'Well, my kids love pan dulce,'" Sarah said.

She sculpted a concha and posted it on Facebook. The response was immediate.

"My friends hyped it up. They shared it. Orders started coming in, and then that money got used for more orders," Sarah said.

From there, Me Vale Creations grew organically and eventually expanded into a full online storefront. What began as a necessity

became momentum. Etsy orders poured in, followed by a standalone website and an expanding product line that includes air fresheners, drink cozies, blankets, pins, stickers, candles, and more.

During COVID-19, growth was explosive. That rapid growth, she said, led to burnout. Still, she takes pride in seeing culturally rooted items now created by other artists.

"You go to Etsy, you type in 'concha keychain,' and you'll see more than 50 people making them now," she said. "And it's good, because it's inspiring. That



Courtesy of Me Vale Creations



Courtesy of Me Vale Creations

means our cultura is spreading everywhere.”

Currently, Me Vale Creations is temporarily housed at the Antique Emporium located at 123 E. Jackson, offering shoppers a chance to see Sarah’s work up close while she plans the next phase of her business. That same perseverance shows up in the name of the business itself. “Me vale” means much more than “I don’t care” — it’s a mindset shaped by grit and determination.

“[Me vale] means we’re nonstop grinders,” Sarah said. “As Mexicanos, we don’t care — not in a rude way — we just keep grinding. We’ve got to wake up and go to work tomorrow. We don’t have time for [drama].”

Inspired by the uniqueness of RGV culture, Sarah’s designs are relatable and recognizable, with food serving as her central source of inspiration.

“The food — that’s the soul of the RGV,” she said.

Sarah’s art also brings to life familiar sayings like “Ponte Vicks” and “Hay comida en la casa,” while

also celebrating iconic moments—like the ever-feared flying chancleta—using humor to connect generations.

Children recognizing the designs, parents laughing at the references, and repeat customers bringing friends all reinforce why Sarah continues her hustle. “That means the tradition is getting passed down,” she said. “That’s what we’re supposed to do.”

After a period of creative block and personal change, including welcoming her youngest child, Sarah is intentionally slowing down and returning to what made Me Vale Creations special: handmade work rooted in Valley pride.

“I want to stop the manufactured stuff and continue with only the handmade stuff,” she said. “That’s something other businesses can’t replicate. I want to be able to put a stamp that says ‘Made in the RGV.’ That way, I’m RGV proud.”

Me Vale Creations is built around shared experiences within a



Courtesy of Me Vale Creations

community, and Sarah is clear about who kept her going through her lowest moments.

“My customers motivate me. They’ve never given up on me,” she said. “If it wasn’t for their support, especially at my lowest, I wouldn’t continue doing what I’m doing.”

In every concha and familiar phrase, Sarah Lee Soria preserves the moments that connect generations of Chicanos across the RGV. Me Vale Creations isn’t just about what we carry on our keychains—it’s about the memories we carry with us, long after the moment has passed. ♦

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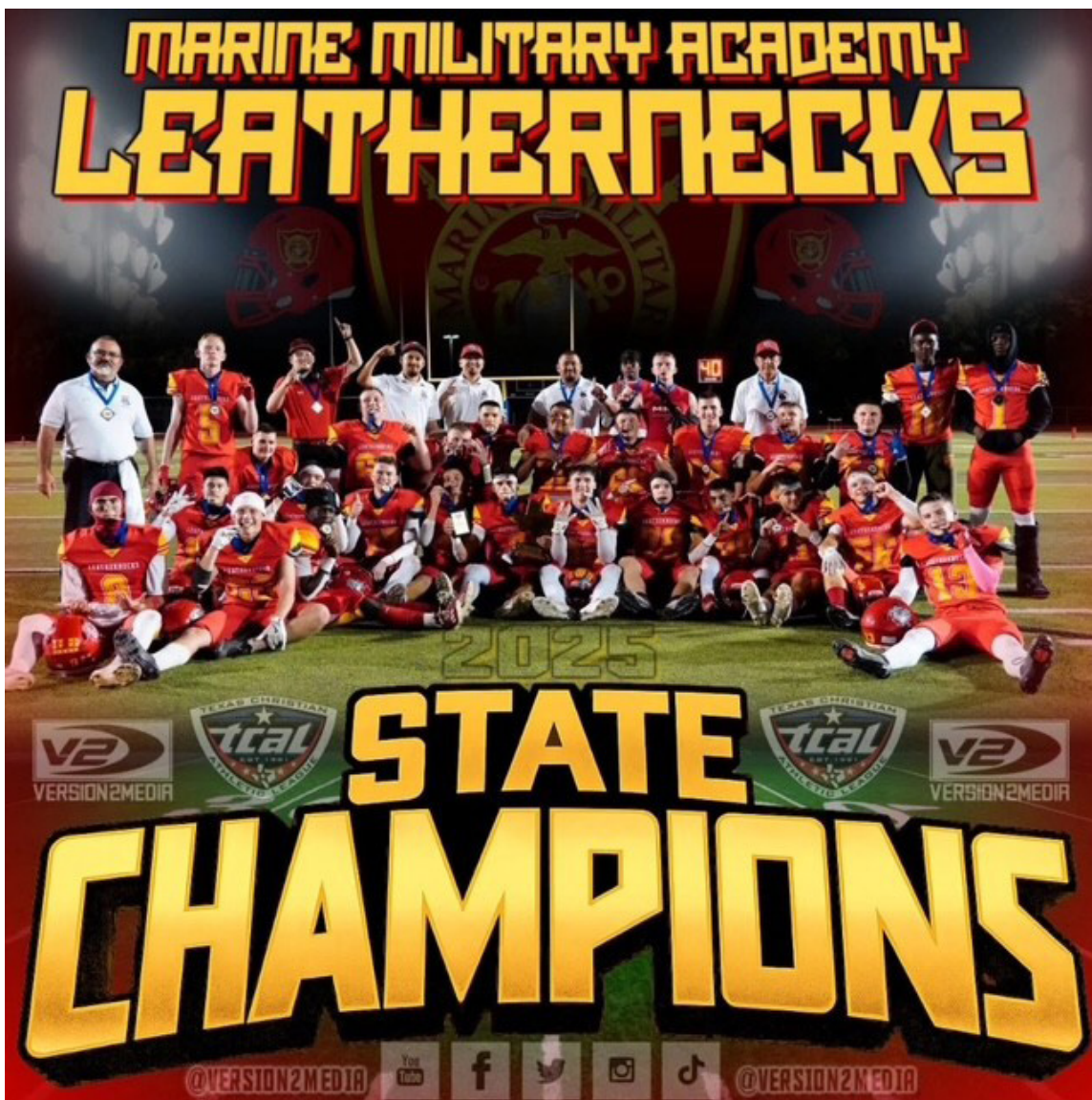
LIVE MUSIC

MMA Fighting Leathernecks: The Champs

By Roel Rodriguez

I have previously written that winning a state championship or being part of a state championship winning team is every Texas high school athlete's dream. At the beginning of the 2025 Texas high school football season, our community had high hopes and expectations for the Harlingen Cardinals and the Harlingen South Hawks football teams to compete in a state championship game. Both football teams had good seasons, advancing to the Texas UIL state football playoffs. However, our beloved Cards and Hawks fell short of making it to a state championship game.

Fortunately, in our community, we have another football program in Harlingen with a rich history and reputation as a perennial powerhouse football team. The Fighting Leathernecks of the Marine Military Academy (MMA) reached the pinnacle of high school football during their most recent season by winning the 2025 Texas Christian Athletic League's (TCAL's) State Football Championship. That's right! Our city is home to the



2025 TCAL State Football Champions.

The History

History has proven that our city is more than capable of producing state champions. We have had state champions in Speech/Drama, Powerlifting, Band, Junior Reserve Officer's Training Corp, and Track & Field but never in football,

until now. It appears that MMA is the first football team from Harlingen to win a state football championship.

Since 1965, MMA has maintained a strong presence in Harlingen, consistently integrating military discipline with high-level competition to develop accomplished teams and outstanding individual

talent. My recollection of the MMA football teams in the early 1980s consisted of tough teams with talented players that could easily compete and beat any team in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) and most football teams throughout the state in their competition class.

Based on its tradition and history of producing talented high school

football players, including some talented enough to play in the National Football League, it doesn't surprise me that the MMA football team won a state championship. But how was the 2025 team able to be the first MMA football team in their storied history to win a state championship?

New Head Coach

In August 2025, Coach Israel "Izzy" Gracia was hired as the head coach at MMA. Coach Gracia is no stranger to building a football program. He has dedicated his entire life to football. Coach Gracia, who recently retired as the head football coach at Santa Maria High School, has more than 32 years of high school football coaching experience. He has worked at Santa Maria ISD, Los Fresnos ISD, Rio Hondo ISD, Hidalgo ISD, and San Perlita ISD. He played football at Los Fresnos

High School (Class of 1989) and Texas A&I University (now known as Texas A&M Kingsville).

I asked Coach Gracia how he was able to take over a program in August and win a state championship in November. Coach Gracia quickly gave credit to the staff and their contributions to building the championship culture. He proudly gave credit to his players and their ability to adapt to adversity and overcome the challenges faced throughout the season. Coach Gracia also credited the amazing support from the MMA leadership, students, and fans.

The Challenges

Coach Gracia accepted the head coaching position at MMA knowing that the program inherently posed several challenges. First and foremost, MMA has always been known as an

institution of excellence, discipline, and character that, back in the day, always had a formidable athletic program in all sports, and especially in football. From my personal experience, it appeared that MMA players were always much bigger, faster, and stronger and MMA teams were always so tough to play against and hard to beat. The history of MMA football and the desire to get back to the glory days of winning and the expected standard of performance was a challenge for Coach Gracia.

Another challenge for Coach Gracia was the players. Unlike traditional high school programs, MMA enrollment is based on local, national, and global enrollment, which constantly changes every year. There could be an All-State player on the roster one year who doesn't come back to MMA the following year. Coach Gracia faced a big challenge of not knowing which players would be returning, nor did he have any insight of the new players entering the program. Coach Gracia and his staff needed to rapidly evaluate their players, ensuring they matched the team's culture, system, and team chemistry, while also developing the necessary skills for each position to create a successful team. Additionally, MMA starts football practice two weeks

after all other high school programs and played their first football game for the 2025 season after only 10 football practices.

Lastly, Coach Gracia had to assemble a new football coaching staff, with only one MMA coach from the 2024 team, Coach John Flores, returning.

The Process

Coach Gracia recognized that establishing a successful program at MMA required assembling an outstanding team of coaches.

Coach Gracia brought in former Santa Maria High School quarterback (QB) Jesse Ortiz as QB coach, added experienced Coach Ruben Cortez as Defensive Coordinator, and completed the 2025 MMA football staff with Coach Castillo, Coach John Flores, and volunteer Coach Mora.

With only 34 players, the MMA coaching staff then focused on helping the team build trust, work together, and gain confidence in their abilities. Coach Gracia mentioned that failure invites change, allowing for more focus to change leading to "buy in." Coach Gracia believes in and promotes a "team first" mindset and team accomplishments in lieu of individual achievements.

I asked Coach Gracia to describe their season and how they were able to win



Courtesy of Marine Military Academy

a state championship. He said that the 2025 MMA football season was one of continual evolution. There were some highs and some lows with several “glimpses of success.” Coach Gracia mentioned the team had great wins, tough losses, and a lot of growth during games when the team experienced adversity. The coaching staff emphasized learning from setbacks and encouraged the team not to give up when games went poorly.

The 2025 MMA team experienced several injuries, forcing some players to play on both sides of the ball on offense and defense. The team had to put “all hands-

on deck” to achieve their goals.

Coach Gracia’s approach was for his players to have fun and enjoy playing the game and with each other. He managed difficulty and losses by accepting full responsibility when his team did not play to their potential, always using these situations as opportunities to learn from mistakes.

Coach Gracia remembers the precise moment his team encountered adversity in a regular season game. Rather than losing their composure, the team remained determined, refused to give up, and continued fighting, ultimately securing the win. During that game, Coach



Courtesy of Marine Military Academy

Gracia recognized that his team had developed the confidence required to compete successfully against any opponent. This poise significantly contributed to them being successful in the state championship game.

The Players

To be a great team you must have great players. Coach Gracia mentioned that he was blessed to coach so many great young men at MMA and mentioned the following players who had an outstanding season.

Dash Varner led the team as their QB. Not only did he have an outstanding statistical season, but he

was a great leader and was recognized as the Most Valuable Player of the TCAL State Championship game. With a 104.0 QB rating, Dash completed 52 percent of his passes with 19 touchdown passes. Dash also led the team in rushing yards and averaged 60 yards a game, scoring six (6) rushing touchdowns.

Brandon Smith led the wide receivers with 81.1 yards per game and scored 14 touchdowns overall (11 receiving touchdowns) and was an integral part of the MMA offense.

Colten Clark led the defense as their Linebacker and led the team with an

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Courtesy of Marine Military Academy

average of 8.1 tackles per game. and **Luke Estell** led the team with interceptions helping to bolster the MMA defense, which included linebacker, **Mason Neeslein**.

The Game

After a season of changes, growth, and adversity, the Fighting Leathernecks earned a trip to the TCAL State Championship

Game. On November 15, 2025, MMA played against the Texas Legacy Football Academy in Buda, Texas and won the game 44-42. Coach Gracia

expressed pride in his team's performance, noting that they began the game with energy, encountered challenges when they fell behind, but ultimately rallied to secure the victory. Coach Gracia commended his players and their strong winning spirit.

The 2025 MMA football team excelled at overcoming: overcoming changes, adversity, past performance, and lack of confidence. Not everyone can say they are a state champion, but the 2025 Fighting Leathernecks of the Marine Military Academy in Harlingen, Texas can and we are all so proud of them. Congrats to the MMA players, their fans, the coaches, the students, and to MMA on a job well done! Congrats on making history! Congrats to The Champs!

To learn more about the Marine Military Academy, please visit www.mmm-tx.org. To learn more about the Texas Christian Athletic League, please visit www.teamtcal.org. ♦

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Recipes

New Year's Chicken Caldo



Courtesy of Mamie Moon

By Mamie Moon

Happy New Year! After enjoying all the delicious holiday dishes, I like to start my New Year with some easily digestible meals. One of my favorites is Chicken Caldo. Packed full of veggies and protein, it will help make you feel full without all the extra calories.

Ingredients:

- 4 large chicken thighs
- 2 stalks celery, diced)
- 2 large carrots, diced)
- Seasonings: Palmful of salt, pepper, chicken seasoning, and crushed garlic
- Handful of cilantro
- 2 large limes, sliced
- Half a cabbage
- 2 calabasa zucchinis
- 3 bottles of water

Instructions:

1. Heat a large stove pot at medium to high heat.

2. In the pot, add the carrots, celery, cabbage, and zucchinis.
3. Stir for about 7 minutes.
4. Add the chicken and all the seasonings.
5. Pour the bottles of water into the pot, cover it, and lower the heat to low to medium heat. Let it cook for one hour.
6. Once the chicken is fall-off-the-bone tender, debone the chicken and add it back to the pot.
7. Top it with cilantro and turn the heat off.
8. Let it sit for 10 minutes and then it's ready to serve.

I like to enjoy this soup with a couple slices of limes, which adds the finishing touches to this delicious dish.

January tends to be a chilly month, even for us who live in the deep south of Texas. This caldo not only keeps you warm but also helps heal your body with all its protein and vegetables. It's a great meal to start 2026 in a healthy way!

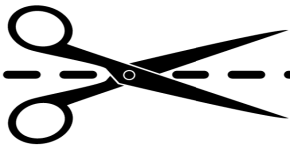
Mamie Moon, owner of Mamie Bakes, turned Keto baker when she was diagnosed with Crohn's disease in 2005. She ditched sugar, gluten, and lactose and became the boss of her own health. She is a home-based Keto baker whose treats can be purchased and picked up locally in Harlingen. ♦



@_MAMIEBAKES_



Courtesy of Mamie Moon



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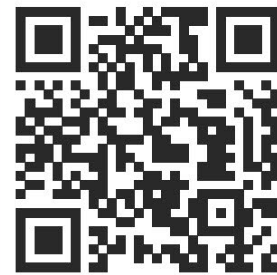
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