

PULSE



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear reader,

Welcome to “Aspire” Issue 009 of Pulse: by students, for students, about students.

My intention with this issue was to tell success stories and journeys that I hope will inspire you as much as they did me. My priority was to remain inclusive and showcase school spirit through an artistic lens.

With that, you will find that many student clubs and organizations are featured, seven colleges and two schools are represented and, for the first time in Pulse history, over 10 teams from the UTRGV Department of Intercollegiate Athletics are recognized.

Every day I am inspired by the locals who are represented in this magazine. For example, Ashley Barrera is a single-mother who devotes her life to her son. Valentina Martinez is a business student with zero quit in her mind or body. Alex Gomez is an agender STEM student who hopes for a world of equality and acceptance. Angie Rocha, our cover girl, is an environmental science student who speaks on the roots of our culture and connection.

The Valley’s successes and aspirations knows no boundaries. Our region is filled with dreamers and achievers; people who constantly aspire for more within our community.

A million thanks to the amazing and talented Pulse staff who worked tirelessly. Thank you to our faculty adviser, Student Media director, program adviser and administrative assistants. I am eternally grateful to have worked with each of you.

Thank you to the incredible people who shared their stories with us.

Thank you to my family and friends. A special thank you to my little girl—my sun, moon and all my stars.

Last but not least, thank you, the reader. I am so grateful for the opportunity to share this with you.

Without further ado, I proudly present “Aspire” Issue 009 of Pulse.

Veronica “Ronnie” Palacios
Editor-in-Chief

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Art and Entertainment	
Student Filmmakers Represent at STXIFF	10
Harlingen Art Night	16
AI in Art: Tool or Threat?	20
Stan Culture	22
The Haunting Hour	26
A Step-By-Step into the Dark Room Society	30
Introducing: Milk Lace	32
For the Filmmaker and the Film Lover	38
Contributions	
Untitled	42
The Planetary Wanderer	44
Mutual Lovers	45
Wrong Fruit	46
Siren	47
DSZVR Live at The Flying Walrus	48
Untitled	49
Campus and Community	
Charro Days	54
Rethinking the Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect	56
Students Raising Students	58
Distinguished Speaker Series	62
‘Pay-What-You-Feel’/CFSI Recipes	64
A Resilient Community	66
Reproductive Activism After the Fall of Roe v. Wade	70
Nurse’s Notes	74
Shaping the Future of Medicine in the RGV	78
Legionary	80
Turtles, Trash, Tourism and Tesla	84
Athletics	
Broncs, Broncos & Vaquero Football	92
Born to Fly	98
Show Up & Show Out	100
On and Off the Court	102
From Pitch to Present	108
Lessons from the Pitch	110
Strength of Mind	112
C X XC	114
UTRGV Men’s Tennis: A Guacamole of Cultures	116
Are Student-Athletes Happier?	120
The Vaquero Fan Experience	122
Play Like a Girl	124
On the Green with Henry Wang	128
Process and Presence	130
Turn On the Lights	132



For The
Filmmaker.png



and The Film
Lover.jpeg



CineSol.jpg



Harlingen Art
Night

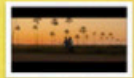


Art Night.HEIC

Art & Entertainment
Contributions



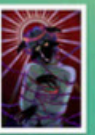
STXIFF



STXIFF.JPG



DSZVR Live at The
Flying Walrus by
RoliezPhotos .jpg



Untitled.jpg



Milk Lace.jpg



MilkLace.jpg



The Haunting
Hour.png



The Haunting
Hour.png



Student Filmmakers Represent at STXIFF

Story by Marissa Rodriguez

From a lonely gas station to the Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge, UTRGV students mapped out life in the Rio Grande Valley in three shorts films at the 2023 South Texas International Film Festival (STXIFF). All of the short films were made as class projects and found a life of their own in the film festival circuit, starting in Edinburg.

At the Sept. 14, 2023, student short film screening, the crowd poured into the old Edinburg Auditorium. All three student-made short films were received with raucous applause, cheers and whistles from the audience. Audience members were moved to tears or screaming with laughter. Each short film achieved its intended effect and the student filmmakers, Armando Ramirez Cardenas, Jared Palomares, Andrew Perez and Angie Rocha felt every minute of it.

“3:00 am The Graveyard Shift”

Ramirez Cardenas’ “3:00 am The Graveyard Shift” was the first film on the screen. Ramirez Cardenas wrote, directed and produced the film, while Joseph “Jrokk” Schaetz, Juan Pablo Gracia Barajas, Arturo “Morfo”

Peña, Jesse “DEM” Garcia, Facundo Gomez Bruera and Carlos Lojero wrote and produced the music.

The “3:00 am The Graveyard Shift” short film follows a cashier through his night shift at a gas station. The music pierces through the monotony of the beeping scanner, the cash tray popping open and the door’s bell ringing as people filter in and out of the store. The short film is in black and white with surveillance-like

footage and the audience becomes a true spectator, watching people pass through.

Ramirez Cardenas, who was nominated for the South Texas Director Award (Rio Grande Valley category), said he wanted to represent a different side of the RGV.

“I was a cashier, and I was like, ‘I’m seeing this little world right here,’” he said. “It’s a small town,



Photo courtesy Armando Ramirez Cardenas

Armando Ramirez Cardenas, the creator of “3 am The Graveyard Shift,” edits his short film in his room.



Photo courtesy Armando Ramirez Cardenas

A payphone located at the corner of the UTRGV Edinburg Science Building is decorated with flyers advertising “3:00 am The Graveyard Shift.”

San Benito. Not even the city of San Benito, but way out, the outside of San Benito, closer to the border fence. So there’s border patrol, sheriffs, state troopers, people from Mexico, people from the U.S. so I was like, ‘Oh, this is the RGV.’”

Ramirez Cardenas was not always a film student in the RGV. He started as an accounting student at Stephen F. Austin State University but after taking a five-year hiatus to travel across Texas, see different things and meet different people, he said he set his mind on finishing his degree. His short film was made with the intention of providing a connection between the art world and the people who may be outside the art world, the people who frequent the gas station after hours to

buy Natural Lite, cigarettes or candy.

“[I’m] just trying to reach out to people [who] might not understand art,” Ramirez Cardenas said. “They’re like, ‘Hmm, art.’ They’re like, ‘Well, I don’t know. I don’t have time to go to a museum or to a concert or to watch a movie or I don’t understand it,’ and they feel intimidated to not go. But this one, I wanted [them to be] like, ‘Oh, I relate to that.’ And a lot of people did.”

After recording every five-hour shift for over four weeks, he broke down over 20 hours of footage into 20 minutes. Ramirez Cardenas edited day and night for almost three months to carve out the pacing of the short film. He said he wanted it to feel like an actual graveyard shift: the rushes, the lulls, the random musings that come to mind when it is just you and a hungry dog, alone, in an empty parking lot.

“The Valley is magical.”

“Everything just fell into place so beautifully,” he said. “Like, I don’t know, I just knew I had something. The Valley is magical. So, I really didn’t have to do much. It was just here waiting to tell itself really.”

Ramirez Cardenas got his start to

an artistic vision with a fifth grade Mother’s Day essay competition. He said he saw a side to a mother’s life that many other students did not see. He saw his mother go to work all day just to come home and work some more for a household that was not as grateful as they could have been. The judges saw something in his unique perspective and he won the competition.

“I feel like I’ve always had an eye,” he said. “Like, I’m very quiet and maybe people are afraid of that. Like, ‘Oh, this guy, he’s so serious.’ I’m just trying to look. Like in the museums, right, you look at a painting. And so, I’m walking around and I’m looking at things, trying to notice things and then I try to put that on screen or in drawings. And if it comes out the way that I thought in my head and people see that and are like, ‘Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.’ I’m like, ‘OK good. I’m on the right track.’”

“Hit Astray”

“Hit Astray,” tells the story of a group of friends. Two of them are in love with each other and a devastating event turns their friendships upside down. The STXIFF crowd favorite, which Palomares and Perez described as a coming of age story about unspoken love between two men, received an RGV Short Film award nomination. Palomarez wrote the film and Perez edited it. Both of them co-directed a group of friends and



Photo courtesy Jared Palomares

Cast members of “Hit Astray,” directed by Jared Palomares and Andrew Perez, act in a scene shot at the Mission Hike and Bike Trail.

classmates in the short film.

“I wrote up a coming of age [story],” Palomares said. “Two best friends that are aching to be with each



Photo courtesy Jared Palomares
Jared Palomares (from left), Ramiro Castro Jr., Andrew Perez, Mario Zamarripa and Adrian Rodriguez-DiBella discuss a scene from “Hit Astray.”



Photo courtesy Jared Palomares
Mario Zamarripa and Adrian Rodriguez-DiBella pose in frame behind the scenes of “Hit Astray.”



Photo courtesy Jared Palomares
Adrian Rodriguez-DiBella and Aaron Guerrero hold hands in a scene from “Hit Astray.”



Photo courtesy Jared Palomares
The cast and crew of “Hit Astray” pose for a group photo at the 2023 South Texas International Film Festival after Jared Palomares received a \$250 UTRGV Scholarship in honor of Dr. Marian Monta.

other. ... It’s 2008. It’s a weird time and the Marriage Equality Act wasn’t set in stone yet. It was still coming. ... These are teenagers. Young adults. However you interpret it. And something happens to them that changes their lives and that essence of the story seems very poetic and beautiful because there’s so many ways you can interpret what that means for today because it’s a timeless story. So, that’s what inspired us.”

“Hit Astray,” with its professional style lighting and camera work, becomes a visual experience and an emotional journey. Palomares said he knew that as soon as they started filming they had something special.

“When we first started filming, I saw the first shot ... I felt emotional,” he said. “I was like, ‘This is possible with what we have. It’s not the impossible.’ You can make something beautiful with what you have.”

Palomares and Perez saw their worlds shift when the pandemic happened in 2020. Palomares had plans that were quickly derailed, and it seemed like the world was falling apart.

“The pandemic happened and I thought, ‘I’m not sure what I could do,’” he said. “I didn’t know I was going to go to college. I thought everything was gonna be shut down and we were going to live in a very different world than we are right now. ... I saw a little light at the end of the tunnel. I saw that there’s hope and I said, ‘Well, I mean if this is how the world is now, then maybe I should just do what I love,’” Palomares said.

Perez, who was nominated for the South Texas Cinematography award, has always had some kind of camera in his hand. Documenting life has always been a part of him and in 2020, he took a chance on his passion and started his career in film. He said that filming “Hit Astray” was a rewarding process and even though he had a few film projects under his

belt, making this short film was still a learning process.

“Everything I do is always a learning process but Jared, even though this was technically his first film, he just crushed it,” Perez said.

“He really knew what he wanted from the actors and how to basically turn the script into a real thing. Everyone felt very connected, really, from the start and I think that was very helpful to be able to finish this in three days, literally. We shot this in three days and as Jared had previously mentioned, the stars aligned in those three days. Everything just came perfectly and we are very thankful that that happened.”

Palomares, who received the UTRGV Scholarship in honor of Dr. Marian Monta for \$250, said the film has a universal theme and hopes the audience walks away with that message.

“It’s important,” he said. “I think the theme of the film is loving who you want to love, no matter the boundaries, before it’s too late. Before you lose that chance of telling that person what you feel about them. Love has no boundaries and no matter the time, era, we should be true to ourselves and experience those feelings and connect.”

“Soy Todo, Soy Nada”

Angie Rocha, an environmental science student, directed, produced and wrote the third short film. It centers on the interconnectivity between people and the environment, as well as the fundamental sense of belonging that she finds in nature. The film was produced as an “About Me” class project. The short film follows Rocha as she makes her way through Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge on a bright, hot day. The audience hears her voice bleed through the sounds of the birds and insects all around her and her words lead them on a meditative journey of self-discovery.

Rocha said what started as a poem



Photo courtesy Angie Rocha
Angie Rocha, UTRGV senior and environmental science major, looks off into the distance at the Santa Ana Wildlife Refuge in her short film, “Soy Todo, Soy Nada.”

became a narrative short film that captures the beauty and the mystique of nature and self-actualization in the RGV.

“From my own experiences, growing up, I lived in a colonia, low income. We didn’t have a lot of toys to play around with, so the only thing left was nature—climb trees, play with the mud, play with dogs,” Rocha said. “Also we didn’t have cable. So, all I would watch is, like, animal documentaries in Spanish. That’s all I ever knew. Interacting with the Earth.”

Now a farmer, Rocha said her knowledge feels innate. Her knowledge of the land has been passed down through generations in her family. Her connection to the land has come from her family history, as her grandparents were farmers and her father picked the harvest.

“Learning the term for what I believe in is, like, animism,” Rocha said. “So, it was kind of connecting, piecing it all together like, ‘Oh, me, the land, the ancestors, the spirit, they’re all connected.’ And how do I make this message known, at least for me, to express it in some way and for others to resonate because I didn’t know that there was other people who thought like me. I at least need to make a film that honors everyone in my lineage and honors the Earth and

makes those connections.”

She said her mother, grandmother and the nature of their teachings also motivated her to write the script in Spanish, their native language. Writing the poem that became her script led her on a journey of self-discovery and a realization of what interconnectivity means.

“Normalize not only being in love with those around you but normalize being in love with the environment.”

“Realizing there’s so much that actually ties us and so many experiences, just being women and of the same lineage, and it made me love them even deeper,” Rocha said. “I already loved them but then now I see it like a string attached to every single one of them and all of us and it’s just like an appreciation, even more deeply of community and of being women and of being of the same lineage. So a lot of self-discovery through others and through me. A lot of two-way connections. I was really happy writing that.”

Rocha said everyone is born from the Earth and in that realization, there is a sense of commitment, responsibility and love that one should have for the land, just as one has for



Photo courtesy Angie Rocha
Angie Rocha on the red carpet at STXIFF, where she received a \$250 UTRGV Scholarship in honor of Dr. Marian Monta.

their family and their community.

“I think a lot of people could understand the part of coming from ancestry ... but I want them to get a fuller sense of community—redefine what community means to them so not only people but animals, plants, dirt, water, air, fire,” Rocha said. “So, I want them to push those boundaries and be like, ‘We are all connected.’ ... I want them to realize that in a certain sense we are all birthed from the Earth. Normalize not only being in love with those around you but normalize being in love with the environment.”

Rocha also received the \$250 UTRGV Scholarship in memory of Dr. Marian Monta. She said STXIFF provided local filmmakers with the opportunity to get to know one another and build community ties.

“It’s kind of a connection and a sense of belonging, too,” she said. “It’s like, ‘Oh, I’m so glad that there are people here in the community that are already making films that are making these spaces available not only for themselves but for future generations.’ And so, it was really nice connecting. I think that was my major takeaway from it. I connected not only with my family through my film but with other locals and just knowing other artists and their feelings.”



I'm Everything, I'm Nothing

by Angie Rocha

Who am I? The question with which we are most enamored by.

The question which lived in my mind for a long time.

Alone in the hole of tar, slowly dying in search of air in a question that had no voice.

After a long time praying to a God that wasn't one of my people, I understood what identity is.

I am Everything, I am Nothing.

I am the daughter, granddaughter, niece, mother, and grandmother of Amparo Pacheco,

who is a strong woman who left her family in search of a better life for her daughters, while raising them alone.

Mercedes Canchola, whose hands are so worn and loved by the lands and her strength to give back to the lands.

Salud Rocha, who has fire in her eyes, hands, and mouth, and uses it to protect her family and to survive.

And many more women who walked this Red Road before me.

Since a long while ago, I was already existence. I was cosmos. I was ash. I was smoke.

I was, am, and will be past, present, and future of this lineage of these women.

In the moment they were born, I was too.

They exist in me, and I exist in them. We are the daughters of the universe.

We are present in every drop of rain that falls on the skin of the nopal.

We are the pieces of dirt, lying in the crevices of the dry rivers living on our hands

that are tangled with this sacred land.

We are the wind that connects the ocean's horizon to the clouds of the sun and moon

that transform into the crow that guides us.

We are the enamored cry of the wolf to the moon.

We are the corn that is rooted by a promise with the planet.

We are the dance and the laughter that erupt like music from the heart of the mesquite.

We are the transformation of wood to smoke in a heated encounter between the fire and wood.

We are the dream's of the stars, reincarnations of the sky and the sun that take care of us from above.

We are the pantano that our ancestors fought on before having their stories, cultures, and beliefs taken.

We are the sound of the cicadas, the crickets, and the snake who tell stories to those who stop to listen.

All this and more is who we are. At the same time that we are everything, we are nothing.

We are the silence heard after a meteor shower.

We are the dark moment felt after the light of a lightning bug fades away.

We are life and death encapsulated in a body of dirt.

We are light existences in a heavy reality.

We are the beginning and ending of a story that has been repeated and shared

between the sun and moon, and our ancestors.

My grandpa once told me,

“We are all born with the moon in our eyes.”

We are all born with the universe inside of us, and the universe creates its cosmos from our existence.

I am daughter of Earth Mother, Mother Universe.

I am existence and a warrior that is in creation and destruction at every moment.

Like the snake that eats itself and is reborn in an infinite cycle called life.



Story and photos by JC Marquez Jr.

On the last Friday of every month, the city of Harlingen is home to the community-led event, Harlingen Art Night. On Jackson Street, over 70 local vendors come together to sell and share their artwork and businesses, from stickers and jewelry, to paintings, prints, and pottery.

Yental Marquez, or @gatomoneys on Instagram, is a studio art senior at UTRGV and has been a vendor at art night for more than a year.

“[Art night registration is] pretty cheap and they also don’t allow



Studio art senior Yental Marquez (@gatomoneys) poses next to her art.

resellers,” Marquez said. “So, it all is just art people; people producing art. I thought that was pretty nice. At art night, it allows me to kind of make stuff other people like instead of just the studio art stuff I do, like painting. I like producing prints and plushies and buttons. It makes me get into different kinds of art. ... It’s allowed me to sell a lot more than I usually do. ... It’s hard for me to sell online and ship stuff so this is a really easy way to sell my stuff.”

UTRGV graphic design alumna, Stephanie Hauser (@lahauserdesigns), has also been a vendor for over a year.

“I’ve been creating almost all my life. I just got more into it two years ago,” Hauser said. “I’ve seen different kinds of people come in and be interested in my art. Sometimes they see inspiration from TV shows, like a character, and I get inspired to make something like that. I just like creating. I’ve always wanted to create jewelry, specifically like two or three years ago during the pandemic.

Photo illustration by Vanessa Vega

I never had an idea to do it, but then suddenly I’m doing it so I’m like, ‘Omg, when did that happen?’”

Martin Rook, co-owner of Funky Fox Antique Mall, also spoke on how art night has brought significant interest to the business since it started over two years ago.

“[Art night] does draw in crowds, primarily a younger crowd ... both in terms of exposure and cash,” Rook said. “It’s definitely a positive thing. It’s good for us.”

Showcasing creativity has not only brought attention to businesses. It has brought attention to the downtown area as well.

“Over time it progressed and more people got into it,” Hauser said. “Now, it’s over 70 vendors here. It’s brought a lot of impact to other people too because some people just stay in Brownsville, wanting to see art. ... This is the only art market that people come to and know.”







AI IN ART:

tool or threat?

Story by Luis Castañeda

Artificial intelligence, better known as AI, is “the capability of computer systems or algorithms to imitate intelligent human behavior,” according to Merriam-Webster.com.

The introduction of AI into the world has not come without controversy. Some people are afraid artificial intelligence might replace jobs currently occupied by humans. On the other hand, others say AI is a tool to improve the quality of life for people.

When it comes to art, AI may become even more controversial than in other areas, especially in digital art.

“I find that [AI] can enhance [art]

in some way ... like referencing or helping out like color schemes,” said Milca Sosa, a visual communication design senior at UTRGV. “... I feel like it will affect more bad than good ... but, if it’s used right, it can improve some artists’ personal growth.”

However, several art students at UTRGV, especially those majoring in visual communication design and studio art, believe AI is a tool that may easily become a threat. A tool-like use of AI in art includes its use as a source for ideas.

Studio art sophomore Sophia Sarmiento said she leans toward being against the use of AI as there should be no use of it in art besides obtaining references.

“I think the most impactful influence it could have is essentially using it as a tool,” said Jeffrey Stanley, a lecturer in the UTRGV School of Art and Design. “[It’s a] double-edged sword. It is very helpful but, at the same time, it is going to impact the way artists are essentially abused or seen in society.”

To address this, Stanley recommended that students form a collective to collaborate, discuss AI awareness, ethical concerns and media literacy—understanding how technology and media can be manipulated and impact people.

“Graphic designers have a responsibility in terms of communicating for whatever kind of client or entity that they’re communicating for,” he said. “There’s

probably certain ethical concerns surrounding that, but artists shouldn’t be censored.”

Elizabeth McCormack-Whittemore, a visual communication lecturer at UTRGV, said she is in favor of the ethical use of AI. She compared the release of AI as an open resource to that of Photoshop when it was released and its users started to print digitally instead of using the printing press.

“None of us can tell the future, but, let’s say when Photoshop was the next big thing, we designers were doing things manually by hand for the most part,” McCormack-Whittemore said. “So then it was like, ‘Do we learn Photoshop or has our career ended?’ Well, [now] do we learn AI or do we just stop here and say, ‘Well, I’m sorry; I can’t go any further’? ... The definition of graphic design is linked to technology, so it’s constantly going to be changing.”

She added that the UTRGV Art Department and the College of Business and Entrepreneurship have collaborated to determine whether UTRGV can offer an “Arts Innovation and AI” course, which would include ethics, uses and possibilities that AI has to offer.

On the other hand, visual communication design junior Nathan Cavazos said he believes AI should not be used strictly as a final product and it would be interesting to see how far AI can go under heavy regulation.

“Graphic design, art, sculpture—

Illustration by Vanessa Vega

whatever it is, definitely something that is intrinsically human,” Cavazos said. “... [With AI], you can just type it in and then a machine kind of spits it out, heavily referencing artists who don’t consent to it. It kind of loses that readability.”

Another threat AI may pose is the unethical imitation of human emotion. While AI lacks emotional intelligence, it is designed to obtain information from human databases.

“Essentially, humans are behind that art as well,” McCormack-Whittemore said. “It’s coming from human art; it’s coming from art that exists already and knowledge about that art.”

Nevertheless, the students and faculty that Pulse spoke to shared that AI’s use in art should be regulated. McCormack-Whittemore and Stanley said AI can be a good tool in art that should be regulated.

Stanley said ethics is a strong tool to use as a person or an artist; he encouraged students to build a solid foundation on two things: ethics and media literacy.

Whether AI is a tool or a threat is yet to be decided. It is up to artists how to make the best use of this instrument.

“I just think artists shouldn’t be afraid to try new things,” Sosa said. “Just don’t rely on them too much because then that affects your imagination, your creativity and your artistic identity.”

“... has our career ended?”

STAN CULTURE

Story by Karina N. Alegre

Photo by Briana Mireles

The word “stanning” stems from Eminem’s song “Stan” featuring Dido. It was released on May 23, 2000. Twenty-four years later, the song has over one billion streams on Spotify. The music video portrays the life of Stanley “Stan” Mitchell, an obsessive Eminem fan. He writes many letters to Eminem and his room is full of his pictures and posters. As the music video progresses, Stan’s letters become angrier because he has not received a reply from Eminem. This makes Stan feel that he does not matter to Eminem at all. In the end, Stan kidnaps his pregnant girlfriend and commits murder-suicide by driving his car off a bridge. In 2017, the Oxford English Dictionary adopted the word “stan.”

“Fandom Before ‘Fan’: Shaping the History of Enthusiastic Audiences,” Daniel Cavicchi, a professor of American studies and head of the department of history, philosophy and the social sciences at Rhode Island School of Design, said, “Previously ‘abnormal’ fan practices have not only become more and more accepted but also explicitly supported and nurtured by new technologies and reframed by niche marketing.”

In the Rio Grande Valley, there are a multitude of fandoms. Some include “Swifties” (Taylor Swift fans), “Harries” (Harry Styles fans), the “Beyhive” (Beyoncé fans), “Beliebers” (Justin Bieber fans) and K-pop (Korean pop) fans.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a stan is a person who has an extreme love for an artist, band, TV show, anime or any pop culture character or content. Unlike fandoms, stans do not know the boundaries between a celebrity and themselves.

In a 2014 journal article titled

Pulse interviewed UTRGV students regarding their fandoms. The magazine focused on three fandoms: Swifties, Harries and K-popers.

THE SWIFTIES

The Swifties meet in The Swifties Club, which Ruben Loza,

a communication graduate student, started in the spring of 2021. As club adviser, Loza said he never intended on creating The Swifties Club. The creation happened as a way to bring school spirit to “virtual events” at a time when he was struggling to unite students while serving as the Campus Pride chair for the UTRGV Campus Activities Board. Loza’s proposed target audience was UTRGV Swifties.

The Swifties Club adviser, described Swift as “mother.”

“Oh, my gosh,” Loza said. “Taylor Swift is mother. She is my therapist. She is everything. I love Dr. Taylor Allison Swift with all my heart. She is a global phenomenon. She is such an incredible artist, such an incredible songwriter. She is the music industry. She is someone who advocates for so many things and who has donated countless amounts of money.”

“I also wanted to find people who had the same interests as me, that we could connect and be friends and form

“Taylor Swift
is mother.”

Illustration by JC Marquez Jr.

fan·dom

/ˈfandəm/

noun

“The world of enthusiasts for some amusement or for some artist;
also in extended use.”

–Oxford English Dictionary

stan

/stan/

noun

“An overzealous or obsessive fan of someone, esp. a particular
celebrity.”

–Oxford English Dictionary



Swifties pose for a photo during the 1989 Taylor's Version Album Release Party on Oct. 27, 2023 at Love Buzz in McAllen.



Illustration by Vanessa Vega

a family,” Loza said. “Now, two years later, we’ve established this whole club.”

Hannah Ceron, a health science graduate student at UTRGV and a member of The Swifties Club, said she has been a Swiftie since she was about 7- or 8-years old.

To Ceron, the difference between being a stan and a fan is that a fan is “someone more casual” and a stan is someone who keeps up with an artist, such as having “notifications on for a fan account that gives updates.”

“I don’t think any one category of fan is better than another,” she said. “I think that’s kind of a dangerous thing to have in a fandom. I feel like I fall somewhere in the middle. I was one to rush to go get the popcorn bucket at the movie theater and I am one to collect things and have a few of her CDs. But I’m not someone [who]

collects all of the different colors because I [say], ‘Well, do I really need that?’ Other people do, or say they do, and that’s fine.”

However, Ceron said she has received hate from men outside the Swifties community.

“In my experience, it’s always been coming from guys who don’t listen to her,” she said. “[They say] ‘Oh, it’s another break-up song,’ or ‘You better not date him, she’s going to write a song about you.’ It’s discrediting to her artistry and to us as fans. I wish they would take the time to listen to something of hers or read it if they don’t want to listen to it.”

THE HARRIES

Integrated health science junior Ceyla Garcia said she is wary about letting people know that she is a Harrie.

“With people that I’ve just met, I feel hesitant to express the fact that I am a fan,” she said. “I could say I’m a fan and I like his music and I own some of his merch, but I don’t feel comfortable telling them, ‘Oh, I’ve come to his concerts or I had a fan page ... on Twitter.’ I [had] a fan page back in 2020 to 2021 [during] peak COVID because I [didn’t] know how else to spend my time. So, I don’t know how people will see me once they discover my truth.”

The Harry Styles fan said that she has never received backlash from other fandoms.

She said this is because, “I always kept my territory safe. I had friends. We had a group chat and some people would tweet things against another fandom, for example, BTS. I’m sorry, I hate to say it, but the ARMY scared me.”

THE K-POPER

English linguistics senior Starr Garcia is a K-pop fan.

“I consider myself [a fan], not to the extreme [as] some people,” Garcia said. “I started getting into [K-pop] before the pandemic, so, 2019.”

But she is not comfortable admitting to others that she is a K-pop fan.

“When [people] hear K-pop, they think of the crazy fans, the super obsessed ones,” Garcia said. “I don’t really mention it. I guess if it comes up or if they ask me, I’ll say it.”

Garcia also holds a minor in Asian studies and speaks Korean. Last summer, she studied abroad in South Korea.

“People have this misconception of South Korea because of K-pop,” Garcia said. “They think it’s like K-pop and K-dramas, but it’s not. The way I see it, [it’s] because of all of this K-wave. They don’t see the people in Korea as people and they forget about the culture and everything that makes up South Korea. I liked that I was able to form a connection with them and

understand the culture more and also the language.”

Many of these interests can now be shared with a few or millions of people because of social media. As Cavicchi explained, “We live in an age when ‘following’ a stranger because you ‘like’ her or him represents a harmless form of networking.” As Twitter [now X] encourages us, ‘Follow your interests.’”

“So, I don’t know how people will see me once they discover my truth.”

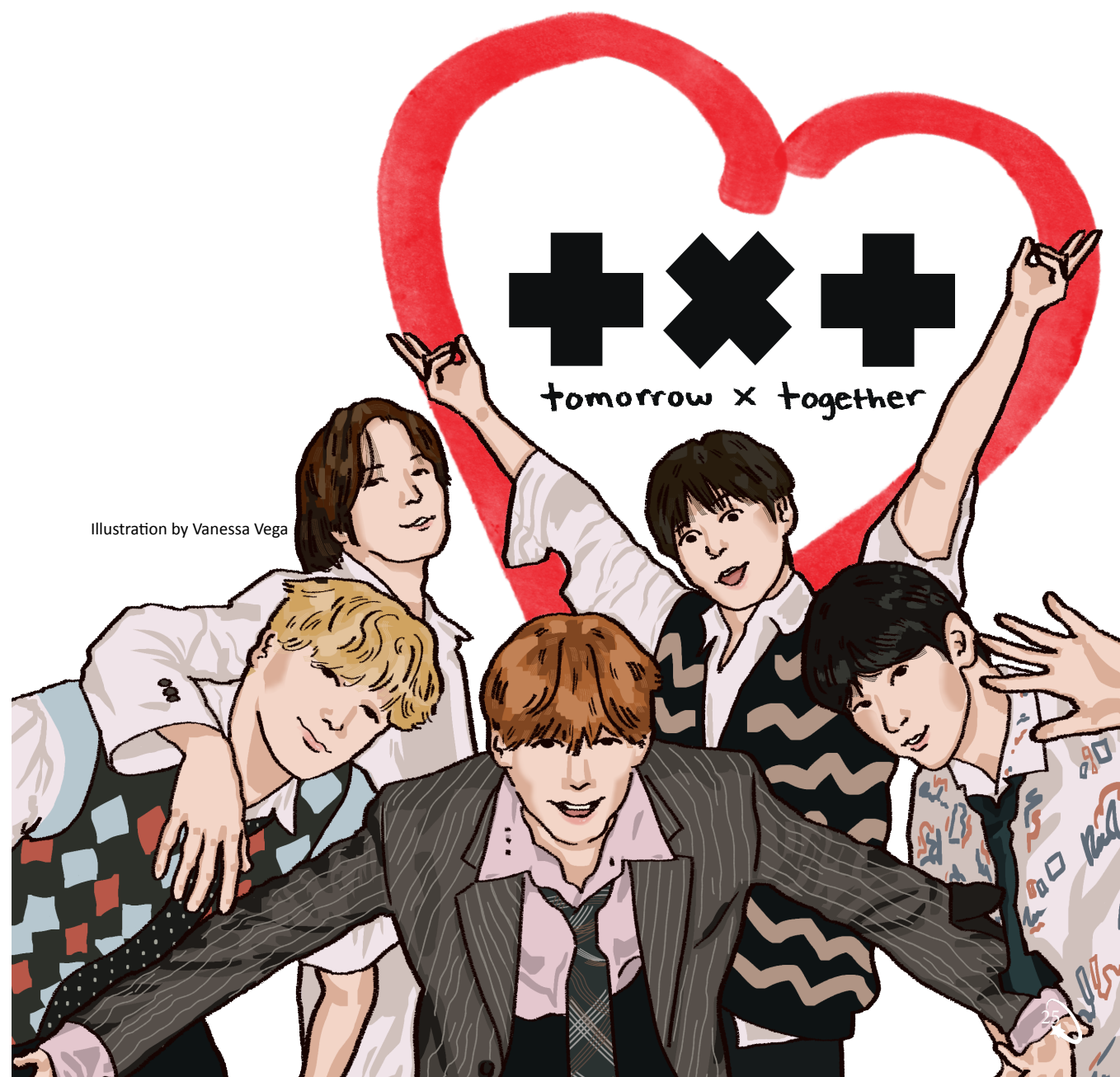


Illustration by Vanessa Vega

The Haunting Hour

Story and photos by Veronica Palacios

The UTRGV Theatre Department opened its fall season with a production of Shirley Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House" on October 20 in the Albert L. Jeffers Theater on the Edinburg campus.

The story follows seven characters in a parapsychological experiment that takes place in a house, a character in and of itself.

"This is a classic novel," said Brian Warren, department of theater professor and director. "I realized that people in the Valley love Halloween. They're always looking for ... the scary, spooky feeling. ... So, I just thought, 'Let's give them a taste of a haunted house.'"

Warren described the house as an entity that is more alive than anything.

"It's a house that preys on the weak," said Gerard Scot Johnson who portrays the character Luke Sanderson. "It's this weird, absorbing force that wants to take you in and keep you forever."

Johnson's acting career at UTRGV has consisted of 10 productions, both main stage and student directed. Johnson graduated with a biology degree last spring, but is now a senior pursuing his post-baccalaureate in theater performance.

"I was applying to medical school," Johnson said. "I was on a specific route, but acting was something that had always interested me. [First], there were auditions for 'Coriolanus.' ... I got a role. Then, right after that was 'Red' the same semester, which was just a two-man play—really intense. I called it my baptism by fire. After that, there was just no choice. This is just what I was going to do."

Luke Sanderson is described as a comedic relief character. Johnson said he particularly identified with his character's goofy nature. As the experiment progresses and the house begins to affect Luke, he finds himself becoming more serious. This intensity begins to take over the full cast as well.

Ashley Cantu, a theater performance sophomore with a film studies minor, played the protagonist "Eleanor Vance." This was Cantu's first role in a main stage production.

"Eleanor Vance' has granted me an experience like no other," Cantu said. "She has allowed me to be the lead in my first play at UTRGV. She took me through a journey I will never forget, especially with the many days and nights I spent reading the book and the play to understand her psyche. She is a fascinating and intense character. Trying to understand why she did certain things was challenging as we are incredibly different. Nevertheless, I thank her for the lesson she's taught me: vulnerability is not a weakness and resilience is not a strength."

Cantu described Eleanor Vance as "timid and mysterious." Despite their contrast from one another, Cantu found herself identifying most with the solitude of Eleanor.

Stage manager Karina Molina, a theater performance senior, said she also identified with the lead character's isolated nature as well.

"I feel like everybody can resonate with [Eleanor] because she feels alone sometimes," Molina said. "It's very, 'Who am I?' During a rehearsal, I asked [my assistant stage managers], 'What character do you all identify the most with?' and we all said Eleanor."



Gerard Scot Johnson (from left), Ashley Cantu and Chelsea Martinez act scared during a scene from "The Haunting of Hill House" on Oct. 26 in the Albert L. Jeffers Theatre.

Molina said her role as the lead stage manager consisted primarily of communication: speaking with actors and the production team, calling light cues, sound cues and actors' entrances and exits. She said it was a demanding but rewarding job.

"I really appreciate my role because actors are more comfortable talking to stage managers," Molina said. "I really enjoy that my actors can trust me and can address anything to me. It makes me feel like I'm providing a safe enough space."

She said she is proud of what this production has accomplished. Her goals were to put on a good show, do the department justice and tell Eleanor Vance's story.

"I hope they see how hard everybody works," Molina said. "... You come to watch a show, and you see the finished product, and it seems seamless, but a lot of people go behind everything. It's beautiful how these little different areas all come together and create this art. I hope people really appreciate the art."

Emiliano Tamez, a theater senior with a concentration in film production, was the assistant stage manager. Tamez joined the department in Fall 2021 on a whim but quickly fell in love with the craft.

A few of Tamez's duties included

being on book, calling out lines to actors and noting light and sound cues. He said it was a job filled with multitasking.

"I've certainly learned a whole lot over these last two years," Tamez said. "I've learned patience. Everything has a process."

"It's this weird, absorbing force that wants to take you in and keep you forever."

As far as the production process, Warren said the casting occurred last spring. Actors received scripts in the summer and rehearsals began at the start of the fall with table readings, character discussions and blocking.

"I want people to have a successful experience doing this, so that they feel like theater has this power and weight

and they've been a part of it," Warren said. "You feel that satisfaction of having created this art. There's a lot to it—more than the acting—of course."

Warren joined the department in 2002 and has directed over 40 plays since. His hope for the department is to have more people come to witness the new and seasoned talent.

"I want to thank Dr. Brian Warren for believing in me and allowing me to play such an incredible character," Cantu said. "I'd also like to thank stage manager Karina Molina and assistant stage managers Juan Manuel Mendiola Jr. and Emiliano Tamez for keeping me afloat through this journey. Without them, I truly would not be able to do it. I'm unsure what the future holds for me, but I hope it's just as enthralling as the time I spent working on 'The Haunting of Hill House.'"



Ashley Cantu as Eleanor Vance in "The Haunting of Hill House."



A STEP-BY-STEP INTO THE DARK ROOM SOCIETY

Story and photos by America Salazar

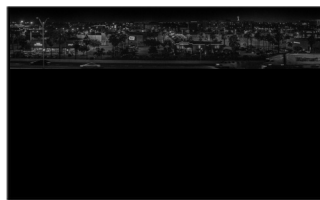


Photo courtesy Gael Sanchez



Photo courtesy: Gael Sanchez

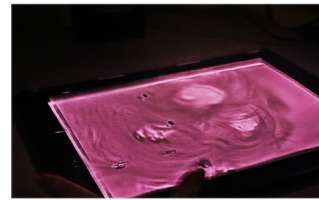


Photo courtesy Gael Sanchez



5

Shake your tank for about one minute.

6

Pour out your fixer and remove your film.



Photo courtesy Gael Sanchez



Photo courtesy Gael Sanchez

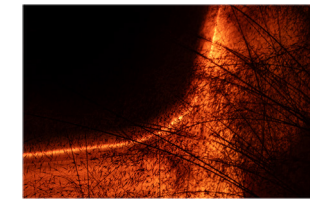


Photo courtesy Gael Sanchez

"People think that art is just painting and drawing when it is also photography, sculpture; we [society members] want that to be out there."

- Joahnna Evasco
President of The Dark Room Society

1

In a dark room, open your film canister and place the film onto the spool. Put it into your developing tank.

3

Shake your tank every 30 seconds for the next 3 minutes and 45 seconds.

2

Combine developer and water. Pour the mixture into the developing tank.

4

Pour out your developer and place the fixer (also mixed with water) into your tank.

7

Rinse your film in water and let dry.

8

On a contact printer, place a multigrade photography paper and your negative films on top.

9

Use a grade 2 filter in the enlarger and expose for 5 seconds.

10

Rinse your photos in multigrade developer for 1 minute, ILFOSTOP for 10 seconds and rapid fix in fresh solution for 30 seconds.

11

Wait for photos to dry.
Fin.

INTRODUCING

Compiled by Olivia Lestarpé

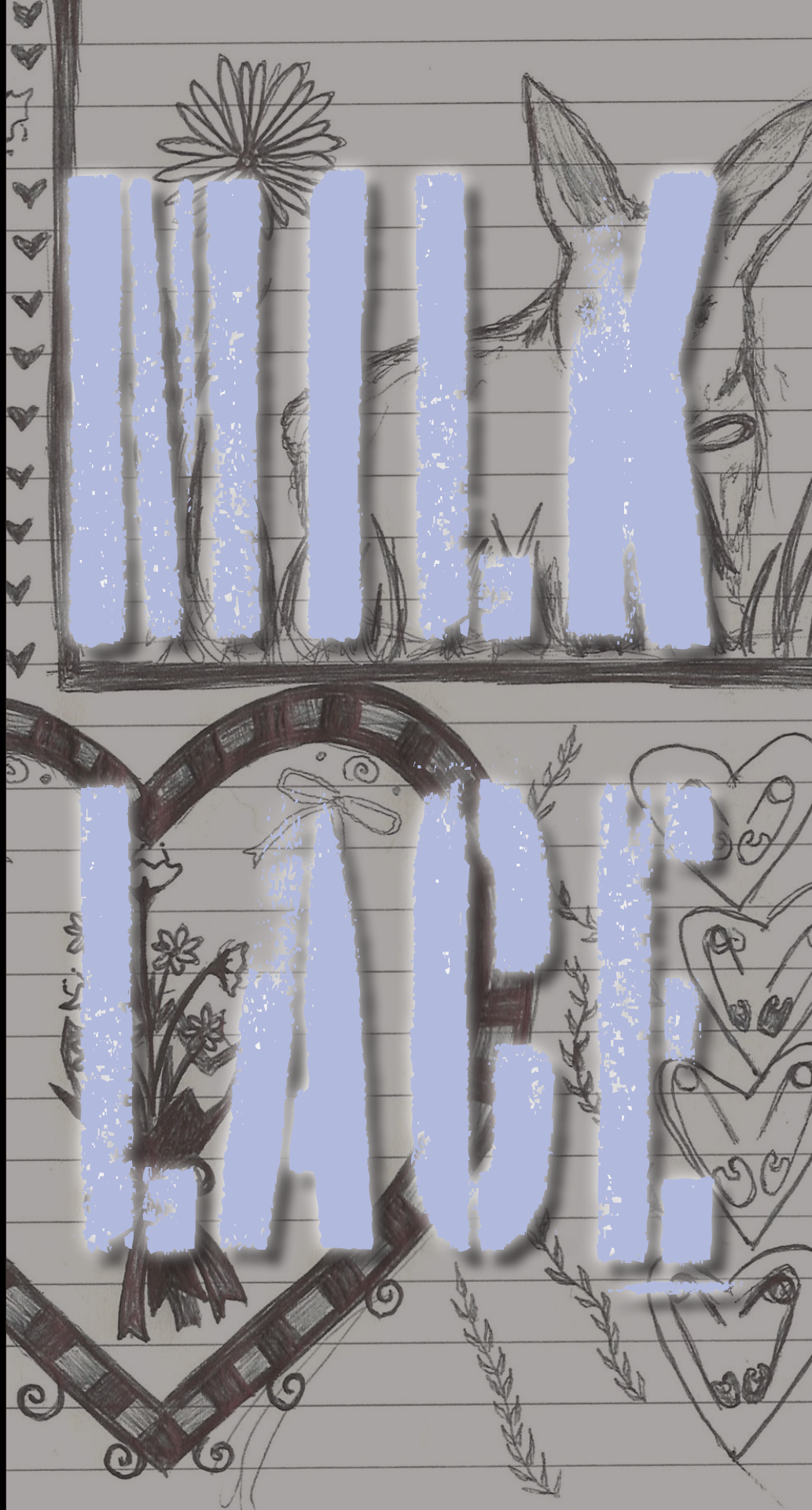


Photo courtesy Momi Lerma





Milk Lace is an alternative rock band made up of four members: lead vocalist Momi Lerma, drummer Jazmin “Jazz” Gutierrez, bassist Claire Martinez and guitarist Alejandro “Alex” Romero. Music sophomores Gutierrez and Martinez, and communication sciences and disorders senior Lerma, are all students at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Romero is a member of the Valley Symphony Orchestra.

Before Milk Lace, each member had been honing their craft for a decade. The four band members said their love and appreciation for music and its healing abilities is what initially brought them together in 2022.

How did the band get together?

Momi: It started with me and Jazmin. We always went to shows together. Or like, I was always photographing [at local shows] and Jazmin was always at every venue I was at. She was a little bunny hopping around, talking to everybody and she ended up coming up to me. Then, there was one time at Bummershed, when it was really cold and everyone was huddling up around the little fire pit. There were a bunch of girls around the firepit and Jazz [said], “We should start a girl band!” Then she got all of our numbers. Jazmin wanted all girls [in the band] at first.

Jazz: There was no particular drummer I knew about that we would be comfortable around. Most drummers that I knew were men but we wanted to find a female drummer. I have nothing against guys [though].

Claire: Our first rehearsal together, Jazmin asked me to play the bass. Our

first show was an open mic and then we asked Alex to be in the band.

Jazz: We had another member [who played guitar] but she couldn’t be in the band because she was working a lot. So, we [said], ‘ Well, we need a guitarist.’ We couldn’t think of any other girl who could pick [guitar] up easily. So then I [said], ‘Why don’t we ask Alex?’

Momi: I wanted him because he had shown me his music before and, oh my God, I really liked it so much. I kept replaying it. It was just so heart-wrenching. This dude was all heartbroken in the song. I heard [his

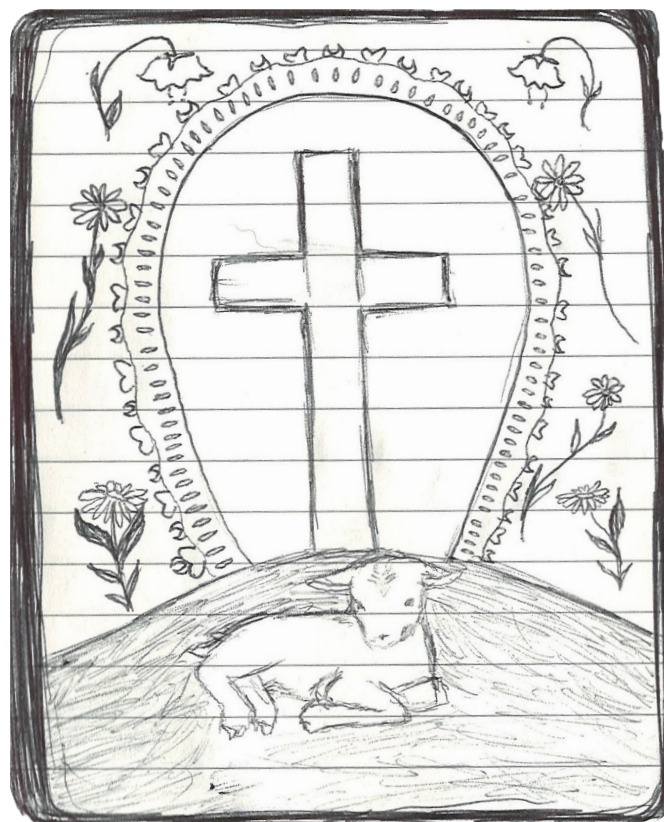


Illustration by Jazz Gutierrez

music] and said, ‘His voice is kind of like mine.’ It kind of feels like he’s crying through it.

Jazz: We also know him because we went to middle school and high school with him.

Claire: We were orchestra buds. Where did the name come from?

Jazz: Momi and I would make music

in my apartment a long time ago. She would always come over and ask for milk. She drank a whole gallon of milk once and she always dresses with lingerie lace pieces. She was giving off Harajuku vibes.

Momi: It was very like, kinderwhore, Courtney Love-inspired.

Claire: I think our name goes well with the music we make, the lyrics that go with it.

Did you have any expectations about what being in a band would be like?

Jazz: I was just expecting it to be another fun hobby.

Alex: I was excited to see what we could do.

Momi: It definitely felt like a different type of bonding. That’s how I always saw it. When I was friends with Jazz before we ever started jamming together, I just liked being around the music. It was comforting. It’s a different type of bond when you’re making music with somebody.

Claire: I thought about how we would be perceived when doing shows but I also didn’t really care because I liked just being able to practice, bonding with each other, and making good music. So, even if

we weren’t well received, I was still going to enjoy just playing the music with them.

What has your experience in the local music scene been like so far?

Momi: I’m very introverted so I’ll stay for the show and perform and then I’ll be there for like, 10 minutes. I’ll have to force myself to stay for 10 minutes and then I’ll go home.



Claire Martinez plays the bass at The Gremlin in October 2023.

Photo courtesy George Glass Photography

Photo courtesy George Glass Photography



Alex Romero plays the guitar at The Gremlin in October 2023.

“It’s a different type of bond when you’re making music with somebody.”

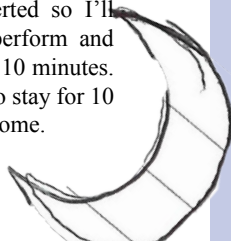




Photo courtesy Rolando Zambrano Jr. (@RollieZPhotos)

Claire: I think we have been well received. I think people were kind to us. They came up to us after and told us that they enjoyed the performance. I appreciate that.

Alex: Interestingly enough, I feel very welcomed.

Jazz: I think it's very stagnant right now. The scene always goes through stages, it's up to the community to start diy venues. At the end of [quarantine], it spiked the most but after a year or so it kind of subsided. That is where it's at right now. That just means there are more opportunities to create more. To do more.

What is the band's songwriting process like?

Jazz: We all put in the work. Momi writes the lyrics for most of the songs and we usually stick to our instruments. But if we have ideas, we'll just present them. And they're always accepted.

Claire: Yeah, I feel safe sharing my ideas with [the band] because [as] Jazz said, they're always accepted.

Alex: We never just shut each other down.

Momi: I've always been in writing competitions so I've always kind of written poems on my own. When I need to vent I'll be crying in my notebook and then I'll write a whole thing. Then I'll send those [writings] to the group chat and [say], "Y'all like these? Y'all wanna make it into a song?" That's usually how it goes. We go into practice, they start jamming and then I just whip [the lyrics] out.

What inspires your songs?

Momi: Love. Everybody struggles with it. It's one of the emotions you can't control. I write and I try to figure it out and nothing makes sense about it. I've always been very emotionally unstable.

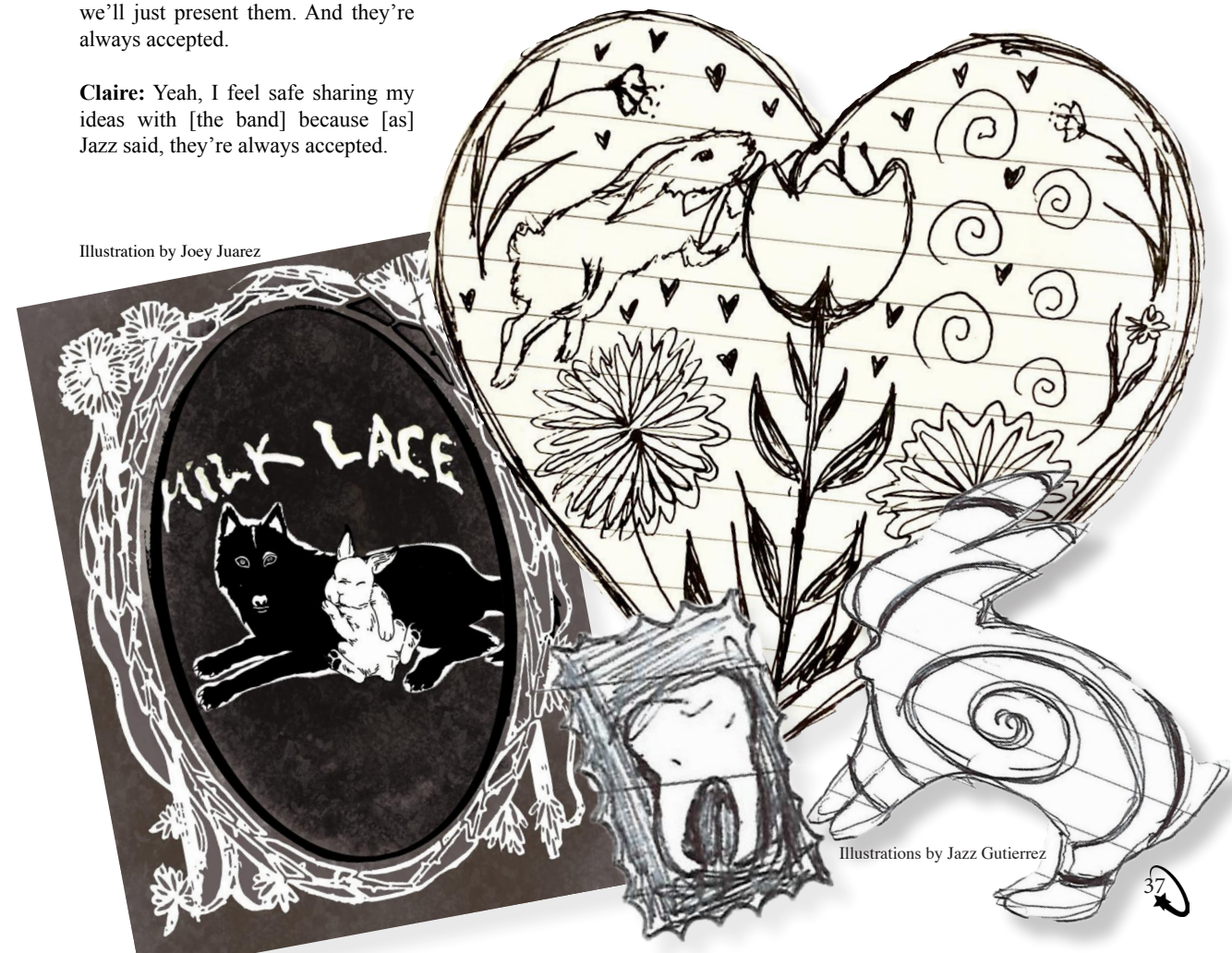
I just have a really bad time regulating my emotions. My emotions are disproportionate to what any other person would feel and I catastrophize a lot. One of the things that always helped me was writing down whatever was on my mind. Music is my journal and it [feels] like an outlet for all of [my] pain.

Is there a message that the band wants to send through its music?

Jazz: Tune into your emotions and be real. Don't be scared of sadness. I think you can always use it to make something better. In our case, we make music and find happiness through it.

"Tune into your emotions and be real."

Illustration by Joey Juarez



Illustrations by Jazz Gutierrez



For the Filmmaker and the Film Lover

Photo courtesy Christian Blake

“More and more filmmakers are starting to realize that they can start something down here.”

Story by Veronica Palacios

From learners to lecturers, the Rio Grande Valley is home to many creatives in the film industry.

For over 30 years, Cinesol Film Festival has recognized and celebrated these local filmmakers and aficionados. It is one of two film festivals in the Rio Grande Valley that celebrates the art, craft and business of filmmaking through workshops and screenings. The annual festival also holds its 24 Hour Film Dash in the spring and its 36 Hour Film Race in the fall. Participating fans and filmmakers come from across the country.

The 30th Annual CineSol Film Festival took place in Brownsville for the first time since 2005 on Dec. 2 and Dec. 3, 2023. Over 50 independent films were screened in two days, with eight of those films being from Cinesol’s 17th Annual 36 Hour Film Race.

On Nov. 17, eight film race teams gathered for the drawing of the five required elements to be featured in each film. The selected elements were a documentary/mockumentary

(genre), an office cubicle (location), a foam finger (prop), a hairdresser (character) and the line, “I’m not a photographer, but I can picture you and me together” (dialogue).

Festival Director Henry Serrato said all teams had 36 hours to write, cast, shoot, edit and submit their seven- to 10-minute films by Nov. 19.

The film race judges were Eric Sierra, Univision’s weather anchor; Susan Smith, programming chair of the South Texas International Film Festival; and Rodrigo Moreno, an award-winning director.

The films were screened and judged on Dec. 3 at the eBridge Center for Business and Commercialization.

Serrato has been involved with CineSol for 29 years. He began as a volunteer in the festival’s second year. In 2007, Serrato was appointed festival director and has held the position ever since.

“[Before I volunteered], I didn’t even know what a film festival was,” he said in a November 2023 interview

with Pulse magazine. “I was a UTPA student. ... My mind was blown. I never thought I would be the director. ... [Now], I’m the longest-running festival director of its 30 years.”

The 2024 CineSol board had a lineup of 57 independent films to be screened, with 15 having connections to the Rio Grande Valley. Fifteen were from Spain, one from Belgium and one from Ireland.

In between films were workshops with celebrities and local filmmakers. McAllen native and actor Raul Castillo, who acted in “Cassandra,” “Knives Out” and the TV series “Riverdale,” held two Q&A sessions. Daniel Adam Warrior, who appears in the TV series “Yellowstone” and the Martin Scorsese film “Killers of the Flower Moon” hosted the workshop “How To Get Into Hollywood.”

While the festival has been held in all RGV cities, including South Padre Island and Mission, Serrato said Brownsville is the only city that has a film commission.

“There’s a film scene there and, with UTRGV there [and] some film students there, there’s a lot of activity in Brownsville,” he said. “There’s film clubs and societies there, but there’s not a film festival. So, we thought it would be nice to take it back to Brownsville this year.”

Serrato also said several screenings were a major highlight. These included “Border Cowboys,” released in 2022 by Jose Sanchez, documented the Gladys Porter Early College High School soccer team as it competed for the state championship in 2021. “Going Varsity in Mariachi,” released in 2023 by Alejandra Vasquez and Sam Osborn, documented the Edinburg North High School’s mariachi team as it competes at the state level in 2021. The documentary premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, the largest independent film festival in the U.S. It also went on to win Best Documentary of CineSol.

The film festival’s 36 Hour Film Race winners included “The Vanishings of Fair Hope County” by Watchmen Productions for Best Film and Audience Choice and “The Mad

Mind of Lukas” by Team Etcetera for Best U18 Film.

“The Valley has a lot of talent,” Serrato said. “There’s always been a growing film scene in the Valley. ... There’s a lot of local people that have gone on to Hollywood. [Our region] lends itself to interesting film locations. ... There’s untapped potential in the Valley. More and more filmmakers are starting to realize that they can start something down here.”

Serrato said a film festival is for two audiences: the filmmaker and the film lover.

“If you’re interested in the art of film, whether it’s script writing or acting or directing, editing, anything, you need to go to a film festival to network,” he said. “The other target audience is film lovers. We see a lot of amazing movies that you’re not going to see in theaters. ... If you are a movie lover and you want to see amazing films—local, English, international—come to the festival.”

The Filmmakers

Christian Blake is a veteran

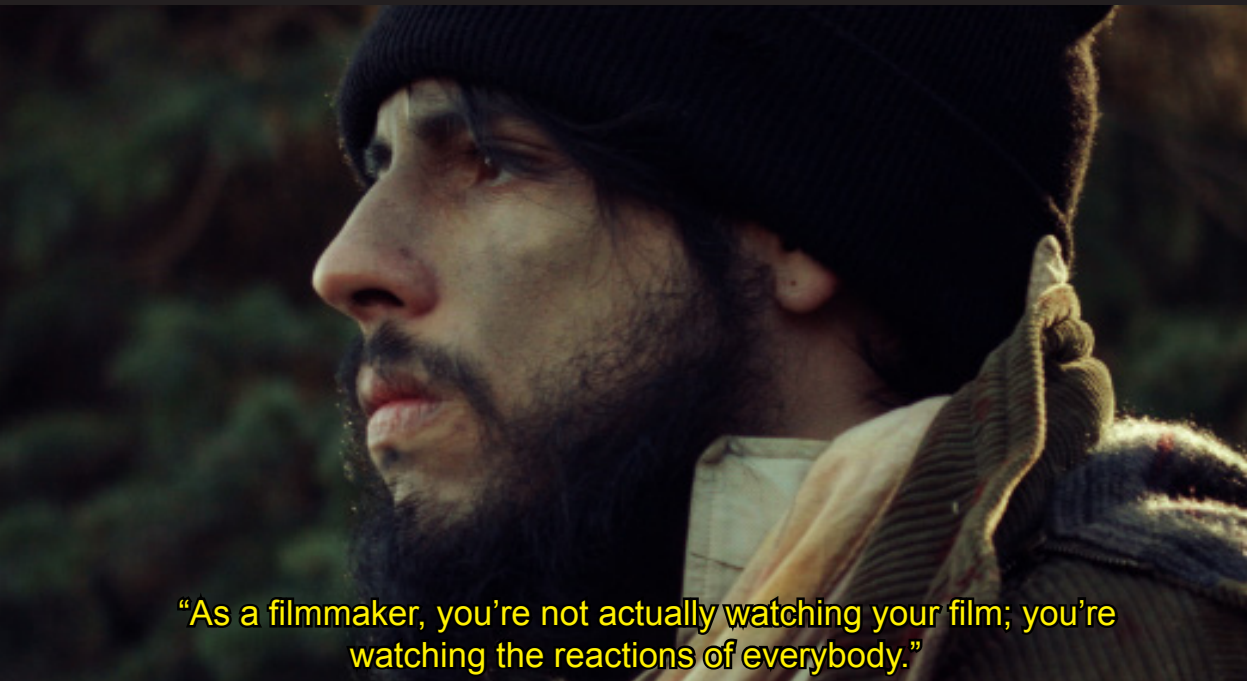
competitor and attendee of CineSol. He is also the director of “The Vanishings of Fair Hope County,” which won Best Film, Audience Choice, Best Sound, Best Original Music, Best Editing, Best Cinematography and Best Director of the 2023 CineSol 36 Hour Film Race.

Blake is also the student ministries pastor at the Family Church in McAllen. He said he has had a passion for film for as long as he can remember.

He attended and competed in his first CineSol Film Festival 12 years ago where his team won Best Under 18 Film.

“That boosted our confidence to be like, ‘Hey, we can actually do this,’” he said.

After the win, Blake said he searched for any opportunity to utilize his craft. During Bible school, Blake joined the television studio, where he helped make a show for a monthly program. There, he learned to edit and shoot on bigger, high-end cameras, which he never had access to before.



“As a filmmaker, you’re not actually watching your film; you’re watching the reactions of everybody.”

Photo courtesy Christian Blake

In 2014, the itch to make a movie was back.

“I called up my buddies from high school and somebody that I met at Bible school and the worlds just collided,” he said. “I was like, ‘Do you guys wanna go to Alaska and film a movie?’”

The crew shot for two weeks in Alaska and 30 more days in the Valley. “Ingress” was Blake’s first feature film and directorial debut. The film, which is about time travel and a monster apocalypse, was released at CineSol in 2016 and won Best Film. It is set for wide release this year.

“Through all the opportunities CineSol gives young filmmakers to participate in film races ... I [credit CineSol] for my filmmaking journey big time,” Blake said. “Without CineSol and Henry [Serrato’s] push for young filmmakers to come out and try different things, I don’t think I would be where I am today.”

The director has filmed about 15 films throughout the RGV, though Valley culture is not his only subject.

“I know a lot of people may want to push their heritage in their storytellings and that’s beautiful,” he said. “It’s something so incredible that I think so many people have the opportunity to do. I believe that if you feel the call to do that, you should do it. If you don’t feel the call to do that, don’t do it. ... I didn’t limit myself to telling a story about Hispanic heritage, but I do believe there are so many people who have such amazing stories to tell about the Valley and I don’t think anything should stop them or get in their way of telling us stories.”

Going into the race, the group prepared three potential ideas in case a comedy, drama or horror category was selected. However, hours before the race started, Blake’s teammate suggested the documentary category.

“I was like, ‘What? are you dumb?’” Blake said. “‘That’s not gonna be the genre. They’re not gonna do that to us.’ He was like, ‘I’m just saying, dude.’ ... And sure enough, [it was] documentary.”

The documentary was about home invasions by extraterrestrials. It was centered around one house where every so often a new family would move in only to disappear without a trace.

Blake went without a script for the first night of the race, fitting all the elements into it as best as the team could. Blake and his team filmed dramatic reenactments to make the documentary feel like a movie.

“It’s a collective effort for writing. I want everybody to feel like they’re a part of writing the story,” he said. “I don’t particularly like for people to join the team and feel like they did nothing but hold the light. ... I want them to be able to say, ‘I have a say in the story.’”

Blake described a live audience screening as an “exhilarating” experience.

“It is fantastic,” he said. “As a filmmaker, you’re not actually watching your film; you’re watching the reactions of everybody. You’re not interested in your film anymore.



Photo courtesy Hanna Tovar
A promotional poster for Hanna Tovar’s film, “Inhaling Possibilities.”



Photo courtesy Christian Blake
A promotional poster for Christian Blake’s film, “Ingress.”



Photo courtesy Henry Serrato
A promotional poster for the 2023 30th Annual CineSol Film Festival.

You see it over and over, you know the ins and outs of it, but you want to see how everybody’s reacting [and] how they’re feeling. ... Every time it happens, it’s a very fun experience. [It is also] nerve wracking because you feel like maybe they won’t like it. But at the end of the day, if you feel like you did your duty and you told the story that you wanted to tell the way you wanted to tell it, people will involve themselves. ... It’s freeing to be able to put something out there and kind of walk away.”

Aside from the screening, Blake said his favorite part of making a film is including people who have never made a movie before. To him, there’s nothing like sharing the art of film with others who have the courage to get involved. He said his goal is to create movies that bring people hope.

“I’d love to be able to tell stories that, in the midst of chaos, there’s always a spark of hope if you just look hard enough,” he said.

What does the hope for CineSol look like on UTRGV’s part? Pulse magazine spoke with filmmaker Hanna Tovar to find out.

Tovar is a senior theater major with a concentration in film at The University of Texas at Rio Grande Valley. She said although she was

originally a graphic design major, she has been acting, singing, dancing and creating shows with her family since she was a child.

“I didn’t know what to do,” she said. “I liked [graphic design] and I still like it, but I didn’t want to do that forever. ... Then, I [found] theater [and film].”

Since joining the theater and film department, Tovar has written and directed several films and plays. In 2023, she directed a film titled “Julia, it’s me,” which is about a girl who gets kidnapped by her stalker ex-boyfriend and her gay best friend saves her. Later that year, Tovar wrote, directed and edited her film, “Inhaling Possibilities.”

“It was about the first time that I got high,” she said. “I [have met] a lot of nice people [through film]. ... There’s so many talented people here in the RGV.”

Tovar is now working on an original play and her next film about a breakup.

“I went through a breakup in October and it was so ugly,” she said. “I was going to write [about] how all of that made me go into a depression during the winter.”

Tovar said she aspires to compete at CineSol in the future and connect with other creatives.

The Film Lover

Jorge Flores, a computer science freshman at UTRGV, said his interest in the art began two years ago when he started watching more films.

“I want to be more involved in the [film] culture,” Flores said. “That’s when I decided to give [film festivals] a try to see what independent creators here could make.”

Flores described his first impression of film festivals as an unexpected and surprising experience. He attended his first festival, STXIFF, in 2023.

“Some of [the films featured at STXIFF] varied from documentaries made on iMovie to really high-quality productions [with] a crew,” Flores said. “It really showed [me] different levels of talent. That was surprising. The good thing is they were all enjoyable regardless of quality and some were really good.”

The film lover said he aspires to create his own movies someday. Seeing other filmmakers and their work has given him tips on where to begin. For now, the next festival on Flores’ list is CineSol.

UN T F E

Story and illustration by Anonymous

I am a queer artist born and raised in the Rio Grande Valley.

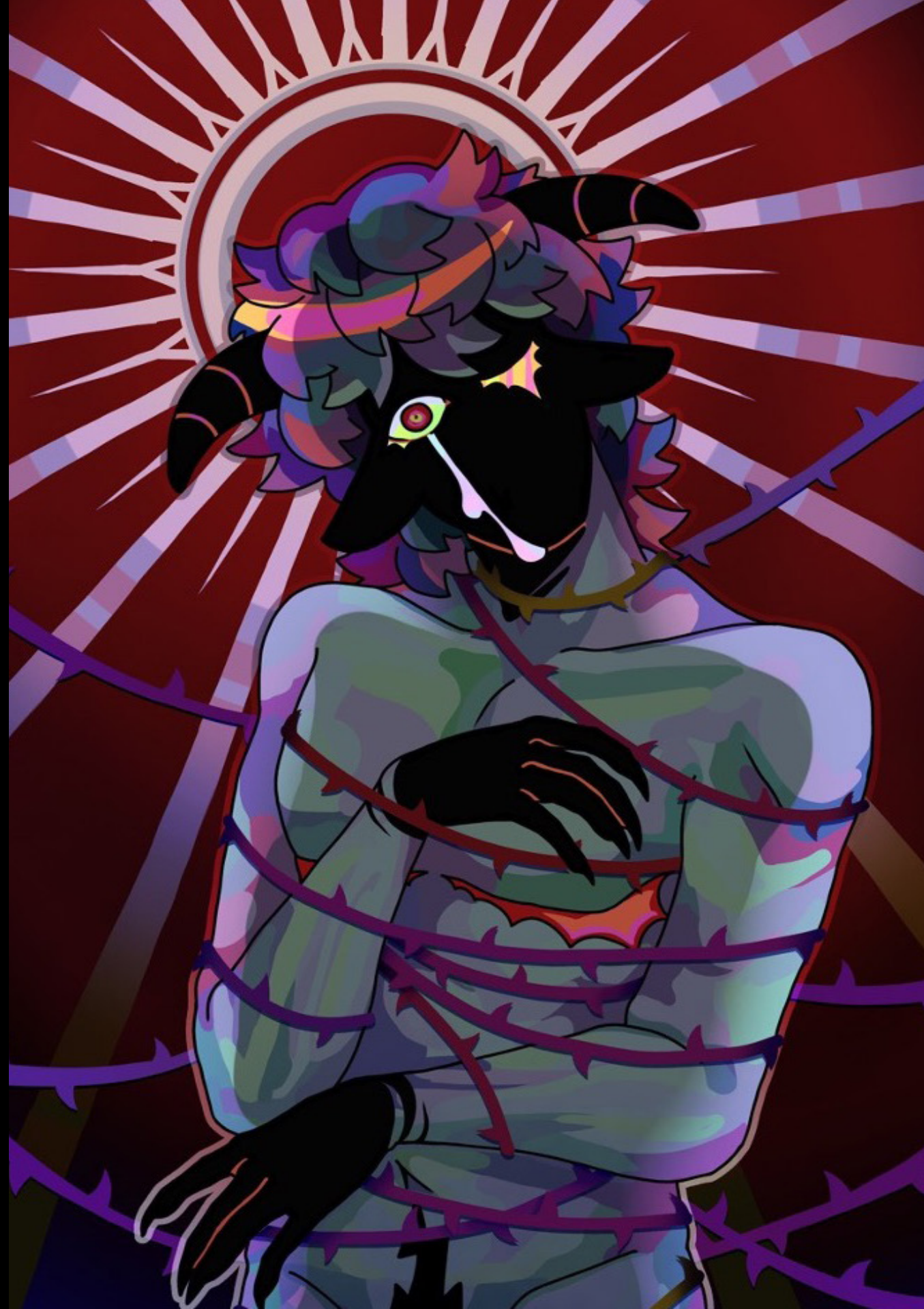
Art has always been an incredibly important form of self-expression to me. From the edgy, warrior cat sketches of my childhood, to the mature, religious themes of my present, my art has been part of every phase that I have gone through. It is no surprise that when I started experimenting with my identity and realizing who I am, these bits of me found their way into my work.

However, finding myself was not a linear process. All the labels I swapped through showed up in the versions of characters that I carried with me. My creations have always found a way to reflect who I am as a person and the struggles I have gone through, sometimes by accident. My queerness, for example, has become important to who I am and the values that I hold. It is a theme that shows up in many of my artworks. It is no secret that the Valley, and Texas in general, is a very religious area. A lot of my pieces about my identity tend to touch on the struggles of growing up queer in a very religious environment.

Many people who grow up here are also not given a chance to discover their own faith. My people, but their faith has always been something they expected me to follow. This made it quite difficult for me to dive into my identity, as I had gotten so used to following the path my parents set out for me. Accepting my queerness was confusing and terrifying, especially knowing that many others in this faith saw it as ‘unnatural’ or wrong. At 13, I realized that I was actually one of the people I used to laugh at with strangers on the internet. This created a kind of isolation that is hard to put into words. My art also morphed to fit in the whirlwind of emotions I was experiencing. A tool that I used to bring cats and monsters to life became a powerful tool for showing my emotions. When I did not know how to put things into words, I found myself connecting with others like me through art.

I was also extremely lucky with the people I had as friends. As I started exploring my identity, the people closest to me accepted me with open arms and even looked into their own identities. I did not feel so alone in my struggles or my identity. My art gave me a sense of community.

Overall, I do not think I could have made it through my low points in life without art. Not only did it give me an outlet for things I could not say out loud, but I also found the most important people in my life through our shared interest in drawing. Without them, I probably would have buried the things I could not accept about myself. If there is anything I can accomplish by sharing my voice, I want it to be to show others like me that they are not alone. Though it may sometimes feel like the world is against people like us, there is a place for us. There is a community for us. We are not on our own.



The Planetary Wanderer by Sergio Cuéllar

Planets forming, tiny things
Growing, bigger and bigger
Time passes
Big planets now

I'm a rogue dwarf
From a distant system
Joining late
Different in composition

Just a small planet
In retrograde elliptical
Orbiting around the warmth
The others share

Coming and going
In and out
A stranger to a family
Alone

MUTUAL LOVERS by Alyssa L. Pruitt

Into each other's eyes
A connection
A spark
A mutual feeling among the two

Both willing to do whatever necessary
To make each other happy and not hurt

It's complications
It's ups and downs
Like an emotional roller coaster,
they can't get off of.

They know
They feel
They want
But can't

It's not hard to be together
It's merely complicated

A complicated friendship
But more than a friendship

They both try hard not to feel
Leaving each other blinded by the darkness
That is surrounding them

To be engulfed
By each other's deep secret
Of mutual love.

Wrong Fruit by Karina N. Alegre

I picked you up
Looked at your color
Washed you clean
Got the dirt off you

The birds and insects had gotten to you
I took good care of you
Until you were full of saturated color

But I could not forget what had once been in you
I could not bring you to my mouth
To taste you

Something in me knew that you weren't as sweet as you looked
I knew you'd make me sick to my stomach

But I closed my eyes, took a bite out of you
Then another, until I was taking big bites of your sweetened flesh

Convincing myself that you were sweet
That you were good for me

I tried
I tried so hard
In the end, I had to spit you out
As you were filled with poison and lies

I watched as those bad parts of you came back
Tasting bitter, used

I went around the apple tree
Ignored the dull apples on the ground and grabbed—

A shinier, rounder red apple
As I bit it, my eyes grew wide
Happiness as it tasted sweet
And got rid of the taste of you

Never knowing I could've had better
If I hadn't picked up the wrong fruit

Siren by E. A. Desilos

The entire world disappeared while I slept.

The sudden realization of my loneliness shook my body. Standing up in the middle of town, a gust of wind accompanied by the characteristic smell of the sea threatened to move me, but my feet were glued to the floor. The hood of my coat tried to hinder my eyesight, but I returned it to its place before it did. I could only rely on my eyes to guide me through the village, as my hearing aids were inexplicably missing. Yet, this was not the strangest event of the day.

Earlier I was woken up by the freezing air coming from the main door, which was wide open. In Aquila, everyone knows everyone and we trust each other by never locking our doors, just in case we're caught by the heavy rains, we can shelter in each other's houses. Yet, leaving the door open was rude and quite out of place given the usual politeness of the citizens. When I got into the living room to close the door, I almost stepped into muddy footprints that were all over the wooden floor. Confused, I walked a little bit to peer outside. The deserted street was surrounded side by side by big and small wooden houses, with their doors widely open, being only moved by the strong wind that comes from the ocean. It looked like time had stopped.

With caution, I returned to my room to put on something warmer to investigate outside, taking the closest parka in my closet. I also approached my nightstand to pick up my hearing aids, but these weren't there. Inspecting other places where they could have been, there was no trace of them. As the situation became stranger, I decided not to waste any more time, I went outside.

I hurried to my neighbor's house. While stepping inside I knocked on the door to alert anyone of my presence. Looking around I saw everything arranged as normal, with two still-hot cups of coffee on the kitchen table, a few toys on the carpet, and breakfast was served for three in the dining room. I made more noise by knocking stronger but without any answer, I suspected that something was extremely wrong. After a brief inspection, I confirmed that no one was in the house, and it appeared they had left in a hurry.

After closing the door on my way out, I went towards the house in front of mine, a smaller home with ever-changing paintings that depicted dawns and the sea. The painter's usual red coat with its colorful stains was still on the hook of the entrance, but her rain boots were missing. After knocking on the door and not getting an answer, once again I went toward the next house and then the next one. Half-done tasks were scattered through different rooms, but no one was there to finish them. It appeared as if everyone was forcefully taken out of their houses during the morning. Everyone except me.

Eventually, I gave up inspecting the houses by the time I was in the fourth one. I decided to go to the center of town to search for either answers or a way to find another soul. In front of the little building we use for meetings, a high pole rises with my hopes on top: an old white siren. We only use it when a weather emergency arises, but given my desperation, I only saw it as a way of finding anyone. Without thinking twice, I activated the siren. Its vibration brought a bittersweet feeling, both comfort and anxiety as I looked at my surroundings repeatedly. No one came.

Nervously, thinking that it would be better to sort my surroundings by myself, I started walking. I moved towards the sea; one of the streets that directly pointed at it gave me an easy view of it. It seemed agitated, too much for this time of the year. Despite the violent waves constantly crashing against the rocks, I paid more attention to the threat of a storm in the sky.

I got so distracted that when I noticed something under my feet, I jumped for a second. My hearing aids were on the ground, accumulating dirt. After quickly grabbing them, I accommodated them in my ears. Yet, while doing so I felt a heavy glance from the sea.

Turning my head, I saw it and it looked back at me, or that is how I felt as if it didn't have any eyes. Its lower half trying to imitate a fish tail was composed of transparent plastic bags wrapped around an amorph-moving mass of fish scales, accompanied by their bones, meat and eyes in a disordered mess. The putrid flesh continued on the torso, which was kept together by rusting metal chains and plates that tried to imitate ribs in a bizarre inhuman manner, with twisted steel rods coming in and out of unparallel sides of the creature that seemed to try its best to create arms. Above its torso, where a head should be found, a white dirty siren was pointed in my direction, as if it was looking at me.

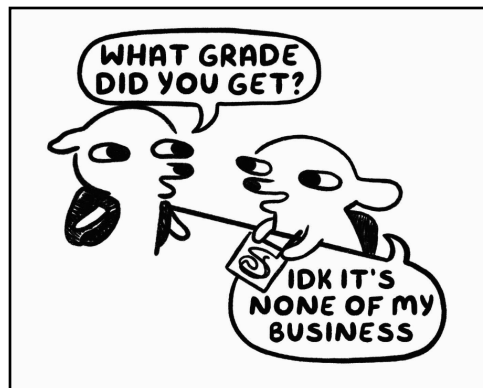
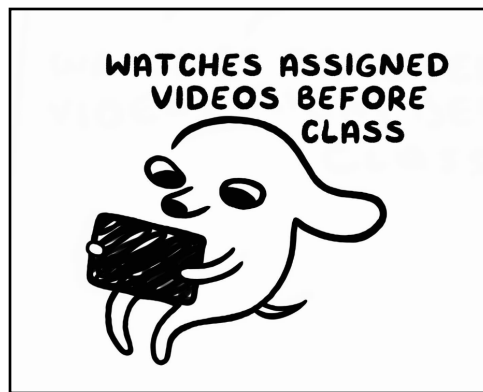
The initial shock of the encounter made me automatically turn my hearing completely back on, which opened the doors for me to listen to the sweetest melody. The siren in the center of Aquila was now a mere nuisance, a noisy obstruction to the true siren's song. It was a welcome and a reprimand. While it didn't have any coherent words, I could understand what it was saying, "Why did you leave the depths of your birthplace and why are you so determined to destroy it?"

The next thing I noticed was that I was walking towards the water. Almost by instinct, I briefly felt the urge to run in the opposite direction, but why should I? Peace filled me as I entered the water with the others.

We were back home.



OSTVR Live at The Flying Walrus by RolleezPhotos



@es.pep

My name is Asayne Maltos (@es.pep) and I am a visual arts student pursuing a certificate in art teaching. My artistic journey revolves around creating comics that reflect my experiences navigating student life and grappling with mental health challenges. Making comics is my creative outlet; I find solace in expressing my frustrations and anxieties. Ultimately, I feel a sense of calmness once I share my inner thoughts with the world.

Central to my comic series is a

character named Pepperoni. She is a whimsical representation of my real-life dachshund companion of the same name. Pepperoni serves as my muse. Depicting my thoughts and experiences through her eyes offers me a unique perspective on life. This imaginative lens helps me piece together my thoughts, understand my emotions and find inner peace.

Sharing my comics with others initially filled me with anxiety, as the prospect of being perceived was daunting. However, as I embraced

this vulnerability, it transformed into a source of empowerment and newfound freedom.

Looking ahead, I aspire to pursue a master's degree in art therapy to further explore themes of self-expression and mental wellness through my Pepperoni inspired content. My ultimate goal is to offer a sense of camaraderie to others and reassure them that they are not alone in their struggles. Through self-exploration, compassion and resilience, I believe we can overcome



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Vaqueros Boots and BBQ



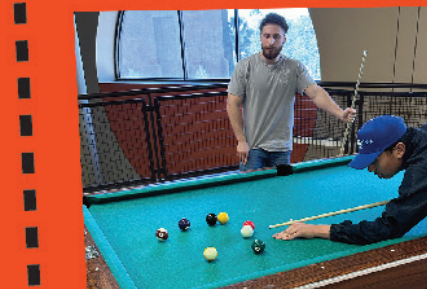
STUN on the GO



Union Unplugged



Haunted Union



Game Tournaments



RHYTHM NIGHT

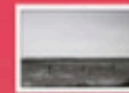


GLOW CRAZY DANCE PARTY



V MY VALENTINE DANCE





Turtles, Trash,
Tourism...esla.JPG



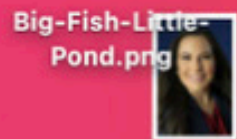
Turtles, Trash,
Tourism & Tesla.jpg



TTTT.jpg



Addressing
Adversities.jp



Erin Gamez.JPG



Legionary.jpg



A Resilient
Community.png



Reproductive
Activism...ade.png



CFSI.png



Nurses Notes.png



Distinguished
Speaker Series.jpg



Students Raising
Students.psd



Story by Luis Castañeda

Photos by Blanca Castillo

to the UTRGV Special Collections & University Archives website.

LeVrier said people look forward to the celebration. On a day with good weather, 25,000 to 30,000 people attend each of the parades organized by Charro Days Fiesta.

He also said seeing the excitement of people and the traditional outfits, especially among children, is what has stood out to him the most over the years.

The celebration was heavily advertised in other parts of the state, including San Antonio, Dallas, Houston and Corpus Christi as well as in northern Mexico through Televisa and other local TV stations, LeVrier said.

This year, Brownsville saw several parades by Charro Days Fiesta, including the Brownsville Independent School District Children’s Parade on Feb. 29, the Illuminated Parade on March 1 and the Grand International Parade on March 2.

“We have over 140 entries in the parade on Saturday,” LeVrier said. “For the first time, the UTRGV band will be performing in our parade and we’re very excited about that. ... We welcome them.”

For the first time in Charro Days’ history, the Vaquero Marching Band, Color Guard and the Drill Team also participated to highlight the programs to the Brownsville community, according to Karen Dorado, UTRGV director of Special Projects and Community Relations.

The university has participated in the Illuminated Parade and the Grand International Parade in the past.

Dorado said UTRGV’s float, “La Bota” and Grupo Folklórico Tizatlán returned to the festivities this year. The UniMóvil, a 40-foot-long mobile clinic operated by the UTRGV School of Medicine, was also featured in the parades.

“We want to participate because we want to promote the university to our prospective students, families [and] the community at large,” she said. “We want to demonstrate our commitment to our community. ... We want to celebrate our Mexican heritage, be proud of it and help our community see how the university understands [its] importance.”

While UTRGV participated in the Charro Days Fiesta festivities, Student Activities hosted its annual Charreada on Feb. 28 on the Student Union lawn on the Brownsville campus.

The event featured performances by Grupo Folklórico Tizatlán, directed by Zelma Mata, a health and human performance associate professor. The Brownsville Early College High School Dancing Stars and Mariachi Sol Azteca also performed at the event.

Sergio Martinez, associate director of the UTRGV Student Union, said the event had a great lineup for students, which included a special presentation from Vaqueros and Charros Unidos, which performed with dancing horses.

Several student organizations, such as the Sculpture Club, also hosted fundraisings by selling art and food.

“We always want to create engaging events that promote community,” Martinez said. “That’s our interest. ... We recognize that Charro Days is a very significant and cultural event for the city of Brownsville. We felt that it makes a lot of sense for us [to] create something that promotes and ties into Charro Days. [Something] that promotes not only Charro Days but the binational and bicultural heritage that exists in the region.”

Charro Days is a local holiday that celebrated its 87th edition in 2024.

“Charro Days originated back in 1937,” said Henry LeVrier, president of Charro Days Fiesta. “Several businessmen got together and had an idea to do something to lift up the spirits of the families of the community and also see how they could stimulate the economy a little bit.”

The first Charro Days festival was celebrated in February 1938. “Charro” refers to the Mexican gentleman or cowboy dressed elegantly and traditionally, according

Rethinking The Big-Fish-Little-Pond Effect

The Story of Texas Rep. Erin Gamez

Story by Andrea Maldonado

Illustration by Vanessa Vega

The common narrative surrounding the Rio Grande Valley is what locals call “The Valley Mentality,” where some South Texans believe they need to leave to succeed in bigger cities.

“We have a lot of big fishes,” said Lia Cavazos-Garcia, a political science junior. “Why do we keep minimizing the pond?”

District 38 state Rep. Erin Gamez (D-Brownsville) is leading by example to show the community that in the Valley, specifically in Brownsville, the opportunities are limitless because the city is a fertile ground to construct the future constituents want to see.

Gamez, who was born and raised in Brownsville, was elected to the Texas Legislature in 2022. She said her mission is to show the community how much its voice matters and that Brownsville can compete and lead at the same rate as any other big city.

At a young age, she discovered her passion for advocacy as she saw her father, attorney Ernesto Gamez, in the courtroom. She worked tirelessly to achieve her dream of becoming a criminal defense attorney.

“Growing up, my father always taught me, ‘It’s God, family and your community,’” Gamez said. “So, I knew that I wanted to go to college, law school, so that I could come back and be of service to my community.”

As the youngest and first female representative of District 38, Gamez has set a precedent for Texans.

“We need to show the community that our daughters can participate and can lead in this capacity and our voice needs to be reflective of the demographic,” she said.

Cavazos-Garcia said, in such a white-male dominated field as law, it is important to have role models such as Rep. Gamez that are paving the way for Latinas in the legal field to work hard and have a voice.



District 38 state Rep. Erin Gamez (D-Brownsville).

"We are the same guy. It can be done. I promise."

“I am not going to be afraid to use my voice,” Gamez said. “I am not going to be afraid to speak up at a table where maybe I am the only woman because your opinion does matter. We have a different perception of the world that the world needs to hear.”

The legislator also said her priority on the house floor is addressing the issues that affect the Valley and Texas, such as immigration, teacher pay and recognition and transportation.

As a member of the House Committee on Transportation, Gamez has also highlighted the importance of the committee and its relevance to the region.

“Investing in a resource that over 90% of the population uses on a daily basis, which is our roadways, allows for the interconnectivity of our communities that we need to develop our cities,” she said.

Gamez has also addressed the issue of artificial intelligence in the freight industry, which may affect the employability of truck drivers in the immediate future.

“To make sure that if there is an automated AI freight 18-wheeler on the road, we have at least two or one human persons operating that vehicle,” she said. “I think we need to put the safety and interests of our citizens first.”

Gamez filed House Bill in collaboration with the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas that would protect truck drivers.

The District 38 representative also said there is not a more painful topic talked about in the legislature than immigration, especially unlawful immigration.

Gamez said she explained to other

members of the House that “when we talk about establishing probable cause to pull someone over and ask for their papers because they’re ‘wearing a backpack next to a river area,’ we need to be careful.

“This describes potentially every student at UTRGV or [Texas Southmost College] in District 38. That worries me.”

Gamez stressed the importance to ensure legislation is respecting the constitution and the safety of citizens.

“I am out here speaking on behalf of the constituents of District 38,” she said. “It’s important to convey that in such a way that 149 other [House members] understand how a community lives, eats and breathes, [an area] that they might never have even been to.”

The politician and criminal defense attorney said she is proud of her background and grateful for the love and support she received at legacy institution University of Texas at Brownsville/Texas Southmost College, where she received undergraduate summer credits as a Scorpion.

“I was doing exactly what you all [aspiring undergraduates] are doing,” Gamez said. “We are the same guy. It can be done. I promise.”

Cavazos-Garcia, an aspiring politician, said Gamez inspires her and other residents of District 38 to take action and be part of the solution.



“Just like what Erin Gamez was to me, she inspired in me that I can do what she is doing, or even more,” she said. “And then, in 10 or 15 years, someone else will look at me and also be inspired to stay here [in the Valley] and do the same thing.”

Gamez said her heart is in the Rio Grande Valley. Realizing there was no alternative for her after getting her bachelor’s degree at The University of Texas at Austin and Juris doctorate degree at the South Texas College of Law Houston, she said she came back to the Valley to serve her community.

“There’s no place in the world quite like Brownsville,” she said. “When that starts pulling at your heart, there’s nothing that can stop it. There is no place in the world like coming home to family.”

Cavazos-Garcia said the big fish-little pond effect in the Valley is affecting the development of the cities

and the only way that the narrative can be changed is by staying in the pond.

“It’s on us, the 20- and 30-year-olds to pave the way for younger generations,” she said. “It’s on us to do what we need to make this ‘little city’ a place people want to stay in, not that they need to stay because all other options failed.”

For Rep. Erin Gamez, it is on Brownsville residents to be the change they want to see.

“It’s on you to get it done,” she said. “Make that band. Start that business or open that restaurant. The city is waiting and there’s absolutely nothing stopping you.”

Students Raising Students

Compiled by Veronica Palacios

Illustrations by Veronica Palacios

According to a 2019 report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office on Higher Education, there was an estimated 22% of undergraduate students—4.3 million out of 19.5 million—raising children in the United States. Fifty-five percent of those student parents were single parents. Forty-four percent were working full-time while enrolled. Almost half of those student parents reported having child care costs while having fewer financial resources to fund their education as opposed to students without children. Over a decade ago, it was reported that 52% of student parents left school without a degree.

As of Spring 2024 at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, 75 students were requesting Pregnancy and Parent Accommodations under Title IX, according to Director of Student Accessibility Services, Shawn Saladin.

Ashley Barrera is a 24-year-old mother and a 2022 alumna of UTRGV. She graduated from South Texas College in 2020 with an associate degree in criminal justice. Since 2020 and at 21 years old, Barrera had been raising her son while attending school as a full-time criminal justice student at UTRGV and working a full-time job as a pharmacy technician.

What was it like going to school pregnant?

Well, by [my third trimester] I had already switched to all online because I was pregnant mostly [during] my spring semester, which was my last semester at STC. The fall before I got pregnant, my classes at STC [were] at 7 [p.m.] and [I would] get out at 10:30 p.m. I was like, ‘You know what? I can’t do this.’ I was already getting bigger and I was always tired and I was always sick. ... I’m at the clinic all the time and when I’m not at the clinic, I’m with my son. [So], every

semester, I just prayed [that classes would still be] all online. ... I was lucky enough that I went to school during the pandemic.

What was your pregnancy journey like? Looking back, what do you feel?

Honestly, it was a horrible experience. ... When I found out I was pregnant, I was happy but I [thought], ‘What am I gonna do?’ I was alone. My son’s father, he was there, but he wasn’t there, you know? So, I thought to myself, ‘Man ... I have nine months to figure out what I’m gonna do.’ ... And I was sick. I had morning sickness every single day. ... I didn’t gain weight till my seventh month. I was stressed. I wouldn’t sleep. ... It was horrible. I feel like that has really changed my outlook on ever getting pregnant again. ... I just felt very alone. I didn’t regret it, but I just thought I should have waited. ... But I’m here now and I just have to take it head on and figure out what’s gonna happen next.

How did your pregnancy influence your schooling?

I’ve always been very into school and studious. I’m the only one out of my siblings who went for a college degree. Everybody else just kind of works and does what they can but I wanted to be the one to give my mom a diploma. ... Even now, I think about going back sometimes because I feel like I’m not done. I feel like there’s so much more I can learn and so much more I can do. I also wanted to give [my son] this example of, ‘If you really put your mind to it and you work hard, you can do it. Nobody can tell you that you can’t. ... It’s only you that [puts] obstacles in your own way.’ I could have easily been like, ‘No, I’m pregnant. I have my baby and I’m not gonna go back.’ It’s so easy [to do that]. As a mom, sometimes you’re so tired [and] the

last thing [you] want to do is go home and have to write a five-page essay. ... But then you think, ‘OK, five years from now this is gonna be [worth it].’

What did your mom say when you were able to present that degree? How did she feel about it?

Well, everybody [told me], ‘Wow, we didn’t think you were gonna do it. I thought you were gonna quit.’ A lot of people doubted me. ... In the Latino community, that’s what you think: ‘Her life is over.’ ... It’s an ugly way of looking at things. You have people telling you, ‘You’re never gonna go back. You’re never gonna make it. You need to watch after your kids and you need to do this and you need to do that.’ ... To a certain extent, yeah, [but] I still wanna do stuff for myself. ... [Otherwise], you never did anything for yourself. That’s such a common thing.

When people were negative, when they doubted you, how did that affect you?

It pushed me. ... Now, my siblings tell me all the time—even though I haven’t used my degree yet—they tell me, ‘I still can’t believe you did it. I can’t believe it’s been a year since you finished.’ They’ve tried millions of times to go back. ... You need to have that hunger. You need to want it and if you don’t want it, you’re never gonna finish. You’re never gonna do it. ... A lot of girls that I see, they talk about, ‘Oh, no, it’s because I’m pregnant. I’m just gonna be a stay at home mom and I’m gonna give up on my career.’ ... You should want more for yourself and for your kids because at the end of the day, it’s [you] now. My son’s dad is not in the picture and he doesn’t help me financially or anything. I do everything on my own. My mom helps me out but I look back and ... I’m independent. My son can never stand there and say, ‘My mom depended on my dad to give me

everything because she never learned how to do anything for herself.’

How do you feel now that you got your degree?

I just tell myself, ‘Damn, dude. You did that.’ ... You just have to want it. ... Nobody’s ever gonna take [my degree] away from me. That’s mine forever. They can take anything else away but not that.

What did your typical day look like while you were in school, working and raising your son?

It was always the same because I went to school all year: fall, spring, summer, everything. ... [My son] has always gone to daycare since he was two months old because I worked and had school. My mom couldn’t watch him all the time. ... I’d wake up around 6:45 [a.m.] so I could get dressed and then my mom would help me dress him. I would drop him off around ... 7:45 [a.m.] because I had to be at the clinic by 8 [a.m.]. I [would] get out at 5 [p.m.] ... go pick him up, come home, watch him in between doing [my] homework, get him ready for bed. ... My mom would help me out with him—shower him or feed him. But at the end of the day, it was still my responsibility.

What is it like to raise your son?

[He is] 3 years old now. He got diagnosed last year with autism. So, he does speech and occupational therapy [twice a week] because he’s nonverbal.

What has that been like?

It’s crazy. [Trying] to figure out what he wants because he can’t openly tell you, ‘Oh I want milk. I want a snack. I want this, I want that.’ ... It’s difficult. He’s very energetic ... running around everywhere. He doesn’t know how to see when he’s doing something and he could get hurt. ... [And] he’s not like any other kid [who will] come up to you and have a conversation. I cannot talk to a little kid. I can’t keep a conversation with them because I’m not used to it. I’m at my house and

my house is quiet [except for] the TV. There’s nobody talking to me. ... It’s just difficult to understand him if you’ve never been around a child with autism, which I had never. ... I had never heard of it until [my son]. ... I was in denial. I was like, ‘He just can’t talk yet.’ ... You have to really step back ... It’s taught me a lot. I’ve had to make a lot of changes for him in my day to day because he requires more attention than other kids. He also requires me to be leaving work all the time. That’s another reason I haven’t used my degree. [My degree] requires you to be at work 24/7. ... It’s crazy.

Since his diagnosis, has anyone been insensitive to your situation or to him?

It used to be worse. ... I think it has a lot to do with his age. He’s still 3 [but] he’s very tall. He does not look three. ... A 3-year-old is gonna be running around regardless but I feel like people would just look at me because I’m talking to myself because he doesn’t reply. ... They fully stare at you. ... [Also], my son has a very big sensory issue with haircuts. He does not like haircuts because of the machine. So, we take him to this place in McAllen called Au-Some Cuts. It’s specifically for kids who have autism. [My son] screams at the top of his lungs. ... We had an instance where some lady walked in and she was taking her son and I guess his [sensory] issue was loud noises. ... So, the little boy was about to walk in and they hear all the screaming so they take him out and they’re waiting outside. [We] finish and we’re leaving and the lady is like, ‘That’s why I don’t like coming here. They are all screaming all the time.’ ... [I thought], ‘It’s for kids with autism. What do you expect? That’s why they made this place, so that you don’t discriminate against those kids. ... We’re [supposed to be] in this together.’ ... You have to just take it sometimes.

What did you have to sacrifice since becoming a mom, going to school and working?

Self-care is a big one. I tend to [say],

‘No, I can wait. My son first. My family first.’ I feel like as a mom, that’s kind of your instinct. Why am I gonna do something for myself when I can do it for my son? ... At times ... I get this anxiety that I need my time alone and it’s very difficult when you have a toddler who—even if he doesn’t talk,—he’s on you 24/7. He wants to play. He wants to be making noise or doing this or doing that and you’re running up and down behind him. So, you don’t have that, ‘Oh, I’m gonna just take a day off ... and I’m just gonna focus on myself.’ That’s never gonna happen after you have a kid. And if you do, you’re lucky. ... I see so many girls online who [are] at the club and drinking and I’m like, ‘Dude, where’s your kid? Where is your child?’ ... and I get it. We’re young. We’re supposed to go out. I’m about to turn 25 next week and I can count on my hand how many times I’ve gone out. But then I look at another girl my age and she goes out every night and she works the next day. She has a baby ... [or] three kids [or] four kids and they’re living this life and I’m like, ‘How do you do it? How do you have the energy? How do you have the time? How do you have the money? Who takes care of your kid? How is this all working out?’ ... I want to know because I want that too, you know? As a mom ... you put yourself second. Your kid is first and with everything else [it is] kind of just like, ‘Pues, if I have time.’ And at the end of the day, [when] you’re 30 years old, your kid is already leaving your house forever and you’re like, ‘What do I do with my life?’ I spent it giving my kid all my energy and what about me?

When you see those things, what do you feel?

At the end of the day, I still have my son. ... He makes me happy, but ... what am I doing wrong that they’re doing all this and I feel like I can’t? Is it my own guilt as a mom? ... Am I supposed to [go out] so that 10 years from now I’m not like, ‘Where did my youth go?’ [After] all the nights that I spend at home tired after a long day of work, not wanting to go out or not having the money to go out because I

spent it all on stuff for [my son] or to pay bills or to do this or to do that; you start to think, ‘I got into this situation of getting pregnant. Now, I have a kid and it feels like my life is over,’ even though it’s not. But as a woman, you can’t do much because then it’s everyone’s business. ... Everybody [talks] smack about you. [It is] never like, ‘Oh, look, she’s giving herself some time.’ No. It’s always, ‘Oh, where’s your kid?’ And I just did the same thing. ... But that’s how the Latino community works. We want to do more but [then] we’re like, ‘But what is everybody gonna say if I do?’

What does your support system look like?

Honestly, I have one friend, my boyfriend, my mom and my co-workers. ... I had other friends when [my son] was a baby. ... It’s very true when they say that your friends who don’t have kids don’t [understand]. ... They [were] like, ‘Dude, but why can’t you [go out]?’ ... [They] don’t have anything to come home to. ... [They] can get home at 5 in the morning and nobody’s gonna be waiting for [them]. That’s not true for me. A lot of my friends have told me, ‘But you deserve a time for yourself to go out.’ But where is the time for that though? How am I to do that? ... Now, the people that I do tend to get along with are older than me and are people who have kids. They understand you, you know? [But when] talking about relationships, ... I was with somebody for two years who didn’t have a child—who took my child in as their own. And it was so easy for him to just [say], ‘You know what? I don’t want this anymore.’ To just throw everything away and it’s like, ‘You became a part of my son’s life.’ You get that person used to your routine and people who don’t have kids, it’s so easy for them to [say], ‘I have nothing to tie me to you.’ ... What about my kid?

If you had to describe being a mom in three words, what would they be?

Difficult. Rewarding. Stressful.

Do you ever hear people say they admire you?

Sometimes. ... I have nieces and nephews that are [about my age] ... and they’re like, ‘I wanna be like you. I wanna get my degree.’ ... I always [say] ... ‘Nobody can ever take it away from you. That’s yours. You earned it.’ ... My sister tells me, ‘I’m so happy that you instilled this mentality into my daughter. I’m glad that they have [a role model] like you.’ ... And they know my whole story. They know about everything that I went through when I was pregnant. ... If I can do it, you can definitely do it too.

Is being a pharmacy technician something that you see yourself doing long-term?

I feel like everyday is just so repetitive. ... There’s nothing left to learn. There’s nothing left to do. I hate feeling constricted. ... I feel overworked. ... I want to leave. I almost left last year [around] September. I had a job lined up already. ... I only [stayed] because [my boss is] super cool. I like being there. But, at a certain point ... now that I have my degree, I’m like, ‘What am I still doing here?’ Don’t get me wrong, being a tech is fun but everyday is the same thing and it’s so degrading sometimes. People are rude. ... People are so demanding. ... I want to get something with my degree. ... I still wanna keep my [pharmacy technician] license because it’s still something to fall back on, but I think I’m already tapped out. ... Eight years—there’s nothing there for me anymore. ... Being a [pharmacy technician] in the Valley is super underpaid for the work that they make us do. ... I think they make more than me at Panda Express. ... That’s concerning. What do you mean you making orange chicken pays more than me [handling] your freaking pills? Panda Express pays like \$17 or \$18 an hour. We get paid \$14.50. ... When I [reach] 5 years

in July, I’m gonna start looking for another job and I’m gonna go.

What’s your favorite thing about being a mom?

Being able to say that I’m his mom.

What would you tell another student, male or female, that is raising a child while going to school?

I think this goes for anybody. ... Being a parent is not the end of the world. I feel like a lot of people tend to think, ‘Oh, they’re a parent. Their life is over.’ The No. 1 response to, ‘I’m gonna be a parent,’ [is], ‘My life is over.’ ... What about having a kid stops your life? ... Why should your education stop? Why should your personal life stop? ... I know everybody thought, ‘You’re not gonna be able to go to school. How are you gonna do [everything]?’ I don’t understand what [they] mean. A lot of people think you won’t be able to. I don’t think that’s true.

If someone is ... having a moment in their college career where they can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel, what would you say?

I went through that [during] my first semester at UTRGV. ... I [initially] went in for [a degree in] social work. ... I was failing because I couldn’t. ... [My son] was a couple of months old and it was hard. [I felt like] maybe I should quit. I was freaking out. ... I remember [an adviser] told me ... ‘Maybe you want to switch into a different career. ... I don’t think you’re gonna make it.’ ... I was a new mom. I was trying to figure out how to be a mom. ... He spoke to me with the truth. ... He [was] right. I needed to figure out what my next step was. ... [To anyone struggling], you need to just take a step back and reevaluate what you’re doing. ... I know for a fact that if I would have kept going with the same thing, I would not be where I am right now. I know I would have felt defeated by it and quit. ... It’s better to just change it up instead

of, ‘I’m done. I quit.’

What was the response when you found out you were pregnant?

When I found out I was pregnant, I was in shock. I took like four tests. ... At the time, my ex was like, ‘We’re gonna keep it. There’s no way you’re getting rid of it.’ ... I was like, ‘I got myself into this mess, now I have to stick it out.’ ... I remember [people telling me], ‘I’m gonna make you an appointment at the abortion clinic.’ That was [their] response. ... I felt betrayed in that moment. ... I know a lot of people would have opted for that and that’s fine. But I was kind of expecting a little bit more [of], ‘OK. We’ll figure it out,’ you know? That’s what you want to hear. [Some people] said ‘I’m disappointed in you. ... Your studies are all gonna go to waste. You’re not gonna finish.’ ... That’s crazy of [them] to have that outlook on my situation. ... That took a big effect on [my relationships]. ... I’ll never, ever, ever forget that. ... That’s why I felt alone most of my pregnancy. ... Now, [everyone] loves my son. ... It is what it is. He’s here now. It’s just something that I’m never gonna forget. ... It was almost four years ago, but it’s still so present in my mind and it still affects me. ... Your pregnancy is so engraved in your mind. I’ll see things or I’ll smell things ... [of] four years ago and I still remember. Honestly, I don’t know if it’s just me because I tend to attach to things, especially things like that. ... [My son’s] dad was very abusive, physically and emotionally. I was pregnant, mind you. He held a gun to my head, pushed [me] around [and] ... broke my car windows. It was the worst of the worst. ... I lived at the police station putting up reports, [but] nothing was ever done. And I was so like, ‘I need to make this work for my kid’s sake.’ I stuck around and stuck around. And then one day, I woke up and I was like, ‘What am I doing here? What am I doing with a person who has no respect for me?’ ... I got myself out of that situation and believe me, I will never look back. Now, that guy is in jail for God knows what. He has no contact with my son. I don’t plan on him having

any contact with him. I’m better for it, but it was hard. It was very difficult to detach myself from that situation. ... Everything that happened, I’ll play it over in my head and I’m like, ‘Why did I think that was OK? Why did I justify his actions when they were wrong?’ ... That affects you forever. Even now, I’ll have nightmares about it and I’ll think about it. ... I’m always very open about that whole situation because I feel like so many people go through it and they tend to cover it up or not wanna talk about it because they don’t wanna look like the victim. But it’s like, ‘You are [though]. You’re definitely a victim and, if you don’t talk about it, nobody will ever know that they were in that same situation and it was wrong and you’re gonna be better because of it. ... I need to tell people [that] it’s OK to feel like ... so vulnerable. I was like, ‘I need to [stay] because who’s gonna help me with my kid? How am I gonna have a son and not have a father [for him]? ... Now, [people] will be like, ‘y su papá?’ [I say], ‘Sepa. I don’t even know who he is.’ ... [But] I feel like [domestic violence is] something that’s not talked about. ... [So], I’m an open book when it comes to that whole situation.

What is your hope or wish for your son?

I hope that—well first of all—I hope that he talks. ... [But] I think one of my biggest fears is for him to be like, ‘Where is my dad? Why did you keep him from me?’ ... Why [is it] just you?’ At some point, he’s gonna know. He’s gonna have to find out because I’m not about to [lie]. I’m not gonna do that. It is what it is. We lived through it and we have to talk about it. I’ve always been that type of person. And I’ve had people [ask] me, ‘What if ... he wants to meet his dad?’ Pues, go. Good luck. Let’s see if he’s better for you than he was for me. I’m never gonna tell him not to but I really hope that, in the future, he can look at me and [say], ‘You know what mom? You were right. I don’t need to look for that guy. What can he give me that you never did?’ ... My mom gave us the option now, as adults, like, ‘If you wanna look for your dad, look

for him.’ For what? They should look for us. If they don’t want to, why am I gonna be begging for attention? So, I just hope that in the future, [my son] will see all the things that I did and know [I love him]. Like, ‘She did all this for me and look at me now.’

What is your hope or wish for yourself?

I really hope that I can get out of the clinic, get a new job [and] move on with my life, you know? I feel like staying at the clinic also makes me relive that whole situation sometimes because I’ve been there since it happened. I feel like I haven’t been able to move on from it. ... It just makes me feel like I haven’t been able to upgrade from that situation. [My job is] tied to a lot of bad things that happened in my life. Moving on from it will [feel] like I’m finally free. ... I’m about to turn 25. That’s a quarter of my life gone. I’m gonna look back and think, ‘What have I accomplished and what do I wanna accomplish in the next 25 years?’ I definitely don’t want to still be at the clinic. ... Hopefully, I’ll be better off than I am now.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

I think that one of the things I want to do with my life is to become an advocate for people like me. Even though it’s difficult, you have to take on that person’s situations ... and it makes you relive your own. But as women, as moms, as people, you need to talk about this. You need to bring it up because nobody will ever do it. And people [blame] you. And so many, not only at UTRGV but everywhere, they’re gonna look at this and think, ‘I’m going through this and I feel like this is the end for me [but] this girl did it.’ ... You can definitely be better. ... Having somebody speak on stuff that you’re experiencing will help people look for that help that they need.



Distinguished **SPEAKER SERIES** AT **UTRGV**

The Power of Music for Peace Through the Eyes of Nirupama Rao

By Andrea Maldonado and America Salazar
Photos by America Salazar

On Nov. 6, 2023, UTRGV conducted the Distinguished Speaker Series with Ambassador Nirupama Rao. Rao is India's former Foreign Service Officer and a former Indian Ambassador to the United States. Rao is now focused on music, which has led to her position as founder trustee of the South Asian Symphony Foundation. During her symposium, Rao said she sees music as a form of communication between the world. No matter what language you speak or where you are from, music will speak for society.



'Pay-What-You-Feel'

Story and photos by Luis Castañeda

Illustrations by Gonzalo Puente

The Campus Food Security Initiative is part of the UTRGV Professional Education & Workforce Development, which “leverages institutional and academic resources to create new workforce development opportunities regionally and globally,” according to its website.

Eva Paschal, program specialist for CFSI, said the initiative is about teaching students how they can eat better.

She is responsible for creating recipes in which most ingredients can be found at the UTRGV Student Food Pantry.

“We collaborate with the Food Pantry and they provide us with ingredients like some canned foods,” Paschal said. “We also work with local farmers, Hub of Prosperity and other places. They sort out the freshest ingredients and then I create recipes with whatever we get from any source.”

A lot of the recipes include beans, corn, peas and other canned products.



Cream of mushroom with coconut milk, vermicelli pasta and millet accompanied by bread with olive oil and za'atar on top was the Feb. 5 special.



The BSM Global Blends menu is served from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Thursday.



The purpose of the CFSI recipes is to provide students with knowledge on easy and balanced cooking. Meals do not have to be complicated to be healthier and tastier, Paschal said.

The Baptist Student Ministries also allows CFSI to use its professional kitchen and prepare some of its recipes.

“We [BSM] share workspace and we allow them to sell food here,” said Jillian Cáceres, a psychology junior and BSM volunteer. “They offer delicious food. ... We’re here to facilitate that and bring more people in because they know the coffee shop, they know Global Blends. So, it kind of helps them get to learn more about CFSI.”

BSM and its volunteers, who are mostly UTRGV students, collaborate with CFSI in providing affordable meals to the community at BSM Global Blends & Creations. It has a “pay-what-you-feel” model with a donation minimum of \$3.

“Sometimes it’s kind of hard to eat healthy as a college student,” said Gabby Sánchez, an integrated health sciences sophomore

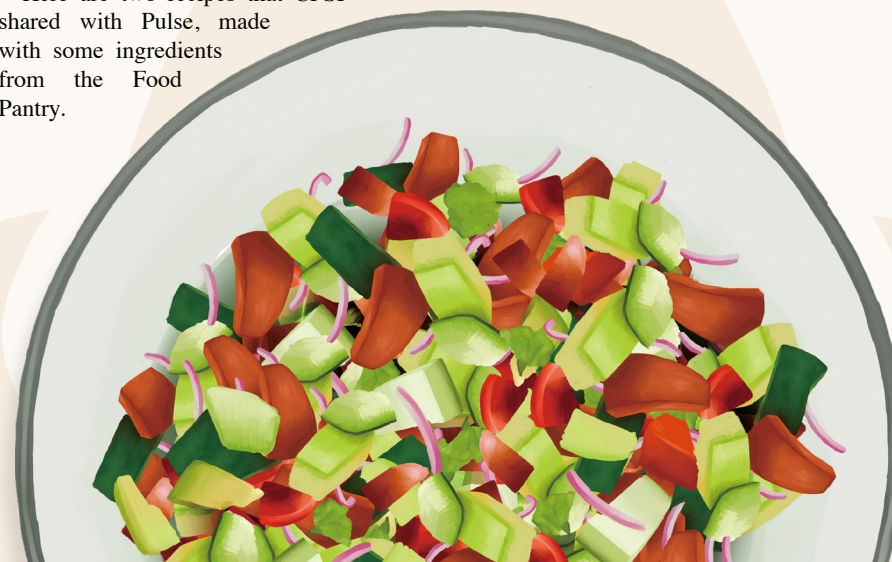
and BSM volunteer. “But CFSI also makes really good [food], like vegan food, that is inexpensive.”

Paschal’s creations are available from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Mondays by asking for the “CFSI Monday Special” at Global Blends, located at 1605 W. Schunior St. in Edinburg across from the UTRGV University Recreation Center.

BSM Global Blends & The Coffeehouse also operates the same schedule Monday to Thursday, offering a fixed menu of sandwiches, coffees and smoothies.

“What we do is offer students a place to eat and study at a price they can afford [with] healthy options and fresh foods rather than going for fast food,” Cáceres said.

Here are two recipes that CFSI shared with Pulse, made with some ingredients from the Food Pantry.



CFSI Recipes



Vaquero Salad



Ingredients

- 1 can corn
- 1 can black eyed peas
- 1 can black beans
- 1 red pepper, rinse, core and seeds removed, chopped
- 1 poblano pepper, rinsed, roasted, skin removed
- 1 serrano pepper, rinsed, chopped
- 1 small onion, peeled, chopped
- Salt to taste

Dressing

- 1/4 cup olive oil
- 3 garlic cloves, peeled, minced
- 1 lime (juice only)
- 1/2 tsp cumin
- 1/2 tsp oregano
- Pinch of chili powder

Optional

- 2 tomatoes, rinsed, boiled, chopped
- 1 avocado, pit removed, chopped
- 1/2 bunch cilantro, rinsed, chopped

Instructions

1. In a bowl place garlic, olive oil, lime juice, cumin, oregano and chili powder together
2. Set aside and allow to sit while preparing the salad
3. In a large bowl place corn, black eyed peas, black beans, red peppers, poblano pepper, serrano and onion
4. Add salt and salad dressing and mix well



“What we do is offer students a place to eat and study at a price they can afford [with] healthy options and fresh foods rather than going for fast food.”



Avocado Ceviche



Ingredients

- 1 avocado, peeled, pit removed, chopped
- 1 cucumber, peeled, chopped
- 1/2 small onion, peeled, chopped
- 1/4 cup cilantro, chopped
- 1 jalapeño or serrano pepper, chopped
- 2 limes, or 1 lemon (juice only)
- 1 tablespoon oil
- Salt to taste

Instructions

1. Place the avocado, cucumber, onion, cilantro, jalapeño, or serrano pepper, lemon or lime juice, and oil in a non-corrosive bowl
2. Mix until ingredients are combined well
3. Add salt to taste
4. Marinate at least 15 minutes

Serving Suggestion:

- Enjoy with tortilla chips

A Resilient Community

Compiled by Karina N. Alegre and Veronica Palacios

Illustration by JC Marquez

At The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, many students are part of the LGBTQ+ community. However, they are not only studying at the university. Several members of the community are also creating on-campus organizations such as the Out In STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (OSTEM) and studying the LGBTQ+ community.

One such researcher is Maricela Galdamez, a clinical psychology doctoral student at UTRGV. Galdamez identifies as pansexual and does LGBTQ+ research.

Tell me about your research.

Galdamez: My research interest is on resilience in LGBTQ+ individuals who have experienced trauma. Trauma can look like a lot of things. In our research lab—The Adversities

in Childhood and Trauma Studies (ACT) Lab—we, as the name implies, work on adversities in childhood. ... I'm personally interested in people who have experienced trauma both in childhood and adulthood and trauma in general is really fascinating to me. But in particular with LGBTQ+ people, the trauma that I'm interested in is intimate partner violence [and] identity abuse. Be that in childhood or in adulthood by romantic partners or by people in the community, harassment that they might receive from people in their community.

When did you decided to do this research?

Galdamez: So, that started for me a couple of years ago. I didn't initially know that I wanted to do LGBTQ+ research until I started the Ph.D. program. I've always been interested

in intimate partner violence.

What are some of your research findings?

Galdamez: People who experience identity-related abuse in childhood and then again in adulthood by their intimate partners exhibit higher rates of resilience than people who experience lower rates of this. So, this is interesting in that, you know, one would think, 'Oh, gosh. They've experienced so much discrimination and identity abuse throughout their lives. That must really wear someone down and have a negative impact on them.' And while it does, seeing that these people have higher resilience, that they have better mental health outcomes, shows that success or resilience in the face of adversity.

What made you focus your research on the LGBTQ+ community?

Galdamez: As an LGBTQ+ person, it's really important to me to do research for people within my community and particularly Latinx LGBTQ+ people because those are two identities that I hold. So, I think it's really important for people within the community to do research for the community. That representation is so invaluable and it's so needed because I bring a different perspective than someone who isn't LGBTQ+ conducting this kind of research. And in some of the studies that we've conducted where I've talked to LGBTQ+ people, they like to see and know that an LGBTQ+ person is doing this kind of research makes them feel really happy and proud. ... So, it's just the passion that I have for helping my own community and trying to make a difference, a positive difference in the community.

Is your research widely supported in your field?

Galdamez: I would say so. For such a long time, there was this focus on the negative experiences of LGBTQ+ people and so much focus on high rates of substance use, suicidality and intimate partner violence. All of these negative things, leading to negative mental health outcomes. So, there's kind of this new wave and research that's focusing on resilience. So, how people are able to not only survive, but thrive in the face of adversity. And it's just growing more and more as the years go on. Luckily, there is a really welcoming support, at least from other researchers who do this type of work with [the] LGBTQ+ community. [They] focus on how people are able to make it out on the other side.

In June 2023, you represented The Adversities in Childhood and Trauma Studies (ACT) Lab at the Pride Celebrations on South Padre

Island. Tell me more about what this event and what you did there?

Galdamez: While I was there I asked people, 'What are some issues that you think could benefit the community? What are some things that you think are worth us looking into in the community or things unique to people in the Valley?' And so that was really neat to get that response [from] them. So, not only did we go out there to show people that we exist and network with other organizations in the community, but to hear from community members too. ... Getting out there, being a part of the community [and] trying to do outreach was our goal.

Pulse also spoke to a member of OSTEM (Out in STEM), Julissa Arias. Arias, a lesbian, is an applied statistics and data science graduate student at UTRGV.

"And while it does, seeing that these people have higher resilience, that they have better mental health outcomes, shows that success or resilience in the face of adversity."

How would you describe being a member of the LGBTQ+ community at UTRGV?

Arias: I enjoy the community itself. It's very bright and has a lot of culture to it. Being in college, being a lesbian in STEM specifically, is a little more difficult, which is why I'm a part of the OSTEM organization to foster that better. So, we can have a safer place because, outside of our community, it's not as comfortable to be in. So, we're trying to create that space for ourselves.

Did you ever struggle with any feelings of not being comfortable with being out?

Arias: I've been relatively comfortable with it. But it's about ... if the people around you are okay with it, it's whether or not you express that. But I mean, I've known since I was a child and then, as I just got older, it just kind of just naturally came out

when the time [was] right.

What is your advice to anyone who may be struggling with being LGBTQ+?

Arias: My advice is to really learn who you are and what you want. Then, you just get to really embrace and foster your personality and yourself and your identity as you get older.

If you didn't have OSTEM, how would it feel?

Arias: In STEM, it's a little bit more uncomfortable of a space. For people in the community, it's really about the space that you take up and if you're able to be comfortable in that space. ... Even being a woman in STEM, you feel the discomfort. Then, you being a part of the community in STEM, you feel extra discomfort. So, if we hadn't reactivated this organization, it would be a lot more lonely because, with this Org, I've already met a lot

of people in STEM that are a part of the community. Before, I was only finding out little by little by talking to my classmates.

What do you aspire for the future of the LGBTQ+ community and for yourself?

Arias: I think my biggest thing that I aspire to specifically in the Valley [is] community. We are starting to create a lot more safe spaces for us and trying to reconnect or connect the whole community and all of us. I just want that to continue and really foster that community in the Valley. Especially in our culture. Mexican culture, it can be really divisive. But I'm really excited about where we're headed just by the stuff that's happening right now.

Alex Gomez is also part of OSTEM. Gomez is a senior majoring in medical laboratory science. He is also president of OSTEM.

You consider yourself to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Are you comfortable sharing what you identify as?

Gomez: Yeah, of course. I like to make the joke that I'm a triple A battery because I'm aro, ace and agender. So, I'm aromantic, asexual [and] agender.

When did you begin identifying as triple A, as you call it?

Gomez: Well, recently, like within this past year. It's kind of been a journey.

This journey that you're speaking about. Has it been a fairly easy or difficult journey? What would you say?

Gomez: It's kind of been a mix. Some areas a bit easier. For example, on the side of sexuality and romantic orientation, [it] has been a bit easier because that's just more personal. ... When it comes to gender, especially with gender presentation, that's where the trouble [is]. And then, "How are

people going to see me? Are they going to treat me differently?" ... So, there's always been that difficulty between wanting to explore more freely of what I like or what I feel comfortable with, but then keeping in mind of what, quote unquote, professionalism is.

What is your advice to anyone who may be struggling with this part of their identity?

Gomez: I guess it would depend on what they told me they struggled with. If it's with acceptance [of] themselves because they either have internalized homophobia from their household or [wherever] it may come from. ... Here in UTRGV, there's several professors that have the UTRGV Ally sticker on their door, especially in the English, philosophy department. So far, the people I've met there, they're always so kind and they're always willing to lend an ear. So, just trying to approach those individuals that have that can help a lot.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Gomez: For a while, I felt fake or like I was acting. Pretending. Something. Although I knew [about] this organization, these awesome people, at the same time, I sort of put [on] another mask. Whenever I'm doing family events, all of a sudden, I'm wearing a dress or letting my hair down. Even [at] formal school events because I know how [it can] impact my future and because several other factors in my life are already at a disadvantage, I feel like I have to compensate in what I can control. ... So, [I] just want to let other people know it's OK; it's OK to, to adjust. Unfortunately, you are perceived in order to be safe, in order to get to a good place in life. Then, later on, we can work on everything else and hopefully we get to a place of course that that's not needed.

"My advice is to really learn who you are and what you want."

REPRODUCTIVE ACTIVISM AFTER THE FALL OF ROE V. WADE

Story by Olivia Lestarpe

Illustration by JC Marquez

Photos by Veronica Palacios

The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision to overturn Roe v. Wade on June 24, 2022, caused much controversy. Overturning the right to have an abortion left the future of reproductive rights unclear and opened the path for states to outlaw abortion.

Texas was among the first to enact a total abortion ban after the fall of Roe v. Wade, according to the Guttmacher Institute. In Texas, abortion is now banned with no exceptions for rape or incest, according to the Center for Reproductive Rights.

However, a month after the overturning, the U.S. House of Representatives voted on the Right to Contraception Act, a bill that would prevent states from banning birth control. Although the bill ultimately passed, almost the entire Republican delegation from Texas voted against it.

While the right to contraception was being contested on a federal level, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott cited Plan B as an adequate solution for victims of rape. In a news conference on Sept. 2, 2022, Abbott said that victims of rape could take a Plan B pill after being assaulted.

“We want to support those victims, but also

those victims can access health care immediately, as well as to report it,” Abbott said. “By accessing health care immediately, they can get the Plan B pill that can prevent a pregnancy from occurring in the first place.”

One Plan B pill costs anywhere from \$40 to \$50, according to Planned Parenthood. But the governor’s statement disregarded the reality that lower-income people may not have quick access to Plan B pills, according to the CEO of Houston Area Women’s Center. The Rio Grande Valley is especially relevant in this issue. The Valley is one of the areas with the highest poverty rates in Texas, according to the Texas Department of State Health Services.

“But as the years went on and more and more restrictions fell into place, we needed to expand to include abortion funding on top of practical support.”

The Valley has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates in the state and the nation, according to UT Teen Health at The University of Texas San Antonio.

Therefore, several organizations in the Valley are working to help girls

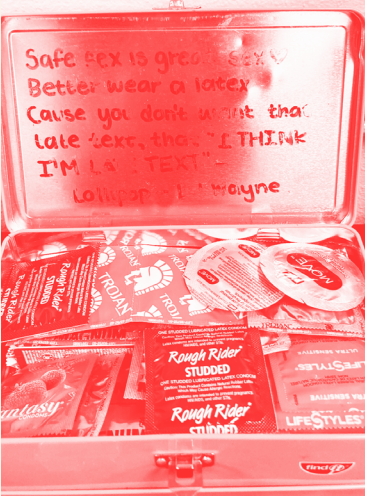
and women. One of the organizations combating the restrictive abortion bans in Texas is Frontera Fund. The organization was launched in 2015 by Sophia Rivera-Peña and Alexis Bay. Kathy Torres, the organizing manager at Frontera Fund, said that there was an apparent need for an abortion fund in the Valley.

“[Frontera Fund] started off as a practical support fund, meaning we only paid for travel,” Torres said. “But as the years went on and more and more restrictions fell into place, we needed to expand to include abortion funding on top of practical support.”

Torres has been working with Frontera Fund for close to 10 years and has experienced many different environments and political ideologies. In her opinion, the anti-abortion culture in the Valley is not as aggressive as it is in other states.

“It is not anywhere in comparison to ... the Bible Belt, where people are very violent and aggressive, or ... Colorado Springs, where there has been ... actual domestic terrorist acts of violence towards ... Planned Parenthood and things of that nature,” Torres said.

However, she said



Texas Rising’s condom container at a tabling event on Feb. 21, 2023, in the Sage Room at the Edinburg Student Union.

that in recent years there has been a shift in anti-abortion sentiment and intolerance.

“I’m not going to say there hasn’t ever been a presence and there haven’t been aggressive people, like, that is just the human condition,” Torres said. “I’ve noticed since 2016 that people have been more emboldened. I attribute it to the political climate and how it’s shifted.”

Torres said Frontera Fund has had to mold its mission statement around the current political climate in Texas. Their mission statement is:

“Frontera Fund fosters reproductive justice and rights by supporting community advocacy and direct services for all people of the Rio Grande Valley regardless of gender identity, ability, sexual orientation, race, class, immigration status, age, or religious affiliation.”

Anyone who needs help with issues related to reproductive rights can call or text the organization’s helpline. Since the overturning of Roe v. Wade, Frontera Fund has implemented new initiatives such as a patient navigation element.

“If any [person] has questions, if they’re pregnant and don’t know what to do, or pregnant and don’t want to

be pregnant, they can call us and we can point them in the right direction,” Torres said. “We can connect them with clinics outside of Texas that we work with, and we can fund their abortion care in full and answer any questions that they have about it.”

For anyone who needs a non-abortion-related reproductive health care service, Frontera Fund also has a partnership with Planned Parenthood in Brownsville and Harlingen.

“If they need an IUD or a pap smear and even though there are funding services, there’s still ... a fee that might be a little steep,” Torres said. “We can provide that gap funding. If they need a ride, you know, from the Edinburg campus to the Planned Parenthood in Brownsville, we can ... support with ... practical support like with Lyft or ... gas cards or anything on that venture, too. So, we’re here to help, you know, answer any reproductive health questions.”

In 2023, Frontera Fund ventured outside of its local endeavors to help when the organization joined other abortion funds in bringing forward a lawsuit against Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton.

“The bottom line is we’re here to help our community,” Torres said. “And because these laws were super weird, we’re like, ‘OK, well, what can we do?’ [They] can’t keep people from traveling. You know, [they] can’t keep us from helping people outside [if they] are outside of Texas. We needed clarification. So, it was more of a lawsuit to bring clarification on what we can and cannot do.”

To avoid criminalization, Frontera Fund worked closely with attorneys to find ways to navigate the restrictive abortion laws. Eventually, the federal court judge issued a dismissal of Paxton from the case, allowing abortion funds in Texas to continue aiding their communities. Torres said that although they did not win



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MY BODY MY CHOICE MY BODY

the lawsuit, being allowed to fund abortions counts as a win.

As to the future of reproductive activism, Torres said that in her lifetime she would like to see free and on-demand abortion care for all who need it. If this does not happen though, she is glad for the positive stride that Frontera Fund is creating.

“We’ve seen people mobilize amongst themselves and do so much work in their own communities,” Torres said. “I think the more and more that we do, we will see change. We cannot rely on the courts. It has to be what we do for each other like we’ve been forced to do for so long. And that’s why I think the way we organize in the Valley is almost a blueprint of how we can see change happen because we’ve been forced to lean on each other to see change and to sustain ourselves.”

The Texas Rising UTRGV chapter is one of those groups promoting activism in its community. Its mission statement is:

“Texas Rising is building the power of young people in our communities and at the ballot box. Our program organizes and builds power with young people of color in a multi-issue, intersectional social justice framework.”

The organization works to increase student voter registration and turnout, helps organize events on college campuses and deals with issue advocacy. Texas Rising has chapters on more than 20 different college campuses.

At UTRGV, Texas Rising plans tabling events and informs students about issues such as immigration justice, criminal justice, LGBTQ+ equality, voting rights and reproductive justice. To give students easier access to sexual health resources, the organization started a condom distribution campaign.

Melanie Martinez, a senior majoring in psychology, is the president of Texas Rising on the Edinburg campus. She said that the goal of the campaign is to help expand access to free contraceptives on campus by installing condom containers in the residence halls of the Edinburg and Brownsville campuses.

“We are part of the condom collective with Advocates for Youth,” Martinez said. “[It] is a program that delivers multiple packages of 500 condoms to different campuses all over the nation. So, through this, we’re able to support a campaign to help expand access to free contraceptives on campus.”

Martinez said Texas Rising is not the only student organization on campus that does reproductive justice work. The Intersectional Feminist Student Organization, known as IFSO, and Texas Rising are hoping to collaborate on the condom distribution campaign.

IFSO has its own distribution campaign focused on making sure the women’s bathrooms on campus are stocked with menstrual products. Martinez said that there is power in people and that joining forces with IFSO will be effective.

She said Texas Rising has experienced setbacks when it comes to launching the initiative.

“The main reason why we have not been able to move forward with this distribution campaign has been because of problems with housing, problems with staffing, problems with lack of communication, and disorganization. That’s the main reason why.”

Martinez said she attempted contacting the Residence Hall Association multiple times and would rarely get a response. She said any communication with them would lead to “dead ends.”

“Had they been organized, had they been properly staffed, I don’t think that we would be in the position that we are right now,” she said. “Actually, I think we would be light years ahead of where we are right now. We were able to have a meeting with them and discuss the idea and the logistics of the campaign.”

“It seemed like things were looking up and we were getting somewhere. There were plans for October and being able to launch a proposal at the RHA. Then abruptly, they said that they were too short staffed and too overwhelmed with other events and other things to be able to take it seriously. So that’s where we’re standing right now. It wasn’t like a priority to them.”

Pulse contacted the Residence Hall Association on Feb. 23 and Feb. 25.

As of press time, the RHA did not respond.

The condom initiative was expected to launch on the Edinburg campus this semester but the setbacks that the organization has experienced forced them to reevaluate their original goals. Student Leader Devanee Guerra, a sophomore majoring in philosophy, created a contraceptive request form. Through the form, Texas Rising connects with students who have submitted an entry expressing urgency for emergency contraceptives.

Until the condom distribution initiative can be revisited, Texas Rising will distribute free condoms and Plan B pills at its weekly tabling



Emergency contraceptives at Texas Rising’s tabling event on Feb. 21, 2023, in the Sage Room at the Edinburg Student Union.

events on both the Edinburg and Brownsville campuses.

Martinez said the organization believes this initiative is crucial to the sexual health of students.

“College students, people, will have sex,” Martinez said. “That is inevitable. It’s just something that’s going to happen regardless of anyone’s beliefs. That’s a fact. And the fact is we need more access to free contraceptives on campus, especially in this county. So it’s very critical that we’re able to prevent any unwanted pregnancies.”

Martinez and Torres said organizations such as Frontera Fund and Texas Rising have been doing reproductive justice work for years, and the bans have not stopped them. They will keep providing resources to anyone who needs them.

“We’re happy that people call us when they have questions,” Torres said. “So, that way, [they] can know that they have folks in their corner to help them get the care that they need, unapologetically, without any judgment and with compassion.”



Nurse's Notes

Compiled by Marissa Rodriguez

Illustration by JC Marquez

“The medical field is a track unlike any other,” according to four nursing students of UTRGV. Rensanali Dela Cruz is the president of the Student Nursing Organization at UTRGV and a third semester nursing student. Patricia Cortez is a clinical assistant professor in the School of Nursing and is also pursuing a doctor of nursing practice degree (DNP) at UTRGV. Antonio Cosio is a third semester nursing student and a member of the Student Nursing Organization. Perla Avalos is pursuing a master of science in nursing. She has been a nurse for almost 19 years and decided to return back to school after the shortage of health care professionals that happened at the height of the pandemic.

These individuals are taking in a constant flow of new information and putting that knowledge to work from labs to clinicals to emergency rooms and intensive care units across the Rio Grande Valley. Pulse magazine spoke to the students at varying stages in their journey to gain some insight into their experiences at the university and in the field.

Rensanali Dela Cruz:

What drew you to nursing?

I needed a bachelor's [degree] and I was thinking I wanted something hands-on but I also really like education. Originally, I was gonna go bio because I wanted to do the medical field and I still do want to do the medical field. But I felt as though nursing [would] secure me a job [and] it's a lot more fun. ... It's a lot more

challenging. I love challenges. But really what drew me was the hands-on part because you do have clinicals when you're in nursing. So, it's really fun. I'm honestly really glad that I chose nursing even though it's a bit more difficult just because you get more experience. The friendships that you make [are] really strong because you stay with the same ... 60 people.

What surprised you about nursing?

Something that I didn't realize is how I would apply the stuff that I learned life. So, just last I was in the library and a girl had a seizure right in front of me. It was at school in the library. It was a medical emergency. So, I jumped into action and I helped her. I did all my steps that I learned in my classes and you really do use your knowledge from class in real life. So, that was what also surprised me, I never thought that something crazy like that would happen in front of me. I felt like a superhero for a moment. ... You really do feel like you're helping people and that's another reason that I love the program so much. If I wasn't in the program, I would have no idea what to do. I wouldn't have known to turn her on her side or how to call EMS from the school.

What has been your favorite class so far?

So, we have simulation labs. Every

semester you have at least one simulation lab.

Last semester our simulation lab was really, really cool because we got to see the helicopter. We had a fake emergency that happened.

So, there was a fake bomb explosion and we had fake patients and we acted as nurses in triage and we actually

teamed up with the

Border Patrol and I got to sit in the helicopter. I got to ride in the ambulance. ... We got to [think], ‘Oh, are we gonna save this patient or are they likely not going to make it and we have to allocate our resources somewhere else?’ ... We use the Harlingen simulation lab, which is mainly for the medical students but the nursing students use it quite a bit. We learn how to put in IVs. We learn how to do foley catheters. We learn how to inject medications, administer medications, everything, so that when you start in the hospital, you know exactly what you're doing. And then when you go to the real world, your second and third semester prepares you for that as well as your fourth semester. I know this semester, we have a poverty simulation [where] we

get to see what it's like to deal with drug users as well as low-income families and things like that. You get to see that a lot in the county clinics. I know I saw it a lot already beforehand because I've been [to] the county clinics before as an observer. Some of the other nursing students jumped in without knowing what they were getting themselves into. But we do have a

Band-Aids. [Whenever] something happened to somebody, I always wanted to help them out. I'm always the one that will listen and be there. ... I became a psychiatric nurse. I'm very compassionate. I love meeting with people, trying to make them feel better, healing ... because the primary [doctors] don't focus on that. ... Psychiatric is more like, ‘OK, what's going on?’ Most of the time [patients] want somebody to talk to. That's like the main reason, you know? The other 50% is, you know, there's something wrong chemically or neurologically. But most of the time ... they want somebody to talk to. I'm very passionate [about] listening and really helping others. At the end of the day, if

“I felt like a superhero for a moment.”

simulation to prepare ourselves for that if anyone chooses to do a VA clinic or a county clinic or things like that when they go out into the field.

So, what has been your best experience working in the program so far?

There's so many. I think that my best experience is when I'm in the hospital. I love being in the hospital. It's my favorite thing in the world actually. I'm at [Doctors Hospital at Renaissance] right now and I just love it so much. I remember when I was younger, I really, really wanted to be there. It was like my dream and now I'm living it.

Patricia Cortez:

What drew you to nursing?

Since I was a little girl, I knew I wanted to be a nurse. ... I would get

somebody smiles, that makes my day.

As a woman, do you face any unique challenges in the field?

You know what? Not really. I work with other healthcare providers right now. ... I've been present with this particular nurse practitioner—a doctor—and he's very open. He's very open to [helping] me because he went through the same program. So, no, I haven't seen any rejection or differences. ... I feel that we have the same opportunities.

How would you say that being in the nursing program has changed you as a person?

[It] makes me feel more humble, passionate; give someone a chance because sometimes ... this world is harsh. ... Being a teacher and a student ... the students fear to ask for help or fear to say, ‘I don't understand.’

And I've told my students, ‘I'm very transparent. If you don't understand, just come to me and I'll help you.’ Because as a student, I'm also ... like, ‘What does that mean?’ I'm scared to ask. But you know what? I have gone back to ... ask them and they're very open. ... And sometimes it's the fear of not asking or not wanting to feel that we're incompetent or [that something is] not a very smart question to ask. That allows me to be more humble.

What has been your best experience working in the program so far?

Cortez: [I would say] helping people. Sometimes they come psychologically imbalanced and then we [start] treating them. I'm talking about the out-patient field. ... You treat them, whether through therapy or with pharmacology therapy and then you follow up [with them] in two weeks. ... You can see the difference from being [unable] to stop crying to being able to ... get a job and be able to start [being] outside in the community and [being] able to go to school or to open up to other people. That's the most rewarding [experience].

Antonio Cosio:

What drew you to nursing?

Cosio: I switched majors because I was doing engineering and I just didn't have a passion for it anymore. But I saw that a lot of nurses were going out, [getting] burnout and dying of COVID, so [it was] like a call-to-action thing.

How would you say that being in the nursing program has changed you as a person?

Cosio: I would say [I have had] life-changing experiences; stuff that you don't really see ... in other professions. So, it's really opened my perspective to different things. Also, I was kind of antisocial before I joined nursing but now I know when to say something or not to say something. Social cues.

As a man, do you face any unique

challenges in the field?

Cosio: I did my turn on the maternal clinicals and I could really see that [women] get embarrassed. And it's understandable. That's just how it is. ... I guess people, in general, prefer a woman caretaker because they seem more nurturing. That's what the norm is. ... [And in] labor and delivery, I couldn't really see any of the patients because, like I said, they get embarrassed. But that's honestly the only thing. ... Also, I wasn't able to see a C-section because I was a guy. The doctors don't want guys in there.

What has been your best experience working in the program so far?

Cosio: The best experience would just have to be when the patients get discharged, how they get all happy. Because I would help the nurse that day and it's like, 'We did it. We helped.'

Perla Avalos:

How would you say that being in the nursing field has changed you as a person?

Avalos: I went straight into nursing school after one year of just having a certificate as a pharmacy technician. So, I went back to nursing school. I was accepted and I became a nurse really, really young. Probably 22 or 23 years old. The approach to life is so much different because you are constantly dealing with life and death. The responsibility and the outlook of life is very, very serious in the sense that your approach to life is more different at my age. ... A look of life is a little bit broader in that you are more on the preventive side. You're more on the safety side of things. I don't think that's a bad thing. ... It allows for you to take advantage of the good health that you do have in the meantime and also, [it helps you with] advice for your patient—to take advantage of the health that they do have.

As a woman, have you faced any unique challenges in the field?

Avalos: I have never felt a disparity because I'm a woman in nursing. I have not encountered that. [Not] even when I was doing travel nursing in New York. I never encountered a lessening approach on behalf of my patients or the staff that I work with. I think the preconception people have—where you come from, where you grow up, who you are, whether you're male or female—people that have a preconceived idea, once they get to know you, [they] can change.

"The approach to life is so much different because you are constantly dealing with life and death."

What has surprised you the most in the nursing field?

Avalos: What surprised me most, when I started as a nurse, was the acuity of the patient in comparison to the ratio of wonders. So, one nurse can have many patients at one time and each patient has different things going on. So, one thing that I thought ... was if the nurse can have a little bit more time for the patient ... many things can be prevented. Many exacerbations of diseases can be prevented. But that's the restraint of time. ... So, the knowledge that we do get from nursing school is so much that you want—as soon as you graduate—to import it to your patient because a lot of the diseases are [preventable]. So, you want to impart so much knowledge but sometimes, by the time we get to our patient, it's already late. They already have a diagnosis. They already have chronic health diseases. That is one of the things that I observed and, since [then], I thought, 'OK, let me go back to public health. Maybe I can prevent a lot of the chronic diseases that I [saw] when I started nursing. Maybe I can go back and catch them earlier.' So, that's where I concentrated [for]

a lot of years: children. ... You only get a certain amount of time with the patient and if you manage to explain to the patient how the body works so they can understand, you can prevent a lot of the things that you have right now and you can be autonomous with your health if you really want to.

What has been the most challenging experience in the field?

Avalos: I have had a lot of different experiences that are challenging emotionally. They're very challenging emotionally because we are taught to advocate for our patients in any city and the challenges can be varied. Maybe the patient does not have the economic means to get treatment or they are not compliant with their treatment plans or medications. Sometimes, you deal with neglect. Sometimes, you deal with abuse. And, sometimes, you deal with a lot of issues that are even criminal. So, it's a lot of issues that go on. ... Physically, it's a tiring job. At the end of the day, you are on your feet the most of the time and ... physically involving your patient.

Do you have any fun facts about health that you would like to share?

Avalos: You have to be in charge of your own health and everything is by choice. ... For example, what you are gonna have for breakfast is a choice. ... So, we do have choices over our own health. If I want to grow old in a healthy way, in the healthiest way possible, I need to invest in my health right now. So, then, I can "cash out" per se when I'm 60 or 70. My old self will thank my younger self and say, 'Hey, thank you for investing in me right now so that I don't have all these diseases because you try to prevent them.' ... Knowledge is everywhere. You can Google. You can research. You go to the library. You can podcast. It all depends what you do with that knowledge. You're [either] gonna invest it in yourself or you're gonna just let it slide. ... And always brush your teeth!



Shaping The Future Of Medicine In The Rio Grande Valley

Story by Andrea Maldonado



Photo courtesy Ryan Bialaszweski

Ryan Bialaszweski is a third-year medical student at the UTRGV School of Medicine. Bialaszweski explores the impacts of obesity on the field of orthopedic surgery.

MS3

The UTRGV School of Medicine has a strong commitment to provide accessible and evidence-based healthcare to the Rio Grande Valley community. Medical student researchers have a unique opportunity to conduct research that benefits underrepresented and vulnerable members of the region.

According to Kelsey Baker, director of medical student research, UTRGV SOM provides students with research opportunities that expand to the real world. Students have the means to impact rural communities as their curriculum includes new core elements that impact the Rio Grande Valley community.

“Our curriculum committee that oversees the curriculum at the medical school have identified border health, social determinants of health and healthcare disparities as core elements of our curriculum,” Baker said.

Ryan Bialaszweski, a third year medical student at the UTRGV School of Medicine, shared his journey as a medical researcher and aspiring orthopedic surgeon.

Before UTRGV, Bialaszweski worked as a physician assistant in Dallas. During his experience in the emergency floor, he said he realized a lot of the patients he connected with faced particular social determinants of health.

He said social determinants of health regard patients experiencing limitations to achieve the same type of care as someone with better financial means or insurance, related to access to care or healthy living conditions very common in the Valley region.

“A big portion of the patients that we treat down here [at UTRGV] are patients that face these social determinants of health,” Bialaszweski said. “It’s a community that is very thankful for the care that they receive.”

The aspiring orthopedic surgeon defined his experience of working with patients from the region as the reason why he committed to the UTRGV School of Medicine.

“I [feel] that my role as a medical student, whether it be [through] volunteering activities or research within the community, is to make a difference to these patients,” Bialaszweski said. “That is ultimately what drew me down to the Rio Grande Valley.”

Regarding his research projects, the medical student has engaged with his peers, faculty members and mentors, such as John Ronnau, director of the Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) Program; mentor Dr. Joel Wells, orthopedic surgeon and Baker to develop his research related to the impacts of obesity on orthopedics and osteoporosis rates in the Rio Grande Valley.

The Rio Grande Valley is one of the most impacted regions from obesity, causing multiple health complications from hypertension to diabetes or cancer.

In his research, “The implications of obesity on total hip arthroplasties: A literature review of the associated complications,” Bialaszweski explored the impacts of obesity on the field of orthopedic surgery. His findings revealed obesity is associated with patients receiving total hip replacements at an earlier age.

The third-year medical student further analyzed the causes for some of these orthopedic conditions, such as hip fractures, and how these correlations regarding osteoporosis rates have impacted the Valley.

His research showed Texas is

one of the most affected states with high rates of osteoporosis, and the Rio Grande Valley is even more disproportionately affected.

“We found that Starr, Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy Counties were all disproportionately impacted by osteoporosis despite being impacted by obesity, which is actually supposed to be a protective factor for osteoporosis because you’re bearing more weight, and your bones have to be stronger,” Bialaszweski said. “But we found the opposite: we found that individuals from the Rio Grande Valley are actually impacted more by osteoporosis compared to the rest of the state and the nation.”

“It’s a community that is very thankful for the care that they receive.”

Therefore, he concluded that increased rates of obesity and increased rates of osteoporosis may lead to poorer health when it comes to repairing these fractures or treating these orthopedic conditions.

Bialaszweski’s research also highlights the need to increase healthcare utilization and investments throughout the Valley.

The purpose of focusing on the region’s health risks related to obesity and orthopedics is to understand the impact they have on communities and further educate patients to provide better treatment.

“With underdiagnosed and undertreated osteoporosis, there are more patients at increased risk of

what we believe could be preventable fractures,” Bialaszweski said

More recently, the medical researcher published a paper looking at the outcomes of periacetabular osteotomy (PAO), recognized by the Bone & Joint Open Orthopedic Journal, which has been referred to as one of the most popular in the nation.

“We examined approximately 2,600 social media posts to learn about surgical outcomes and post-surgical patient care,” Bialaszweski said. “This paper is significant as it is the largest social media analysis of its kind, looking at PAO particularly.”

The impacts of the study on the Valley region emphasized it all comes down to access to healthcare and patient education. According to the student, there are many patients suffering from chronic hip pain who do not know they actually have hip dysplasia, which, if diagnosed, they might be able to seek appropriate symptomatic relief through PAO.

Bialaszweski’s commitment to service the community shows how UTRGV SOM is expanding its footprint across the RGV. The School of Medicine has expanded to new cancer and surgical hospitals expecting to bring better care to locals.

“We’re going to be able to implement the latest and greatest oncology and surgical care right here in the Valley where patients previously might have gone up to Houston or Dallas to receive those types of care,” Bialaszweski said.

For medical students, developing research is becoming increasingly important. Director Baker recommends UTRGV SOM students and aspiring undergraduate students interested in medical school to take advantage of their positioning and think of research early on since it will be a long journey that requires time, guidance and passion.

LEGIONARY

Photo courtesy Valentina Martinez

Story by Veronica Palacios

Valentina Martinez is a 19-year-old athlete, entrepreneur, military reservist and a first-generation college student. She is also a devoted daughter, sister, partner and Christian. Martinez's versatile life tells a story of "fearlessness."

"I wanted to eat the whole world," she said.

Early Life

Martinez grew up in Valle Hermoso, Tamaulipas, Mexico, in what she calls a "team" family dynamic. She is the oldest of three, with two brothers, her mother and father, all whom she calls her best friends. She describes her upbringing as a humble beginning and can recall putting her brothers before herself for as long as she can remember.

"I think that's just part of my culture," Martinez said. "I was raised like that. Your family is always first. We were a super humble family. When I was a kid, we were super poor. We had to learn how to make the money be enough for everybody. I grew up with that mindset. I took care of my brothers. I needed to do what's best for them. I needed to set an example. I always felt like it was my job to be someone they could look up to."

Secondary School

Martinez's life outside of her home was a different story. Throughout middle school, Martinez was bullied over her accelerated performance in classes. She said she was viewed as competition to be defeated no matter the cost.

"I was never good at socializing," Martinez said. "... So, I was always focusing on studying. I guess my classmates and their parents didn't

rumor that I was hooking up with my teachers and that that's why I was getting such good grades. I was 12. I was 12."

Martinez recalled having lunch by herself every day, remaining focused on her studies and keeping quiet about the situation as a "bad time." One day, she started receiving death wishes from classmates. According to Martinez, her principal did not intervene when notified of the situation. She said teachers were allegedly given directions to stay out of the situation and parents of her peers condoned the bullying. She said she felt isolated.

"My classmates [would say], 'You should kill yourself. Nobody likes you,'" Martinez said. "The teachers knew. The principal knew. [A Death Note] notebook passed by all of my classmates and they wrote my name 27 times. They were saying, 'She's gonna die on this day at this time.'"

It was at this point that Martinez's family pulled her out of the school. However, staying in Mexico was no longer the option. At just 14 years old and without knowing any English, Valentina moved to the U.S. to begin high school.

The States

Martinez moved to Brownsville with a family friend who also served as a legal guardian for minors who wanted to live in the U.S. Six students, including Martinez, enrolled at Homer Hanna High School. The six were given strict orders: cook, clean, do laundry, go to school and come home. She recalls little time for anything else in between.

"When I lived with [my guardian],

I was not having the best time," Martinez said. "... [The house] was just two rooms; three girls in one and three boys in the other. We were not related; we were nothing. We were just people that lived in my hometown and wanted to study in the States. ... I was just not having the time of my life. We could just go to school and come home. [We had] no permission [for anywhere else]. ... That's [when] I learned how to be independent. ... It was like living by myself."

Martinez got along with only two of her housemates. She said the overall treatment within the house had her looking for a way out. About a month before her junior year was over and without any preparation, she went to her high school adviser with a plan to graduate.

"I went to my adviser and I lied to her," she said. "I said, 'I have a scholarship to go to a big university in Mexico and this is a great opportunity that I need to take now.'"

Two weeks after, Martinez was set to graduate from high school. In just five days, she had completed her last year and a half of high school. Applications to UTRGV, FAFSA and housing came next. In August 2021 and at just 16 years old, Martinez was now a first-generation college student.

"I think God made it happen," Martinez said.

Postsecondary School

Martinez enrolled as a business management student in the Robert C. Vackar College of Business and Entrepreneurship. Going into that field was something she was sure of for as long as she could remember.

"My 16-year-old self was fearless," she said. "... I already knew what I wanted to study. ... My dad is a business owner. The way that I was going was because of my personality. That's my dad's personality."

Martinez believes there is a big space for people in the field. She grew up with that mentality through watching her family's business start from the ground up. To Martinez, the key to success is to constantly look for greater opportunities.

However, upon enrollment, her concern for financial stability grew. She was constantly thinking about her family and did not want them to have the burden of her college finances.

"All my life, it was all about money," she said. "[My dad] was like, 'I wasn't expecting for you to go to university [yet]. I'm not sure how much I'm going to pay.' My parents were not doing really good. It was the beginning of the business [still]. I was like, 'I'm going to figure it out.' ... That's when the whole story gets tricky. ... That's when I enlisted. ... That's my whole introduction to the

military."

The Reserves

After completing her first semester at UTRGV, Martinez visited Sgt. Ruban Rodriguez, a U.S. Army recruiter. She said joining the Army was something she was always interested in doing but her age had always been the deterrent.

"I [have always] had a lot on my mind," she said. "I was like, 'I just want to do everything.' I wanted to eat the whole world."

Martinez's biggest priority was still being able to attend school, which made the Reserves her best option. However, Martinez was still 16 at the time and too young to enlist on her own.

"I talked to my parents. My mom, being a Mexican mom, was like, 'No, something is going to happen to you. I don't know how the process is.' ... My dad was like, 'Yeah, give it to me. I'mma sign this.'"

After receiving her military orders in Spring 2022, Martinez went off to basic training in Fort Jackson, South Carolina, for six months.

"My mom's visa expired so she couldn't take me to the airport. When I left my home, I saw my mom crying. ... She was saying, 'Please come back.' ... My dad [asked me]



Photo courtesy Valentina Martinez

Valentina Martinez trains in Fort McCoy, Wisconsin, in 2022.

"I always felt like it was my job to be someone they could look up to."



Photo courtesy Valentina Martinez

Rene (from left), Valentina and Raul Martinez pose for a picture for (@thelegionariesx) during a workout.

to write letters because you don't [get to] have your phone. ... I left on Jan. 24, [2022]."

Martinez said during basic training, she went through a process of shock when switching from civilian to military.

"They really were doing whatever they wanted with me," she said. "My body was completely bruised up because of training. I was burned because of the cold. My mind was being pushed to the limit. I had to pray to God every night. ... I really thought I was going to die. ... I came back very religious."

Post-Basic Training

The reservist returned to Edinburg on July 7, 2022. She said after experiencing military training, she decided to base her life strictly around religion and family.

Martinez took on a guardian role when—after many years of living apart—her brothers, Rene and Raul, moved to Edinburg to attend school and live with her.

"I decided that I wanted to do

something big with my life, something different," she said. "I wanted to make sure my brothers had a good example to look up to. ... I make sure I'm the best version of myself for them."

Martinez also resumed her degree in business management in fall of 2022. After setting her new priorities, the student said she has given up many extracurricular opportunities to take care of her brothers as a way to repay her parents.

"We value the people who are putting the work in every day."

"I wanted to join the cheer team," she said. "I went to one of the tryouts but then my brothers came [to live with me]. I wasn't going to have time to see my brothers if I decided to do that. If they need something, I'm

going to be there. ... Your family is always first."

Martinez has since kept her circle small. She said aside from her family and boyfriend, she has few real friends.

"I really have a lot of trouble being social," she said. "I also go to bed early. I don't go partying with my friends. ... I'm not saying that's bad. I think everybody [should have] fun the way they want and that is so cool. ... I just decided that it was better for my situation. ... Since I became very religious, I don't drink or smoke. I'm not addicted to anything because I've been trying to be better for [my brothers]. ... I wanted to do something good so I'm trying to focus on myself."

Since then, the latest opportunity presented itself: a new family business.

The Legionaries

In June 2023, the trio had an official business: Legion (@thelegionariesx on Instagram).

"We all love working out and sports," Martinez said. "My middle brother, he loves working out way more than he loves business, so he wants to be a nutritional fitness major. So, our thoughts on making a family business was putting [our interests] together and creating a nutrition business."

Martinez also explained that the brand name, Legion, means a group of people who support or fight for the same thing.

"In fitness, we all want kind of the same thing," she said. "We share this passion. We all know the struggle, the discipline that it takes and the focus that you need to have. We value the people that are putting the work in every day."

Martinez sought advice from other companies and creators, having several business meetings since the brand's beginning. The group also started creating fitness content to build

a community on social media. The content features workout routines, gym vlogs and meal plans.

The siblings have also started working on a sportswear brand of the same name since 2023. The team estimates another two years before launching in order to build brand identity and investments.

"We have the LLC and all the designs," Martinez said. "We're at the manufacturing part. ... We're still looking for fabrics. ... That's our next step. We're also working on the website. ... We don't want to have something that we did in two months. ... We want to launch something that we really love."

Present

Martinez is now 19 years old and a junior in her program. Her advice to prospective college students is to enjoy their youth.

"I feel like I missed a lot but I don't regret anything," she said. "That's just the way I decided it. But if you can enjoy all the things, enjoy it."

To anyone wanting to join the Army, Martinez advises following passions and doing what "feels right."

"There's bad days in the military but there's also good days," she said. "You're going to meet a lot of good



Photo courtesy Valentina Martinez

The official logo for Legion created by Valentina, Rene and Raul Martinez.

people. I think the best people that I've met, they're in the military. Just make sure it's something that you want to do and that you choose a job that you like."

She also reflects on her youth with gratitude.

"I was going through a lot at a really young age," Martinez said. "From that, where I'm at right now. I'm so blessed and so grateful. ...

I wouldn't have done anything if it wasn't for my family and God. ... I needed to forgive to keep going. ... I don't forget, but I forgive. ... I would tell [my younger self], 'You're gonna be fine and this is going to be worth it. Everything is going to make sense in the future. Just don't quit.'"

Martinez is looking forward to graduating and continuing growing her business with her brothers.



A mock-up of Legion's sportswear created by Valentina, Rene and Raul Martinez.

Photo courtesy Valentina Martinez

TURTLES, TRASH, TOURISM & TESLA

Story by Finch Cantu

East of Brownsville and south of South Padre Island lies a remote stretch of the Rio Grande delta known informally as Boca Chica Village. Once a serene coastal community home to little more than a neighborhood surrounded by miles of nature, much of the land was bought by Elon Musk’s SpaceX in 2012 and it has since grown into a bustling area with a front-row seat to the company’s thunderous rocket launches. But Musk’s brainchild is not the only big fish taking a bite.

Two liquefied natural gas companies, Rio Grande LNG and Texas LNG, have also bought portions of land along the Port of Brownsville. Through a process called liquefaction, whereby liquids are made from natural gas, the companies are planning to produce LNG and build export facilities.

For some Rio Grande Valley residents, this influx of development is just the economic jumpstart the area needs. However, for other residents, these developments are worthy of skepticism.

How Did We Get Here: The State of Our Shoreline

Musk, owner of private companies such as The Boring Co. and Neuralink, and partial owner of public corporations Tesla and X (formerly Twitter), founded his private spacecraft company SpaceX in 2002. SpaceX stepped into the public eye in 2008 with its launch of Falcon 1, the world’s first privately developed rocket to make orbit. Since then, it has carried out

aerospace projects across the United States with various goals.

Musk initially set his sights on Boca Chica beach for launching his reusable Falcon 9 rockets and Dragon spacecraft, according to “A timeline of SpaceX in Texas” by the San Antonio Express-News. Crews broke ground at the site in September 2014, after the Federal Aviation Administration gave the needed permissions for operation. However, in September 2019, Musk changed plans and announced that the site, Starbase, would launch tests of his Starship spacecraft and Super Heavy rocket instead.

The Starship launch vehicle stands at nearly 400 feet tall and can carry over 330,000 pounds, making it the largest and most powerful launch vehicle ever constructed, according to the SpaceX website. It is powered by 33 Raptor engines that run on liquid methane and liquid oxygen.

The FAA cleared these new plans for liftoff in April 2023, reporting that the changes did not significantly alter the site’s environmental impact. Later that same month, Starship’s first fully assembled flight test exploded over the Gulf of Mexico, scattering concrete and metal debris to a wide area, according to reports by the Associated Press.

Following the incident, the FAA conducted an investigation, which closed in early September. The FAA’s report required SpaceX to make 63 corrections

before Starship would be allowed to fly again.

Then in November 2023, after receiving the go-ahead once more, SpaceX launched a second test flight of Starship. It, too, exploded, though it lasted four minutes longer than its predecessor, according to reports by the Associated Press.

In February 2024, the FAA finished its investigation of the second test flight, according to published reports. Its report required SpaceX to take 17 corrective actions. As of February 2024, a third launch date has not been set.

On its part, Rio Grande LNG’s history in the RGV began in 2015 when Houston-based energy company NextDecade introduced its new subsidiary project, Rio Grande LNG LLC.

The project is intended to liquefy and export natural gas at a 984-mile site along the Port of Brownsville, NextDecade’s website stated.

Rio Grande LNG officially broke ground in early October 2023, beginning the construction of its facility. Once it is fully operational, NextDecade said the plant will produce 27 million metric tons of LNG annually—enough to power air conditioning for 34 million U.S. households. However, many of NextDecade’s interested customers are energy corporations from across the globe, according to its “Corporate Presentation November 2023.”

Photos by America Salazar

The Rio Grande LNG facility’s completion will also make NextDecade the largest privately funded infrastructure project in Texas.

The second LNG company, Texas LNG, is owned by international energy producer Glenfarne Energy Transition LLC. It will also be an export facility and liquefaction plant.

In 2015, Texas LNG filed with FERC to begin a pre-filing environmental review process, according to “History of Proposed LNG Plants at Port of Brownsville” on the UTRGV website. By 2020, the company secured a 625-acre lease along the Port of Brownsville for up to 50 years, according to Texas LNG’s website.

The company received needed Section 10 and Section 404 permits from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and approval from the Railroad Commission of Texas in January 2024 and is expected to begin construction this year.

According to its website, texaslng.com, Texas LNG’s commercial production will begin in 2028. It is intended to produce and export 4 million tons of LNG annually.

Putting Price Tags on SpaceX in the RGV

SpaceX’s arrival sent ripple effects into the economy of surrounding communities. In Cameron County, the company’s presence has spurred a rise in property values. According to annual reports from the Cameron County Appraisal District, Cameron County’s total land market value has rocketed from \$21.9 billion in October 2018 to over \$38 billion in July 2023.

The City of Brownsville experienced

a jump in private commercial building permit investment within a year. These investments almost doubled from \$85 million in 2021 to about \$160 million in 2022. The city’s tax revenue has also seen an increase. It collected almost \$28 million in sales taxes in 2016. By 2022, its sales tax revenue climbed to \$41.6 million.

Across the Queen Isabella Causeway, the City of South Padre Island also witnessed financial gain. South Padre reported that it collected \$4.4 million in property tax revenue in 2018. By 2022, the city collected almost \$5.3 million in property taxes.

Profits from tourism have reached business-minded residents of the Valley as well.

In the wake of SpaceX’s launches, various small businesses have popped up bearing space-age themes and seeking to capitalize on tourism in the RGV. These include Rocket Ranch and The Space Dog Station.

But local entrepreneurs are not the only group looking to the future with stars in their eyes. At The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, the Rocket Launchers, a student organization, focuses on preparing members for aerospace industry jobs by offering hands-on experience in designing, building and testing small-scale rockets in the Spaceport America Cup.

Ryan Lopez, vice president of Rocket Launchers, said the student organization has served as a “steppingstone” since 2015 in enabling students to gain internships with large companies and agencies, including SpaceX and NASA. He said “about five to 10” members have gained internships at SpaceX.

Lopez said SpaceX has also brought many needed jobs to the Valley.

“I’m from Rio Grande City, so out there, there’s not much out there,” Lopez said. “But I know people there who have got jobs at SpaceX, whether it’s welding, whether it’s, you know, different parts of manufacturing.”

As for its future impacts, Lopez predicted that SpaceX will encourage other industries to spread to the Valley.

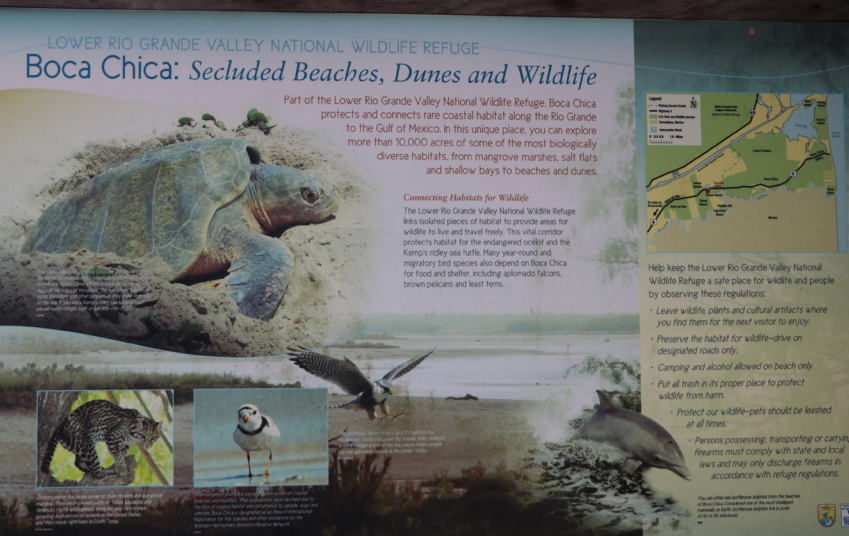
“One of the big industries that’s going to be coming within the next 50 years or so is space mining,” Lopez said. “So, you’re going to have missions to different asteroids and to different worlds where we collect samples and bring them back home.

“And if SpaceX builds Starbase into a fully rapidly reusable rocket launching area, I mean, it’s going to be something that’s unlike anywhere in the world. So, I would say that the Rio Grande Valley would boom, especially from the Brownsville area, because you’d have all this commerce coming in through space, literally.

“Slowly but surely, it’s going to get to that point where ... more industries are going to be coming in and more jobs are going to be available.”

Indeed, SpaceX has hired workers of all kinds, from engineers to hovercraft pilots to chefs and plumbers, according to its website’s job listings. However, it is unknown how many of its employees are RGV residents. Cameron County’s 2023 annual report stated that “SpaceX currently employs 2,000 full time employees, many who are local to Cameron County.”

However, some of these economic



Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge’s sign about the wildlife and map of Boca Chica.

benefits are one side of a double-edged sword. Higher land values may be profitable for the county itself, but for renters or people looking to buy, this means higher rent and housing prices.

For example, in the March 2022 Housing Report for the Brownsville-Harlingen area released by the Real Estate Center of Texas A&M University, the average price per square foot for a home in the Brownsville-Harlingen area in 2021 was \$153.58. In the December 2023 Housing Report for the same area, the average price per square foot had risen to \$182.29.

SpaceX has also delivered a blow to ecotourism in the Valley.

The Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge receives about 110,000 visitors annually, according to a public comment by Friends of the Wildlife Corridor President Jim Chapman regarding the FAA’s 2021 Draft Programmatic Environmental Assessment of SpaceX’s Starship/Super Heavy Launch Vehicle Program at the SpaceX Boca Chica Launch Site.

However, this number has already been subject to change.

Lindsay Dubin, the staff attorney for Defenders of Wildlife, and Sharon Wilcox, the senior Texas representative of Defenders of Wildlife, also submitted a public comment on the FAA’s Draft PEA.

“LRGV NWR has been repeatedly forced to shut down operations during SpaceX’s testing and launch activities, which prevents the Service from adequately managing the refuge and precludes visitors from enjoying these public lands,” Dubin and Wilcox wrote.

Accounting for all would-be visitors who were unable to access the park during

those 158 hours of closures, the NWR determined that the park lost 9.9 million recreational hours, according to Dubin and Wilcox’s comment.

Dubin and Wilcox also noted that the operations bring “environmental justice concerns.”

“Indeed, most of the refuge’s visitors are from the surrounding area and the surrounding area is occupied by a higher rate of individuals who are below the poverty line and a higher rate of individuals who are Hispanic compared to the national average,” Dubin and Wilcox wrote in their comment.

Patrick Anderson, chair of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Sierra Club, also submitted a comment on the FAA’s Draft PEA, noting that Port Isabel Junior High School “is just over six miles away (PEA p. 137).”

Anderson wrote that the proximity suggests that the community of Port Isabel, including “children and others with compromised health” will have to face air quality issues.

The Environmental Awareness Club, a student organization at UTRGV, attended a meeting held in Brownsville on Dec. 1, 2023, organized by Another Gulf Is Possible, during which the Carrizo Comecrudo Tribe of Texas, also known as Esto’k Gna, presented its experiences with SpaceX’s launches. While not officially recognized by the U.S. government, the tribe has sacred lands in the Boca Chica area.

At the meeting, representatives of Esto’k Gna said that scheduled rocket launches have been powerful enough to shake entire houses like earthquakes, according to EAC Vice President Sofia Martinez.

These pieces of information appear to contradict a statement in the FAA’s Final PEA Executive Summary, which said that because “the access restrictions to Boca Chica Beach would be temporary and intermittent, and there are other cost-free public beach access locations within the vicinity of local communities, the proposed action would not result in disproportionate high and adverse impacts to minority and low-income populations.”

What Goes Up Must Come Down ... Into the Gulf

No development project is without cost to the natural environment, and this is especially true for Starbase.

The FAA described Boca Chica as “a sparsely populated coastal area adjacent to the Gulf of Mexico and ecologically unique public lands owned by Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Lower Rio Grande Valley National Wildlife Refuge.”

Jim Chapman, president of Friends of the Wildlife Corridor, and Nicole Ekstrom, president of Friends of Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge, jointly submitted a public comment in 2021 to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers regarding the potential issuance of a 404 permit for expansion of SpaceX at Boca Chica.

They emphasized the importance of the land at Boca Chica.

“In fact, Boca Chica is a unique and diverse ecosystem with extensive tidal flats, salt prairie, scattered black mangroves, and vegetated sand dunes, with a very significant population of shore birds and other wildlife,” Chapman and Ekstrom wrote. “Present in or near this area are rare, threatened and endangered species such as the ocelot, aplomado falcon, piping plover ... and others, as well as a multitude of passerines during fall and spring migrations. ...

“The VLA [Vertical Launch Area] is surrounded on 3 sides by National Wildlife Refuge and Texas State Park land, none of it dedicated to recreational use. ... Only the Boca Chica Beach to the east of the VLA is significantly used for recreation, as well as for research by coastal biologists and birders. This beach, less than ¼ mile from the VLA, is also a nesting site for the endangered Kemps Ridley sea turtle,” Chapman and Ekstrom wrote.

However, despite the key role Boca Chica plays in the survival of many species, animals are being harmed and driven out.

The Coastal Bend Bays and Estuaries Program conducted research on the population of several bird species in the Boca Chica area since SpaceX began routine testing. David Newstead, director of the program, presented its results in a public comment regarding the FAA’s Draft PEA.

“The Piping Plover population has decreased by ~54% over the course of three years (from over 300 to below 150),” Newstead summarized. “A study of nesting activity of Wilson’s and Snowy Plovers in the area was also conducted during the five breeding seasons of 2017-2021. ...

“For reference, we have conducted similar analyses at other sites on the Texas coast over the same time periods and detected no alarming negative trends. The timeframe of these studies is temporally consistent with the major buildout and testing of SpaceX infrastructure, rocket components, and Starship prototypes from 2019-2021. These findings indicate the associated activity has had negative impacts to wildlife well beyond the applicant’s property boundaries.”

The reasons for these population declines include the “noise, light, traffic and human presence generated by SpaceX,” according to Dubin and Wilcox’s public comment. This includes operations intended to prevent harm, such as the removal of debris from sensitive areas and pre-launch drone surveillance to ensure humans are not in dangerous areas, both of which bring loud noises and may startle or provoke nesting birds. Animals that travel by ground, such as ocelots and jaguarundis, have also been impacted. Dubin and Wilcox note that the LRGV NWR has seen more frequent roadkills of wildlife at all hours of the day, citing an email from Bryan Winton, manager of the LRGV NWR.

Local residents also have personal experience with these changes brought by SpaceX. Mary Angela Branch, a board member of community nonprofit Save RGV, frequents Boca Chica beach and grew up in the area.

“What I have noticed significantly is, since the last four years of it really ramping up with testing, since 2019 ... I just noticed that it’s completely devoid of life,” Branch said in an interview with Pulse. “And I just don’t mean human life. I mean all life. ... less and less wildlife there ... beautiful vegetation and flowers ... pollinators ... less of everything. ...

“And, you know, we’re right in the middle of fall migration. We should have—

The STARGATE facility at Boca Chica.

it should be loaded with ducks and birds, both year-round and migratory, and they should be stopping there resting, foraging—refueling, so to speak. ... There’s been nothing. I used to see Queen Monarchs, all kinds of moths. ... But it’s not the Boca Chica that I remember, even in the last five years.”

Branch also said now there are tourists, the news media, new housing developments, heavy machinery and construction vehicles.

“And maybe that’s progress, but to me it’s a tragedy,” she said. “But it’s what man does. Everywhere. They’ve destroyed the entire Gulf Coast from Louisiana to Corpus, and now they’ve targeted the last pristine—and to me, most ecologically biodiverse—sensitive habitat. And I would put it up against Galapagos or the islands in the South Pacific. I mean, I would put it up against any other beautiful habitat in the world that is protected. ... But we never got that designation.”

Branch fears the area is going to become a “wasteland.”

“I know there are people that say, ‘No, it never will be,’” she said. “... What comes back, with continual destruction and degradation? Yeah, the birds will settle back in. You fire off that cannon, they’re going to scatter. How many times are they going to keep coming back?”

To make the situation worse, pollutants are being released that damage the air and water quality of the Boca Chica ecosystem and contribute to climate change.

“Methane is a super-pollutant 87 times more powerful than CO2 at warming the atmosphere over a 20-year period,” Margolis wrote. “... Methane also leads to the formation of ground-level ozone,

a dangerous air pollutant that harms ecosystems and species by suppressing plant growth and reducing plant productivity and carbon uptake.”

“Deep cuts in methane emissions of ~45% by 2030” are necessary to prevent “0.3°C of warming by 2040” and avoid “the crossing of planetary tipping points—abrupt and irreversible changes in Earth systems to states wholly outside human experience, resulting in severe physical, ecological and socioeconomic harms,” Margolis wrote.

He also addressed the potential for immediate damage should stored methane be hit by natural disasters.

“The FAA states that launch propellant and commodities (including gaseous and liquid methane) will be stored in aboveground tanks at the Boca Chica site,” Margolis wrote. “This includes thousands of metric tons of propellants, which by definition are explosive, but also have been shown to be carcinogenic and toxic. The Boca Chica site has the potential to be hit by hurricanes coming off the Gulf of Mexico, which have been increasing in recent year[s]. Furthermore, FEMA’s flood risk map ... clearly shows that all SpaceX facilities at Boca Chica are at risk of flooding.”

Regardless of whether flooding or tank ruptures occur, Friends of the Wildlife Corridor predicts on its website that because “SpaceX has built the vertical launch area higher than the surrounding marsh, tidal flats and vegetated areas and is continuing to build higher,” wetlands and the “nearby South Bay, a unique and highly productive shallow bay,” will be degraded by the disposal of contaminated water used during launches and for fire suppression, runoff from the vertical launch area and “fuel runoff from leaks or





Construction at the Starbase facility at Boca Chica. accidents.”

Many of the damages already present in the Boca Chica area have not been a surprise. In an email to Pulse magazine, Aubrey Buzek, the Texas Public Affairs Specialist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said, “as part of its consultation with the FAA, the Service anticipated permanent effects to habitat and species in the area. Impacts to ESA [Endangered Species Act]-listed species include loss of habitat, reduced ability to disperse, and exposure to loud noise, rocket heat plume, bright night lighting, tall structures, hazardous materials, ground vibration and increased vehicle traffic.”

At the Port of Brownsville, another prominent developer, the energy producer NextDecade, is building its Rio Grande LNG liquefaction plant and export terminal. Also along the Port of Brownsville is the future site of fellow energy project Texas LNG.

Pipelines and Promises

Since both Rio Grande LNG and Texas LNG have yet to begin planned operation of the plants, many of their economic impacts have yet to occur. However, both have expressed commitment to supporting the local community.

Both Rio Grande LNG and Texas LNG promise on their websites to offer internships, short-term and long-term jobs to Valley residents.

In an email to Pulse magazine on Feb. 14, 2024, NextDecade Communications wrote, “as of mid-February 2024, we had approximately 750 people working at the RGLNG site of which more than 70% are local hires.”

NextDecade Communications also wrote that the company is “committed to hiring 35% of craft professionals locally. During the peak development period, RGLNG is expected to create more than 5,000 construction jobs and 350-400 on-site jobs during operations.”

Texas LNG has not begun construction

and its website holds no information on available positions. Pulse contacted Texas LNG on Feb. 27, 2024 at 4:52 p.m.. As of press time, Texas LNG had not responded.

NextDecade has also been working to uphold its commitment to helping Valley residents by contributing to a variety of events in the Brownsville and coastal RGV areas. This includes donations to the Good Neighbor Settlement House in Brownsville and the Laguna Madre Youth Center in Port Isabel, according to news releases on its website.

NextDecade also wrote that it is “investing in our local workforce by providing training opportunities for the skills needed to construct and operate RGLNG.”

So far, investment has meant “sponsoring local college and school programs as part of a feeder system that will employ technicians and career professionals,” NextDecade Communications wrote. This includes sharing resources to teach the local workforce needed skills and “on-the-job training programs to promote and strengthen the talent pipeline, creating additional career opportunities for the team.”

Greenwashing or Truly Green Gas

The Rio Grande LNG site is unfinished and the Texas LNG site has not yet begun development, so their environmental impacts are also not fully known. However, two of the major issues that usually come from fossil fuel projects are chemical pollution and habitat damage.

Greenhouse gas emissions are a big topic to both Rio Grande LNG and Texas LNG.

The NextDecade website states that Rio Grande LNG will be reducing its own carbon emissions by over 90% using carbon capture and carbon storage techniques. The carbon capture and storage project at Rio Grande LNG will be “one of the largest CCS projects in North America,” according to the website. “At full scale, we expect Rio Grande LNG will

capture and permanently store more than 5 million metric tonnes of CO2 per year. This is equivalent to the amount of CO2 absorbed by nearly 300 million mature trees or avoided by removing more than one million vehicles from the road.”

Although natural gas as an energy source still contributes to greenhouse gas emissions, NextDecade Communications added that according to the International Energy Agency, to achieve net-zero emissions from the energy sector, low emissions sources of energy—LNG included—would need to replace carbon intensive energy sources.

Rio Grande LNG also is “committed to the implementation and execution of best-in-practice safety measures in our operations,” which include safety measures such as leak detection systems and operating with stop-work authority, which allows any employee to stop an individual or group task when a risky or unsafe condition is deemed present.

Regarding Texas LNG, its liquefaction process will be powered by renewable energy. It expects this to reduce the facility’s emissions to “less than half of the typical U.S. LNG export project” and make Texas LNG the “gold standard of green LNG design,” according to its website.

Damage to wildlife, however, is harder to mitigate.

The USFWS predicts that, like with SpaceX, LNG operations will cause “loss of habitat, displacement, and exposure to increased vehicle traffic, noise, lighting and human activity” for ESA-listed species, according to Buzek’s email to Pulse.

On its Rio Grande LNG factsheet, NextDecade says it is “ensuring minimal impact to surrounding environment and wildlife” via the use of muted color schemes, ground flares to replace tall flare stacks and smart lighting systems to minimize the use of lights overall.

In addition, NextDecade partnered with the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, donating \$130,000 to fund a study involving the translocation of all tortoises found on the Rio Grande LNG site to the program’s South Pasture Facility, according to NextDecade’s website. TAMUK has not released information on the well-being of the tortoises involved. TAMUK was also unavailable for comment.

NextDecade is also collaborating with partners including the Brownsville Navigation District and The Conservation Fund to protect “over 4,000 acres of land in perpetuity,” according to NextDecade’s website.

NextDecade elaborated on this in its email to Pulse magazine.

The land to be conserved will consist of 1,500 acres of the Las Lomas Ecological Preserve, 1,531 acres of “local wetlands and thorn scrubs” and 1,050 acres of animal habitats, among others.

“As part of our commitment to protecting local wildlife,” NextDecade wrote, “we purchased 1,050 acres of ocelot and jaguarundi habitat near the Laguna Atascosa National Wildlife Refuge for preservation.”

Community Response

Throughout the Valley, commercial and industrial development along our coastline is spurring sharp response from community members both for and against it.

SaveRGV, the Carrizo Comecrudo Tribe of Texas and the Lone Star chapter of the Sierra Club filed a lawsuit in October 2021 against Cameron County, the Texas General Land Office and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton for violating the 1959 Texas Open Beaches Act by closing beaches for testing for up to 450 hours annually, according to published reports.

SaveRGV stated on its website that 445th District Court Judge Gloria Rincones in Cameron County ruled in July 2022 that “the organizations lacked standing or jurisdiction to sue.”

On Feb. 1, 2024, the appellate court reversed the trial court’s judgment and remanded the case to the trial court for further proceedings, according to court documents.

SaveRGV expects the overturning to be appealed before the Texas Supreme Court.

Following Starship’s first fully assembled launch in April 2023, the Center for Biological Diversity, American Bird Conservancy, Surfrider Foundation, Save RGV and the Carrizo Comecrudo Nation of Texas jumped into action, suing the FAA for an incomplete evaluation of the rocket’s impact on both local wildlife and residents. According to court documents, the lawsuit was filed May 1, 2023 with the United States District Court for the District of Columbia. It alleges that the FAA’s evaluation of the Starship/Super Heavy Launch Vehicle Program was insufficient and violated both the National Environmental Policy Act and the Administrative Procedure Act.



The U.S. flag and rockets at the SpaceX site at Boca Chica.

While some efforts are seeking to hold regulatory agencies accountable for issues that arise, others are focused on the impacts of these developments on wildlife. Projects like these add industrial and construction waste onto ecosystems already damaged by everyday pollutants and beachgoer garbage.

According to Dubin and Wilcox’s public comment on the FAA’s Draft PEA, LRGV NWR Manager Bryan Winton told them in an email that “trash discarded by SpaceX employees ‘is being blown into the refuge due to high winds, and negligence.’ He further noted that ‘the refuge has never experienced this level of trash visible from the road ever. It is readily apparent that the trash is related to SpaceX and the motorists driving to-from the site daily.’”

President of the Brownsville-based Sculpture Club at UTRGV, Yvette Larios, an art education senior, described in an interview with Pulse the levels of trash the club found during its cleanups at South Padre Island Beach Access 3.

“We went to the same area all those times, and each time we went, there was always a mess,” Larios said. “... We found a lot of fishing line, we found a lot of glass, water bottles, a lot of cans. We found a lot of toys, Barbie doll parts. ... We found full bottles of liquor there. Even though glass is not permitted on the beach, it was there. ...

“It was honestly, like, an eye-opener, because when I go to the beach, I don’t really think about the mess. I just go to enjoy myself.”

The club’s vice president, Anahi Garcia De la Rosa, a psychology sophomore, was just as surprised.

“It was really jarring, seeing an area that very few people actually visit, littered with trash,” De la Rosa said.

To bring awareness to the issue of personal and industrial pollution and inspire residents to do what they can to help, the Brownsville-based Sculpture Club at UTRGV spent about five months gathering trash from South Padre Island Beach Access 3 and repurposing it into a sculpture of a sea turtle. Sculpture Club Secretary Grecia Osorio said in an email to Pulse that the piece is intended as “an homage to all the sea creatures affected by the inhumane levels of plastics in the ocean.”

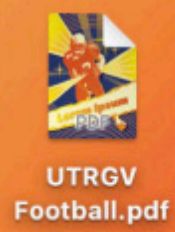
Other groups are focused on reminding people of the benefits these developments are bringing to those looking for employment in the Valley.

“People are going to have concerns,” said Lopez, president of the Rocket Launchers. “And rightfully so, that’s totally fine. ... I don’t see why you should always look at that negative, because I think the benefits most definitely outweigh the negatives. I think a lot of lives could be changed. ...

“A lot of communities, they stay very closed off and it’s sad because a lot of ... people my age would rather leave those communities and go look for something else. But the Valley is going to have to grow regardless. And if we want that to grow, we need to be open-arms about it.”

What Lies Ahead

The situation along our shoreline is evolving constantly. Regardless of the strong opposition and support behind each development, progress continues to be made and the matter comes down to whether the benefits are worth the costs, a question which seemingly only time will answer.



UTRGV Football.pdf



Turn On The Lights



Born To Fly// Cheer.JPG



Athletics



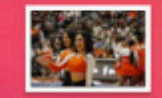
On The Green with Henry Wang



Process & Presence



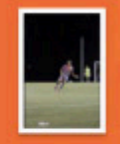
Men's Tennis



Show Up & Show Out//Dance.JPG



Are Student Athletes Happier?



From Pitch To Present.JPG



On & Off The Court



Lessons From The Pitch.JPG



The Vaquero Fan Experien...ball.JPG



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Play Like A Girl.psd



Strength of Mind.jpg

BRONCS, BRNCOS & VAQUERO FOOTBALL

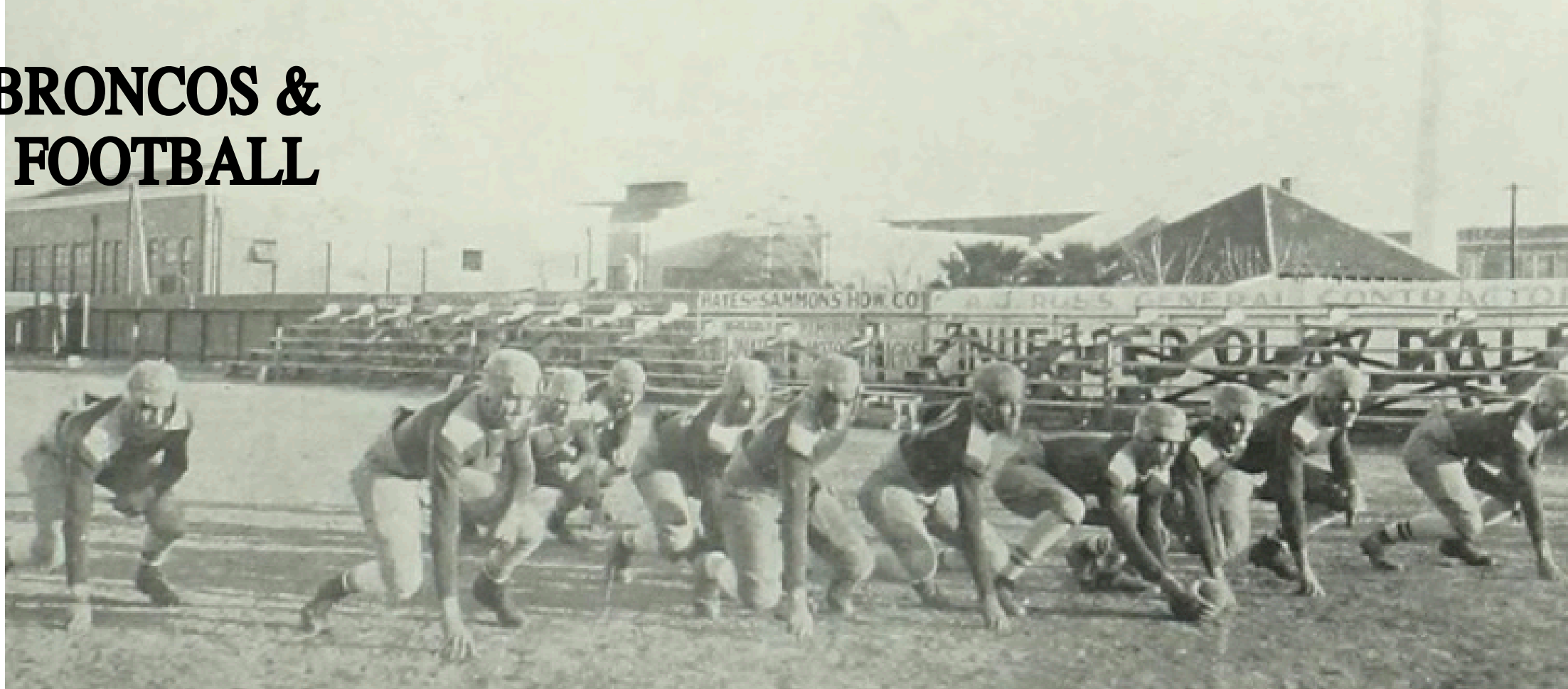
Story by Andrea Maldonado

“Bronc Football: Still Undefeated!” was a running joke among UT Pan American alumni, bragging about the football team they never had.

The old joke stemmed from the belief that the institution did not have a football team, and therefore could not be defeated.

However, the institution has decades of football history running through its halls, stemming from the Broncs of Edinburg Junior College to the legacy institution UTPA Broncos who snapped its “undefeated” streak decades ago.

After a nearly 100-yearlong history of failed attempts to bring football to UTRGV, Vaquero football will become a reality in Fall 2025.



The Midlothian. Edinburg College, 1928.



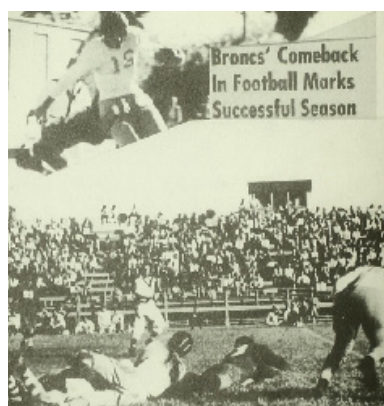
El Bronco. Edinburg Junior College, 1948.



El Bronco. Edinburg Junior College, 1948.



El Bronco. Edinburg Junior College, 1949.



El Bronco. Edinburg Junior College, 1948.



El Bronco. Edinburg Junior College, 1949.



El Bronco. Edinburg Junior College, 1949.

The Timeline

The timeline of football at UTRGV begins in 1927 with the Edinburg Junior College Broncs. Wearing blue and gold, the Broncs were not undefeated as UTPA alumni joked. They got stung by their biggest rivals, the Brownsville Junior College Scorpions, in many seasonal games.

During their heyday, the Broncs, led by head coach JD Foster, defeated the

Rice University freshman team and tied the UT freshman team.

After suffering grievances from the Great Depression and World War II, the team came back in the 1940s under the leadership of head coach Bobby Cannon. It played other collegiate freshman teams and won against local high schools, such as McAllen High.

Challenged by funding and university support, the Broncs' 19-0 win against the University of Mexico marked the end of 23 years of football history at UTRGV legacy institution Edinburg Junior College in 1950.

Almost 40 years after the last Broncs football game, the Pan American University Alumni Association, led by attorney Eddie De la Garza,

attempted to bring Division III non-scholarship football back to campus by the fall of 1989.

The association included Valley businessmen who would raise \$375,000 to fund the season. In spite of the university's lack of funding, in 1988, former UTPA Athletic Director Sam Odstreil and other university officials were optimistic about

bringing back Bronc football. The motivation: a projected \$150,000 to \$200,000 in additional tuition dollars from football student-athletes.

However, by the following year, the team was made up of Pan-Am students, financed by its alumni association but barred by university officials from identifying with the university's colors, name, mascot or

use of its facilities.

In other words, the now called “Broncos Football Team” were disowned due to lack of funding, liability insurance and institutional support.

According to an article published by The Chronicle of Higher Education in 1989, Bruce Erickson, former Pan-

Am director of Public Relations, said “to give [the team] money would mean either raising student-service fees or robbing Peter to pay Paul. And, frankly, we’re more concerned about underrepresentation of Hispanics in science, engineering and academia than we are in football.”

With or without institutional support, Broncos coach Don Pendergrass and eager football student-athletes kept the team going for as long as funding lasted. They played teams from Mexico in a 14-game schedule against high schools and colleges.

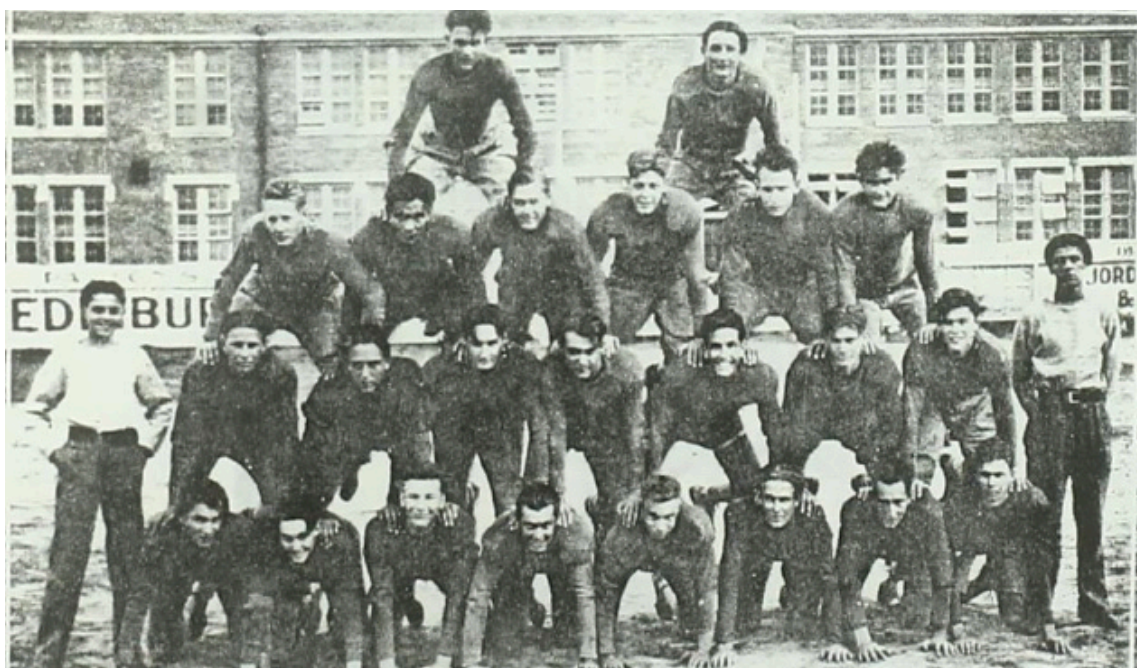
The ending of the “Broncos” season is undetermined.

On Aug. 31, 2015, UTRGV was born. The institution now has a strong identity and student body that will soon follow the footsteps of its legacy institutions with a much brighter outlook for the future of football.

“You have to pay tribute and have appreciation for [the former teams] that have really paved that path and at least they tried to chip away at it to now see it coming to fruition,” said Chasse Conque, UTRGV athletic director and vice president.



El Bronco. Edinburg Junior College, 1948.



Bottom Row: Renfroe, Ellington, Armstrong, Russell, Miller, Dyer, McBride, Berry. *The Midlothian. Edinburg College, 1929.*
Second Row: McDonald, Buscher, Sappenfield, Walker, Williams, Sinnette, Nittler, Beverly, Cavazos. **Third Row:** Slaughter, Garza, Johnson, Handley, Newton, Abendroth. **Top Row:** Young, Perez.

New Beginnings

Conque said his administration had so many important issues that had to be addressed before discussing the expansion of athletics or the feasibility of a football season, placing an emphasis on advancing the academic side.

A consensus was reached between the administration and student body to place the missing piece of the puzzle to Vaqueros’ college experience—football.

He said the administration faced many hardships with starting the program from scratch, especially considering the failed history of football at the institution.

“We called it, ‘Football in a box,’” Conque said. “We had a helmet that we make-shifted and a whole bunch of documents and pictures of what we wanted to build and, of course, our budgets. To see from those days of everything being able to fit into a box, to see where it is now and how many people are involved is special.”

The athletic director said timing was really important to embark on this journey. It all started with the 2021 Student Government Association Referendum, in which 60.46% of 5,784 students voted in favor of the \$11.25 per credit hour increase to the already \$15 athletics fee. Ultimately, about 11% of the student body agreed to raise the intercollegiate athletics fee from \$180 to \$315 for full-time students.

The passing of the referendum allowed the institution to partially fund the building of facilities and expenses of the 16 Division I teams that represent UTRGV 250 times a year across the country.

Football, specifically, is funded through private support and the revenue created from season tickets, as well as a percentage of the merchandise sold by the institution.



Photo courtesy UTRGV Athletics

Other than the athletics fee, Conque emphasized that no tuition dollars can be used to fund the athletics programs.

“Over 2,700 season tickets are already sold and we have fundraised over \$3 million in private support,” he said. “It’s a totally different pot than the academic side of the institution.” The athletics administration has built a sustainable model supported by the community, which establishes a bright future for Vaquero football unlike its predecessors, the Broncos and Broncos, Conque said.

“It was different from the failed attempts from the ’30s and ’80s challenged by funding,” he said. “... Now, we are seeing that [funding is] always a challenge. There is always pressure to keep those revenues strong, but we’ve got a community that is now doing it right.”

Bringing more legitimacy to UTRGV “Being in Texas and not having

football—a lot of people don’t know where we are on the map,” said UTRGV Football head coach Travis Bush.

Conque said Athletics wants to use itself as a vehicle to help tell the story of UTRGV. He added student-athletes represent the institution and proudly wear the logo through wins and losses to place UTRGV’s name on the map.

The administration said it expects the football program to give the university more exposure and recognition. It projects admission numbers will go up, alumni will shape a stronger connection to their alma mater and everyone will be able to find the RGV on a map.

Conque reiterated a big piece of the expected legitimacy is keeping the best student-athletes in the Valley.

“We build our programs and hope to be successful with football so that our

local high school student-athletes say no to others [and instead] want to stay and play for UTRGV,” he said.

Jonah Goldberg, athletic director for Communications and Championships, said only one out of 16 of all the colleges and universities in the country have Division I football.

“To think that we have one of those institutions right here is amazing,” Conque said. “There’s a lot of regions that wish they had Division I football in their backyard. We have that now.”

As the only university in the region with a Division I football program, the athletic director said UTRGV is committed to prioritizing recruitment in the Valley.

Bush and his team hit the road in Spring 2023 on the hunt for the best student-athletes to build the program. The analogy was putting a “V” over

the state of Texas, with the bottom of the “V” being in the Valley. The coaching staff worked their way out to East Texas, Houston and the rest of the state to then finish back home and visit every high school in the RGV.

Nick Tovar, Brownsville Veterans Memorial high school senior tight end, committed to UTRGV Football. He said although he received a couple of offers from other institutions, they were 12 to 24 hours away from home, including Division II and III schools from New Mexico and New York. He said the UTRGV coaching staff were family-oriented and offered a unique opportunity to stay close to home and play Division I football.

“It’s really an eye opener to the younger generations because not many people here in the Valley get scholarship offers or even Division I offers,” Tovar said. “It’s motivating to see upperclassmen in the Valley get

a shot at D-I football and [younger generations] will want to work harder and get where we are, maybe even better.”

J.C. Ramirez, the Brownsville Veterans Memorial High School football head coach, said it is a great honor for UTRGV Football to give Valley students an opportunity as the area is traditionally underrepresented in the college football landscape.

“For us, as the coaching staff, it means the world to us that the UTRGV staff is making a concerted effort to bring in kids from our area and we are going to be rooting for every single kid that has an opportunity to sign with UTRGV,” Ramirez said.

The institution will welcome its first official football student-athlete class in Fall 2024.

Community Engagement & Vaquero Pride

In a community in which football is king, as it is in South Texas, the Athletics Department expects thousands of fans to come out to support the Vaqueros and cover the bleachers with orange.

“I don’t think anything brings a university community together more than athletics, especially football,” Bush said.

There’s a “sizzle” surrounding the upcoming Vaquero football season. Other than the scores on the board, the team, alongside the institution’s Spirit Program, will boost Vaquero pride and improve the college experience for students, faculty and the community, Conque said.

“Sometimes it’s more about the sizzle than it is the steak,” Conque said. “In

athletics, it’s about having a good product, right? But it is [also] the presentation, everything else around it. We focus on the steak, but we also know the sizzle is really important as well.”

The athletics director said the community is seeing more of the UTRGV Vaqueros brand everywhere—billboards, airports, grocery stores—in an effort to gain support and grow pride within students and alumni for football.

Conque said the athletes on the team will not only play for the RGV but will build connections with the community, regardless of where they come from.

“They are going to play for the Valley even harder, so it’s not just supporting

UTRGV, but it’s getting them woven into the fabric of the community,” he said. “When those two things happen, it becomes this beautiful marriage where everybody’s on the same page.”

The Vaqueros will soon get to celebrate the end of their decadeslong “undefeated” streak. The kickoff of the Vaquero football season will be Aug. 30, 2025, one day before the 10-year anniversary of UTRGV.

Photo courtesy UTRGV Athletics

Illustration by Gonzalo Puente

Illustration by Gonzalo Puente



BORN to FLY

Story by Andrea Maldonado

The UTRGV Cheer Team leads V Nation and crowd participation on game days, cheering teams on the sidelines. However, cheering for sports teams is not its exclusive purpose. Cheerleaders are representatives of the university. They are catalysts for enhancing student involvement and Vaquero pride. Cheerleaders shape the strong community that characterizes UTRGV.

UTRGV Division 1 Cheerleading Team

The team's mission is to bring the crowd together on game days. Cheerleaders are committed to spreading Vaquero spirit in the student community and are dedicated to cultivating pride for the institution. It is a difficult task to complete, but these student athletes are passionate about representing the student body.

Political science junior RandiJade Delagarza said she has always wanted to be a cheerleader because she liked how they brought crowds together.

"I always saw them on the sidelines and they always looked put together," Delagarza said. "They always looked pretty [and] were entertaining the crowd. Imagine there [were] no cheerleaders in the sidelines; it [would] probably be a pretty quiet game or crowd. I feel like they do something big at games. So, I always just wanted to be in a uniform and I have loved it ever since."

As part of the Spirit Program, UTRGV cheerleaders foster Vaquero Spirit on campus not only at games, but also during appearances, events and on social media. Spirit is an essential aspect of college. Isela Gomez, head coach of the program, said Spirit is all about becoming one.

"Vaquero spirit has a lot to do with having a sense of community and acknowledgement of our varying cultures that are in the Rio Grande Valley," Gomez said.

For students who feel they have not met somebody else like them, Delagarza advises to come out to games to see the diversity.

When everyone is wearing orange and cheering for the same team, there is an unmatched sense of community; a community that the Spirit program helps cultivate. In the Valley, people may be so interlaced with one another. Everyone knows and cares for each other, so UTRGV is the orange thread that keeps the RGV's community fabric strong and resilient.

The Spirit Program and Football

Football is a huge tradition for South Texas and a key aspect of the college experience. With the sport coming to UTRGV, the partnership between that and the Spirit program anticipates great response from the student community as it desperately awaits the first football game day, according to Gomez.

Photos by Blanca Castillo

Gomez said football will be an area of pride where UTRGV's athletes, cheerleaders and the Spirit Program shine.

With an increase of Vaquero pride running through classrooms, the UTRGV Cheer Team works tirelessly to up its skills, performances and efforts to keep up with the crowd as well as the success of the university's D-1 sports teams. Cheerleaders practice three times a week bright and early at 6 a.m. Nevertheless, hard work pays off and these student athletes are a prime example.



Junior UTRGV cheerleader RandiJade Delagarza cheers on the Vaqueros men's basketball team on Feb. 15.



The UTRGV cheerleaders jump for the Vaqueros at the basketball game against Abilene Christian University on Feb. 15.

D-1 cheerleader Nina Guzman said while what they do on the sidelines might look easy, they work hard to go all the way.

"There is a difference between practicing here and being on the sidelines or on stage," Guzman said. "It's like a switch; you automatically feel the fruits of your labor, [and] you see all the hard work. [Spectators] see that everytime we did a full out here, it was like easy peasy when we were on the sidelines because we worked so hard to get there and look the way that we do."

Besides its rigorous training, the team has represented UTRGV at the Universal Cheerleaders Association (UCA) and the National Cheerleaders Association (NCA) competitions. In 2022, at the UCA national finals, UTRGV Cheer ranked fourth out of 20 teams.

Spirit program Coordinator and Cheer coach Rudy Mata said the cheer team's ambition is to compete every year at the UCA nationals in January.

The UTRGV Cheer Team also indicates that hardworking student athletes are representatives for the campus community.

"I learned cheer is not just about [putting] on your uniform and [getting] all dolled up, but it is also about gaining trust within your team," Guzman said. "You have to trust each other for having someone on top of you, and they have to trust you to carry them. It's about unity

and support; it has a deeper meaning than what's seen from the outside. That is very important not just for the team but for you as an individual. It is very meaningful, and it will always hold a place in my heart."

To outsiders, cheer might seem like a superficial discipline. Despite the

"... it has a deeper meaning than what's seen from the outside."

common belief, just as any other team, cheerleaders said being on UTRGV Cheer has helped them in many different aspects, not only on their skills as athletes but on a personal level.

"One key lesson that I learned from this team is to be disciplined and to not be afraid to be outspoken," Guzman said. "Cheer has helped me build confidence for the outside world. I used to be very introverted; now, I am confident within myself just because I leave my example here, so I want to leave my example outside."

The Spirit program uses its resources for outreach and recruitment to motivate more students to be part of the program. One initiative is the cheer clinics it hosts in high schools and middle schools across the Valley with the purpose of cultivating interest and Vaquero spirit in the student-athlete community. In the future, Gomez

and Mata said they hope to bring this initiative to elementary schools as well.

Mata said the desired outcome of the recruitment strategy is to get students in the mindset of wanting to be a cheerleader or dancer so they want to be part of the UTRGV Spirit Program.

Delagarza said she has been cheering since a young age. Most cheerleaders shared this experience.

"If I told little Randi that I [would] still be cheering at the collegiate level, she wouldn't believe it," Delagarza said. "But she would also be super proud because I never thought I would make it this far."

Considering the upcoming football season, expansion of the Spirit program and plans for competition, the cheer team coach hopes to enhance the student athletes' abilities in tumbling and other collegiate-level skills.

"So, that way we can recruit those top-tier athletes [and] keep them in the Valley," Mata said. "A lot of them want to go to those big competitive schools because they already have football programs ... highly competitive programs. We want to be that program locally. We don't only want to keep local talent, but we want to draw in talent from around Texas and even the U.S. if we can."



SHOW UP &

Story by Marissa Rodriguez

For assistant coach Olympia De Leon and head coach Isela Gomez, it is a family thing.

“We call ourselves ‘The Spirit Program Family’,” Gomez said. “So, we do strive to achieve that feeling when it comes to that type of team dynamic. We’re very supportive of each other. We hold each other accountable. We are calling each other if we’re running a few minutes late for practice. If someone needs a ride or a reminder or help with choreography; [we] pair up. They team up.”

Both coaches are alumnae of The University of Texas Pan-American and The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. With Rudy Mata, UTRGV Spirit and Traditions program coordinator, the three set out to grow the team and expand the Spirit program.

“It’s been very exciting,” Gomez said. “I came on board almost a year

ago. We doubled the team size. We’ve been promoting the team much more than it has been promoted before, in a sense of regularly posting on social media, being a part of and participating more in community and campus events. [This is] just to make sure that the community and the campus know that, ‘Hey, we’re here. We’re here to support you guys. We’re here to get you guys excited at the games.

“The traditions are still there and the style is still there.”

We’re here to represent and show you guys that we’re ambassadors of the university.”

The Spirit program is comprised of the UTRGV cheer, dance, mascot and more recently, the drill team. Their goal is to enhance school spirit and create new legacies for the community

Photos by Briana Mireles

and future alumni of the university.

Gomez majored in dance during her time as a student. She also taught dance at Mission High School for seven years before becoming the head coach of the UTRGV spirit program. She said that collaboration is the key to success.

“I try to stay consistent, set expectations and guidelines but more importantly, I like to make sure I’m honoring and following through with tradition and keeping what works and taking feedback from students and from other staff and faculty members and you know, seeing what they see and taking that into consideration of which direction we’re gonna go,” Gomez said.

On her part, assistant coach De Leon was part of the UTPA Blazers Dance Team, as well as the UTRGV Dance Team. She said that keeping traditions is important to the team.

SHOW OUT

“That’s what I really love about the team. The traditions are still there and the style is still there,” De Leon said. “Like, I’ll show [coach Gomez] videos; ‘Look, the style hasn’t changed. Look, we still do all this.’”

Also a full-time drill instructor at McAllen Memorial High School, De Leon said the dance team’s tradition of allowing students to choreograph their sideline dances is something that promotes team bonding and self-expression.

“That was a big one because that’s something we used to do and back then, we saw it differently,” she said. “Now that I’m on the coaching side, I can see how it can make some of the students come out of their shell and they can also start bonding together and find ways to get creative with choreography within the team. So, sidelines is something that she kept, to where the students choreographed it, not the coaches.”

Another tradition Gomez has kept alive is the Bigs and Littles program, in which every longtime student on the team [Bigs] mentors a younger student [Littles]. Dance captain Vanessa Barnett explained that this mentoring program has brought the team closer.

“I think it helps with team bonding because we are all assigned a Little, so like, all the veterans are assigned a Little, a rookie, and it helps us get to know each other a little bit better,” Barnett said. “It helps the rookies get a little bit more welcome and comfortable on the team and it helps give them some guidance for their first year ... So, they have someone to go to, like, ask questions and we’re able to bond over that.”

She also said that as one of the team captains, seeing the team succeed means something special to her.

“It’s been grueling, stressful at times, but it’s also been worth it,” she said. “[Seeing] the growth of my team and the growth of the Spirit program from a leader’s perspective is honestly so rewarding. I love seeing my team succeed and I love being able to say that I had a hand in that.”

In the end, Gomez said she is very fortunate because she has helped set the standards and raise the bar for the team. She said she could not have done it without the support from her staff, especially Rudy Mata. Gomez described the team as very driven and self-motivated.

“They wanna see the program grow,” she said. They’ve been very excited and hopeful as they’ve seen the team get more notoriety and recognition because that’s something they’ve maybe never felt as much before. So, we are working hard behind the scenes to make sure that’s something that they get.”

ON AND OFF



Compiled by Karina N. Alegre and
Veronica Palacios

Illustrations by Gonzalo Puento

Photos by Briana Mireles

With 1,733 kills and 13.5 kills per set, as seen in the 2022 Volleyball Statistics, the success of the UTRGV Women's Volleyball Team is nothing short of a great testament to what they can do when united toward one main goal.

Hearing what Todd Lowery, head coach since 2015, had to say about the team is great proof of that. Lowery has been a titan; a mastermind with a game plan in place to win. His method demonstrates the passion he has for UTRGV, volleyball and the women he coaches.

Freshman Elise Fourt, a Brownsville native, proudly wears No. 11 on her back. Previously, she played for the Brownsville Early College Veterans Memorial High School Chargers. In 2023 and in

Fourt's first season with the program, she is a middle blocker for the UTRGV Vaqueras.

Then there is Ingridy N. Foltran, a junior who wears the No. 5 on her jersey. Foltran is from Osasco, São Paulo State, Brazil. She has played the position of outside hitter since 2021, her freshman year. From coming to the U.S. with nothing but the support of her family and friends, Foltran's experience is something that can be inspiring.

Along with their other teammates, Fourt and Foltran are part of a large Vaquera family that has dreams on and off the court.

Pulse magazine interviewed Lowery, Foltran and Fourt to learn their stories.

Todd Lowery:

You've been the head coach of the UTRGV Volleyball Team for eight years. How has this experience been for you?

"It's an exciting place to be. I was at UT Brownsville, so I was kind of premerger with the two schools. So, seeing everything come together ... I think when we merged the two schools together, we had a vision for athletics at the time. I think the university did. It's just taken time to get it rolling. Now, finally everything that we talked about a long, long time ago is starting to come to fruition. I think that's really exciting: seeing the value behind UTRGV more and more every year."

THE COURT

I know you have coached at the National American University. How would you say UTRGV Athletics differs from your time at NAU?

"Very, very different. Talking about National American University ... you're talking about a school of 500 kids, so very small. We were in the NAIA [National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics] and times have changed since then. So, being able to compete on the Division 1 stage is so big. I think that's the biggest difference--the resources. One of the reasons I love to coach is about helping kids meet their goals and grow, not just on the volleyball court, but being able to grow as people and meet their goals in life. I think that a university like UTRGV, compared to National American University, we have so many more resources for the kids. [We] have an amazing training room. We have a weight room. We have a strength coach. We have an amazing academic center, tutors; basically, everything these girls need to be successful. Then, it goes beyond that. The mental health side of things. ... We have mental health support. Things that I used to have to be everything at National American University. Now, I get to be a piece of the big puzzle and that's what's really exciting, is being part of something [that] allows these kids to grow."

What are the challenges of coaching that people may not be aware of?

"Coaching college athletics, everybody thinks it's X's and O's. When you start getting beyond X's and O's, that's when you see wins and losses. Everybody at the Division 1 level, everybody's able to get talent. Everybody's got good players. Everybody knows how to play the game of volleyball. The [challenge] of coaching ... and what makes it exciting is ... how can you play to the strength of the kids that you have that year and how do you get the most out of them ... to help the group be better? Those are the unique challenges of coaching. [How do you do] all the other stuff that people don't see? They think we're just coming to the gym for two hours and that's it. [That] we walk out of the gym for practice and then we don't have to deal with them the rest of the time. The challenge is really being committed to them to allow them to be successful."

What are your main aspirations for your team this year?

"On the surface, everybody has the same goals. Everybody wants to win a WAC [Western Athletic Conference] championship. Everybody wants to



Coach Todd Lowery watches a set during the game against Southern Utah University on Sept. 28, 2023.

go to the NCAA tournament. Those are locker room goals that we put in the locker room. We won the regular season last year and then missed the tournament. I think the girls really want to [win]. They have a chip on their shoulder. They really want to win the WAC tournament this year and go to the NCAA tournament. The biggest goal for myself, personally, is making sure that all 19 kids feel like they're important and valued because they are. So, we have to really pour time into the entire roster. That's my challenge for this year."

Describe your team in a few words.

"This team is kind of gritty. If I had to say something ... they have that little kind of 'it' that you look for. We've had our backs up against the wall already a couple of times early in the season and [I] haven't seen a lot of quit in them. I think as far as a team on the court and how they play, I would say they play gritty. Off the court, they're a bunch of clowns. It's such a fun group. They're always

"This team is kind of gritty.
If I had to say something ...
they have that little kind of
'it' that you look for."



joking with each other and always laughing. I think that makes it fun: that we can be serious in the gym. Then, as soon as we walk out the gym doors, it's smiles and it's an easy group to be around and that makes life fun. That makes my job fun. [I have a] group that's easy to be around."

Ingridy N. Foltran:

Editor's Note: Ingridy N. Foltran would like to give a special thanks to her coaches as well as to the Dean of the College of Engineering and Computer Science Ala Quubaj for supporting her. Foltran is thankful for all the opportunities she has received, thus far.

How or in what ways would you say you have grown since your first year?

"I have grown a lot. I say that I came here to [the] U.S. as a girl with a lot of dreams. Being [in the] United States playing D1 volleyball and studying civil engineering was [a] big thing. After two years, I can see myself as a woman who has a lot of goals and knows what [she] wants for the future. I am really focused on volleyball. At the same time, [I am focused on] school. I keep my GPA at a 4.0 and I always try to do everything that I can

"Something that I try to pass on is if you have a dream, you can go and get it."

do in volleyball. I play extra reps and do everything that I can in school, too. I go to office hours and always keep in touch with the professors. I really see myself as a different person from the person that I came here as to the one that I am right now."

As an international student, how is the game different in the U.S. than in Brazil and how does your team back home feel?

"My team back home and my family are so proud because to come here to the United States was hard. I just had my mom helping me. It was a long process. [There were] a lot of interviews with different colleges and everything. So, when Coach Todd sent me the official letter, it was like realizing a dream. ... My mom made a video [of all] my family and my coaches saying congratulations for this big achievement. Being here in [the] U.S. is a big thing in Brazil and I can see that all over the world. ... The difference between Brazil and here, volleyballwise, I would say that here the game is very fast and organized. I think we need to combine school and volleyball. Combining both and getting the best result in both is what makes us feel our best performance."

How old were you when you started playing volleyball?

"I played since I was 7 and now I am 20. So, it's [been] my whole life playing volleyball. I love this sport. When I'm inside the gym, I don't listen [to] anyone. I focus on the ball. When I'm playing, when I hit the ball hard and I make a point, it's noticeable [in] the way I celebrate how much I

love this sport. Volleyball, for me, is my everything. ... [Volleyball] was the way I found to realize my dream."

What would your younger self say if she knew she would be playing volleyball at the collegiate and international level?

"My mom and I always put big goals. Since I was [a] kid, I was thinking to come to the United States and play here. So, for the little girl that started playing volleyball at 7 years, she would be really proud [of] the person that I am right now. ... That little girl, I think, [wouldn't] really believe everything that I have been conquering. I got the International Female Award for UTRGV. I was Student of the Week for the newsletter. So, everything I can do, I am doing and I'm trying to achieve my goals. So, that little girl would be very proud of the person, of the woman, that she is becoming. I can see that in my mom's eyes, too, how proud she was. Because coming from a small city, I think that nobody really believed [that] my mom and I [could] be here. ... Something that I try to pass on is if you have a dream, you can go and get it. So, that little girl would be really proud of everything that is happening."

When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

"I remember that [in] school, they used to say, 'What is your future career? What's going to be beneficial for your future?' [I would reply], 'I want to be a volleyball player.' How am I going to inspire? How am I going to do something for the people

if I want to be a volleyball player?"

What have you learned from your teammates so far and what do you wish to learn more from them?

"Something that I learned is to be responsible with every little detail. Time management and keeping [track of] everything that you have. Being a good teammate, too. On the team, we have a lot of different countries. We have different cultures. So, as I learned other languages, I learned how to be a good teammate. Being a student athlete at UTRGV is [about being] a good example everywhere you go. I learned how to be that example. ... We say, 'Everything you do, do it with responsibility.' I learned how to be responsible with my actions."

Describe yourself in a few words.

"I can say that I work hard and I am determined for the goals that I have. ... I always try to inspire people to find the best version of themselves. I'm always trying to follow the steps that God put in my heart. I try to be positive. I try to find the best things in all moments."



Photo by Veronica Palacios
Senior outside hitter Ingridy Foltran enters practice.

Elise Fourt:

How did you make your decision to play for UTRGV?

"The first thing that made me want to come here was when I came to one of the games and I saw how the bench reacted to what was going on in the court. It was the energy and the vibe they gave off. It was [that]. Even though they're on the bench, they're still super supportive and they're still having the most fun. ... That was something that I wanted, personally. I wanted people that were going to support me no matter what. The first day I came to one of the games, that's exactly what I saw. I've known coach Todd for four years. He's an amazing coach. He built me from the ground up, basically. I have wanted to play for him ever since. UTRGV was my No. 1 option."

How old were you when you started playing volleyball?

"I was around 12 years old when I started playing. Basketball was my first sport. I thought I was going to go to college for basketball, but then I started to fall in love with volleyball and I quit basketball completely."

What are the differences between the high school and collegiate level for you?

"For me, it's more support and I can trust this team a lot more than my high school team. I can trust that they're going to do their job and they're going to help me as best as possible. I just have to make sure that I'm doing my job. In high school, I [had] to do my job and I [had] to do their job at the same time. But in the collegiate level, I know they're going

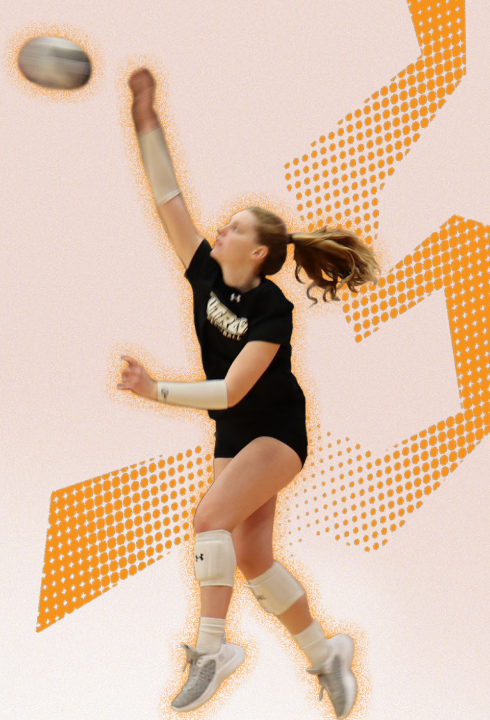


Photo by Veronica Palacios
Freshman middle blocker Elise Fourt jumps for a spike.

to do theirs [and] I'm going to do mine and that's how we're going to work so well together."

When would you say you started to take your career to the competitive level?

"I would say my freshman year. I was on [junior varsity] my freshman year because I was an intradistrict transfer, but that's when I [said], 'OK, I want to do this. I want to compete. I want to be on varsity. I want to be the best one [and] I'm going to work no matter what.'"

If you could say anything to your younger self what would it be?

"Do not be so hard on yourself. I was a wreck when I was younger in volleyball."

When I was a freshman, I was a complete wreck. I was a mess and everyone hated me because I was in my head so much. I had an attitude. I was mean. It was bad. Don't care so much. Try to have fun. That's what I would tell [my younger self]."

When you were a child, what did you want to be when you grew up?

"I really wanted to be a marine biologist. I love the ocean. I don't like to swim in the ocean. I like to study the ocean. I'm super scared of sharks. [I'm] super scared of all that, but I would like to study the ocean."

What is your current biggest dream or greatest goal?

"My only goal right now is to step out on that court freshman year. That's really what I'm working toward. That's probably the only thing I'm thinking about right now, is competing and practice. [I'm] always working

hard every single time I go up to get a ball or I go up to block. I'm giving full effort. That's my goal this year. I'm completely fine with being on the bench. I understand my role on the team. If it's on the bench, it's on the bench. I'm here for a reason. If that's the reason, then that's completely fine with me but I'm still going to work every single day to get on that court."

What have you learned from your teammates, so far, and what do you wish to continue to learn from them?

"There's an expectation in this gym to know what you're doing. You always have to stay super hyperfocused no matter what you do. You have to pay attention to little details. If there was one thing I learned, it's attention to detail, even in the smallest, little things you need to do in volleyball and practice every single day."

What would you say is the lesson

that you've learned on the court that you apply to your life off the court?

"Honestly, I would say reading people. As a middle blocker, you have to read hands. You have to read shoulders. You have to read everything on the court and so you take that into your life. ... It's weird to put into words but you're always watching people and you're always watching the ball. You're always watching their face, their hands, their shoulders, their hips, where they're facing. You have to take all that into consideration to go up and get a block."

Describe yourself in a few words.

"Hardworking, energetic, fun and enthusiastic."

Photo by America Salazar



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FROM PITCH TO PRESENT

Story by Luis Castañeda

Photo by Briana Mireles

Before becoming a Vaquero, Bryheem Hancock was a collegiate and professional soccer player as well as a coach for other universities. Meeting fellow soccer players, training them and watching them graduate has become one of his favorite things to do.

Early Life

Bryheem Hancock was born on March 1, 1980, in Wilmington, Delaware. His passion for soccer began when he was only 5 years old when he attended his older brother's soccer games. He enjoyed going to the pitch at halftime to kick the soccer ball around and shoot to the goal.

At first, he started playing because his brother did. However, over the years, his passion turned into something more than a simple game.

"Where I'm from, soccer wasn't really that popular," Hancock said. "It was baseball, basketball, football, track and field. Those were things that were the most popular. ... I played recreational soccer just because my brother did it."

A Passion for Sports Emerging

Since childhood, sports have always been present in Hancock's life one way or another, not just soccer.

"I think for me at an early age, sports was always important," Hancock said. "My brother is a little bit older than me. He played sports, so I used to always go to his games. ... I was 4 or 5 years old, but my mother, she was a softball player. So, I would always go to her softball games and I'd be the scorekeeper."

College: University of Connecticut

Hancock attended and played soccer at the University of Connecticut from 1998 to 2001. He graduated

with a Bachelor of Science in Communications. During his tenure, the team ranked Top 10 every year Hancock played. As the captain, he guided the team to three Sweet 16s, two Final Fours and an NCAA Championship.

Professional Soccer Career

Hancock was drafted by L.A. Galaxy in 2001. He was the first goalkeeper selected in that year's MLS Draft.

"I was the first goalkeeper drafted, so that has a little bit more meaning," Hancock said. "Typically, when you get drafted early, that means that a team actually values you and wants to give you an opportunity to see something in you. L.A. Galaxy, at the time, [was] one of the top four teams in the league. ... I was very fortunate to be around the best of the best in the CONCACAF region that we live in. So, to me, getting drafted was just another goal I had set for myself and was able to attain."

After L.A. Galaxy, Hancock played for the Atlanta Silverbacks, where he earned the title of MVP for the 2002-2003 season. Following the Silverbacks, he played for the Toronto Lynx, where he retired after playing for one season due to a back injury.

Leadership

As a player, he was captain of the following teams: his high school soccer team, the U.S. U-17 Men's Soccer team, the UConn Men's Soccer team and the Atlanta Silverbacks.

"Leadership, hard work, dedication to a group, the willingness to be unselfish, [winning]--that's something everybody feels," Hancock said. "I always like being part of a group that wins; nothing [feels] better than celebrating with others than just yourself."

He also said he loves working with people who share similar traits: unselfishness, accountability, athleticism, competitiveness and mental toughness.

"Those are the guys that I want [and] love to work with," Hancock said. "Those guys are similar to how I was, and that's the most comfortable thing I'm with: Players that have those same traits."

Coaching Career

Hancock's coaching career began over 18 years ago after his retirement as a player. He started as a middle and high school coach as well volunteering at his alma mater.

In 2009, he was invited by his former coach at UConn, then head coach of the University of South Florida, to a training session and immediately fell in love with coaching.

"I nearly knew I wanted to be fully invested into coaching at that point," Hancock said. "That fired a willingness to want to be around student athletes like I used to be and help project those guys to be either pros in the sport or to graduate to be successful outside of sport."

After being an assistant coach for eight seasons at USF, he was hired as Radford University's Men's Soccer head coach in March 2017. There, his offense ranked eighth in the nation in goals. He was with Radford until 2020.

@ UTRGV

Hancock was named head coach of the UTRGV Men's Soccer team in November 2020. He said his goal is to win a national championship.

"That's the biggest [goal] right now: fighting to get to be a national champion as a coach," Hancock said. "I think that's my biggest goal that I'm driven to get towards, and that's what I'm going to keep pushing to every day."

According to him, to be a coach, one has to love it. It comes with long days

and nights as well as holding players accountable and making sure they are ready for the next day, regardless of the circumstances.

"You gotta love it," Hancock said. "If you don't love it, then you can't do it. You can't. I'm 18 years into coaching. ... You can't fake that, right? You gotta love it to do it, and that's something I love to do."

Philanthropy

Hancock said his biggest professional achievement is watching his players graduate. The team has participated in several community service events as a way of giving back to the Rio Grande Valley.

"Last season we were sixth out of any Division 1 men's soccer program for community service,"

Baltazar said. "He's supported me [and] helped me grow as a player and as a person. ... My grades have only been getting better. ... I like the way that he manages the team and the style that we play is really good, and yeah, I really like it. ... He's really determined. He knows what he wants and [has] really influenced me to wanting that even more, too. He's influenced all of us."

Defender Tristan Singh said he believes the UTRGV soccer program will dominate the Western Athletic Conference in the next five to 10 years because of what Hancock brings to the team.

"I think he's a fantastic coach and he brings a lot of the right things to this program," Singh said. "I think he's a fantastic guy and I really enjoy being coached by him. ... He brings good energy to training every single day. He motivates us before every training session. ... I think, overall, I've just really developed well as a footballer, as a leader on and off the field and as a person."

Coach's Words to the UTRGV Community

"Come out and support," Hancock said. "Come out. Come out with your flags. We have a drumline that you can bang the drums with them. Wear the school colors. Be loud in the crowd when we score; be loud when the other team has the ball. All those things make it a great fun atmosphere because you have [soccer players] that have put on a lot of work each day to represent the brand [for] you, UTRGV, the university athletics program, but more importantly, [for] the Valley. [I want] to continue to build the brand of just the Valley where we get on a plane and people look at our logo and they know exactly where we are. ... That's kind of a challenge for me. I want to get to the point where they see our logo and say, 'OK, you're from UTRGV.' ... That's the goal. We want to be a household name."

Hancock said. "We spend a lot of hours and time with the community that's on campus [and] in other areas of the Valley [at] the high school level, the youth soccer level. ... All those things are really important."

Student Athletes on Hancock

Midfielder Cesar Baltazar said Hancock has been very supportive and has helped him grow.

"He's been there always for me,"

Photo courtesy UTRGV Athletics



LESSONS FROM

THE FIELD

Story by Olivia Lestarpe

Photo by Briana Mireles

At the peak of the Western Athletic Conference women's soccer season, two UTRGV players spoke about the determination, discipline and bravery required of them on the pitch. As fierce competitors, they explained how they apply that passion to their lives.

THE WINGER

Team captain Georgina Hernandez explained the winger position as "the messenger."

"They're pretty much the widest player on the field," Hernandez said. "You're kind of an in-between man. You're the messenger [who] gets the ball from the defense up to the forwards."

The captain said being from Celaya, Guanajuato, Mexico shaped her view of soccer growing up. While her male classmates had the proper attire for soccer, she played with them in her school uniform.

"Soccer is such a big sport in Mexico and you would be surprised [that], around that time, it wasn't very common to have an all-female team," Hernandez said. "So [I] kind of had

to play with the boys. ... I was there with my little dress-up shoes and my skirt. I didn't care."

She said things changed for her once her family moved from Mexico to the United States.

"Once I moved here it was like a whole different world," the winger said. "The U.S. has so much to offer for women's sports and it's still growing. ... It was very encouraging to move here and have [more] opportunities. ... I like the American world of soccer. Once you make it to a Division I level, it's a very different kind of game; it's very physical. ... You have to work hard, get after it a lot and be tough."

"So [I] kind of had to play with the boys. ... I was there with my little dress-up shoes and my skirt. I didn't care."

During her teen years, Hernandez said she played on both her high school and club teams. Her schedule was hectic and demanding. She trained three times a day during the

week and would spend her weekends driving up and down from Dallas with her mom for games. She described her life as "sleep, eat and soccer."

"If you really love something, then you learn to control how you feel about the things going on around you," Hernandez said. "You feel the pressure, but you learn how to handle it. You have to rely a lot on your teammates. I've had awesome teammates who have been there supporting me throughout everything."

She said staying involved in hobbies outside of school and soccer also helps her wind down.

All of her hard work was rewarded when she was elected Student-Athlete Advisory Committee president of the WAC, a Division I conference that covers multiple states in the western United States. In this role, Hernandez advocates for all of the student-athletes at UTRGV and the WAC.

"Now more than ever, the student perspective and what we believe in is crucial to the program growing,"

she said. "I get a lot of leadership and professional development while also relating it to sports, which have been such a big part of my life."

Hernandez said her goal is to remain involved with the sport after she graduates and her contract with UTRGV ends. She believes there are additional ways to contribute aside from being a player, such as coaching.

The player said she will always be able to look back on how the sport shaped her.

"Anyone who plays sports can handle failures and successes well," Hernandez said. "You learn how to be a part of something bigger than yourself. ... It's made me a better student and a better person."

THE GOALIE

Goalkeeper Ashton McCorry's journey as a Division I athlete began with basketball. She initially signed to play at Pittsburg State University in Kansas after receiving encouragement from basketball head coach Lane Lord, a family friend. It would not be until McCorry came to play basketball for UTRGV in 2022 that she was also be recruited to play soccer.

The Wichita, Kansas, native said she was afraid to come back to soccer at first. She had not played for five years and there were mental blocks she had to work past after such a long break. One of the challenges she said she faced was working on getting her footwork and hand-eye coordination back. Eventually, McCorry got to a point where she felt ready to return to playing soccer.

"There are some similarities between the two [sports] that definitely have helped me," she said. "I have even started playing better in basketball. ... I'm having so much fun [playing both]."

McCorry now divides her time between basketball, soccer and studying. As a graduate student working on her second master's degree in health care administration, she has a packed schedule. Both of her coaches make sure that each player is doing all right outside athletics because they understand there is life outside of sports.

Part of McCorry's success is also based on trusting her teammates and relying on them when necessary. She said all players in the UTRGV Department of Intercollegiate

Athletics support each other.

"We'll all go to each others' games," McCorry said. "My basketball teammates will come to soccer games whether I'm playing or not because they now know some of the soccer girls."

McCorry spent 12 years with her club soccer teammates and said they were like a second family to her. She keeps in touch with those teammates and her high school soccer coach, Greg Rauch.

"If there was anybody that I would have kept playing [soccer] for in high school, it would have been him," the goalkeeper said. "He kept my love of the game alive."

Be it her high school, club, college teammates, or the coaches who always pushed her to reach her potential, McCorry has had many valuable people come into her life through sports.

"My wedding party is going to be like 10 people and they're all from club teams," She said. "We all went through the same experience growing up. ... We went through a lot of ups and downs together."

STRENGTH OF MIND

Story by Andrea Maldonado

“You might be in pain during a race but so is the person in front of you and so is the person behind you,” said Ricardo Garcia, a civil engineering senior and cross-country runner. “It is just a question of who can hold on to that pain the longest.”

Garcia said he repeats this to himself throughout the 10-kilometer track until the finish line.

Cross-country is commonly labeled as one of the most mentally demanding sports. The core quality of cross-country runners is endurance, how far they are willing to go for their team, families and themselves.

“If you do it for more than just yourself, you are going to be able

to push through it because other people are depending on what you do,” said Ricardo Mendoza, UTRGV Men’s Cross-Country assistant coach. “Sometimes it could be easier to give up if we are just thinking about ourselves.”

As student athletes, Garcia and junior cross-country runner Abraham Morales said time management is the key to balancing practice and school.

In preparation for their performance at the NCAA South Central Regionals Nov. 10, 2023, the UTRGV Men’s Cross-Country team trained tirelessly to improve its times and mileage. Following its coaches Sharisse Hicks and Mendoza’s advice, the team averaged a group improvement of 20 seconds in comparison to the two

previous years.

Mendoza applauded the efforts of Garcia and Morales, the team captain, as some of the best performers on the trail and also as team leaders, whose leadership and experience has impacted the younger athletes on the team to help them transition from high school to college cross-country training.

According to Mendoza, team unity is really reinforced in this sport. It is not necessarily about how an individual runner places but how the team places.

“My best motivation in high school was the faster I finish the faster I can go eat,” Garcia said. “Now, it’s just, ‘I have to do this for the team,’ at least

in cross-country. This is for the team; it is a team effort. ... If I know I can push more, I am going to push more. I just want to finish and make sure I am almost fainting at the finish line.”

As described by cross-country athletes, the sentiment of running on the track is unparalleled unlike any other sport, especially in the outdoor season. It is a race against themselves, where they get to be free and mindless.

“[Cross-country] takes me places in my mind where I never thought I could go,” Garcia said. “It just feels like I am somewhere else; it feels like I am not a student [or] a college athlete. I am just me, a person just running.”

“Sometimes it could be easier to give up if we are just thinking about ourselves.”

C X XC

Story by Karina N. Alegre

Photos by Briana Mireles

Exercise, researchers have found, can help improve a person's health and mood. So can music. Ask any cross-country athlete who has stayed focused for miles during their runs or people who simply run or jog for fun. Music is part of their exercise because it helps them focus, motivates and inspires their minds.

In fact, according to professors Costas Karageorghis and Peter Terry in a 2008 book titled, "Sporting Sounds: Relationship Between Sport and Music," "music has become almost omnipresent in sport and exercise environments." This shows how music and sports are interlinked.

At The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, some athletes need music in their routines. Take Ana Hernandez and Kailey Salazar, two UTRGV cross-country student athletes who said they get motivation and inspiration from the music they listen to.

Hernandez, a civil engineering junior, said she became interested in running when she was 13 or 14 years old. She said she runs 45 to 50 miles a week with her team.

"I will say I try to be consistent," Hernandez said. "But sometimes ... things happen and you'll miss a day or two. We definitely try to be on track to be ready for the seasons."

Hernandez also said cross-country is "a peaceful sport."

"It's all on your own and you're challenging yourself to become better everyday. It's kind of competing against yourself. It's not against other people and I like that because you see the best of yourself."

One of Hernandez's favorite things to tell herself during a run is: "I can. I will. I must."

How does music fit into all of this?

"The rhythm pumps you to be more energetic, depending on the run you want," Hernandez said. "If you want to go slow, then slower music helps as well."

Hernandez added that she listens to motivational music to feel more "energetic and ready." She is also the type of person who pays more

attention to the beat of a song.

"There's a song that reminds me of the breathing pattern that I need to do. [It's called], 'We Will Rock You.' It's the breathing pattern you should do."

Hernandez shared her Spotify Wrapped with Pulse.

"[It has] mostly Mexican music or Urban music. ... Taylor Swift was in there, too. ... [My top three songs] were 'Yandel 150', 'un x100to' and 'When Emma Falls In Love' by Taylor Swift."

Kailey Salazar is a freshman cross-country athlete studying exercise science.

Salazar said she listens to Hip-Hop and R&B. She loves artists such as Drake and The Weeknd.

Currently, Salazar is listening to Metro Boomin and Lil Tecca.

Unlike Hernandez, Salazar said she pays more attention to the lyrics of a song rather than the beat.

"They're both a really good

combination [to] get your feels going," Salazar said. "And I think it's a good way to express yourself, not only through music, but through running in general and health and exercise."

Salazar also said there is a difference when she is running versus when she is not. Listening to music gives her confidence. She said on the track she is "a whole different person."

"When I'm not running, I'm a shy, introverted person," she said. "But when I'm running and I'm on the track and I'm in competitions, you can tell that I'm outgoing."

A personal mantra Salazar tells herself is: "I'm stronger than what I think I am."

Salazar said music keeps her "in check."

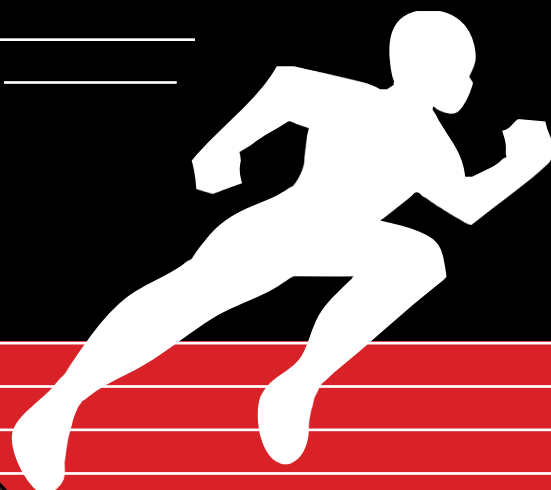
"I listen to motivational, upbeat music," she said. "As a runner, that's very important because you don't want to be running on a low mentality."

Salazar shared her Apple Music Replay with Pulse.

"My No. 1 song was 'Around Me' by Metro Boomin, 'Too Many Nights,' and the third one was 'Spin About You' by Drake," she said.



"I CAN.
I WILL.
I MUST."



UTRGV Men's Tennis: *A Guacamole of Cultures*

Story by Finch Cantu

Illustrations by Gonzalo Puente

Photos by Briana Mireles

The modern metaphor for American culture is that the United States is a salad bowl; a dish with diverse ingredients, each keeping their individual flavor. Together, they create a unique flavor. Along this line of thinking, The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's Men's Tennis team is like guacamole — a diverse makeup with an RGV flair.

The eight-member Vaquero force has people from different countries and various backgrounds.

Team captain Emilien Burnel is a business management senior from La Teste-De-Buch, France.

Sam Whitehead is a junior from Launceston, Tasmania, Australia, also majoring in business management.

Agustin Salazar is a sophomore from McAllen majoring in communication studies.

Daniel Leh is a sophomore from Kirbyville majoring in kinesiology.

Ivo Isqueiro is a freshman from Olhão, Algarve, Portugal majoring in mechanical engineering.

Paolo Bonaguro is a freshman from Caracas, Venezuela majoring in finance.

Santiago Serrano is a freshman from Santiago, Chile majoring in management.

Will Roberts is a freshman from New Plymouth, New Zealand, also majoring in management.

Coach Nathan Robinson leads the team.

Before joining UTRGV, Robinson worked at Oklahoma State University, Virginia Tech, Western Michigan University and the University of California, Davis. Robinson said that among these, UTRGV stands out thanks to the investment of its administration.

“I’ve been a part of other programs [in which] I couldn’t have told you what the [athletics director] looks like ‘cause I never met them,” Robinson said. “And here, I see Chasse [Conque] at our matches. I see him in our practices. The family atmosphere that is here is second to none at any of the schools that I’ve coached at in the past.”

But support does not just come from outside the team. Within, the men’s tennis team has developed its own flavor of unity.

Isqueiro said, “Everybody’s just trying to adapt to where we currently are instead of just relating to what is back home.”

This spirit extends into everything these Vaqueros do. Although they are constantly juggling classes, homework and athletics, the players said they enjoy spending time together outside of practices. Team dinners are one of the main ways they bond off the court.

Whitehead said traveling for matches is another high point of the

men’s tennis experience.

“It gets quite squishy in the van, so maybe not the van rides,” he said. “But, when we get to the places, it’s always nice to experience new places with everyone on the team and getting to play in different parts of America is really cool.”

The junior has been on the team the longest. He joined the team in his freshman year in the fall of 2021.

“When I first came, I had the older guys to teach me a lot of things,” Whitehead said. “I guess the responsibility is up to me to then help the new guys out and make sure they’re feeling comfortable. It is a tough adjustment, especially coming from overseas, leaving everything behind, basically coming over here yourself not really knowing what to expect and having someone there to help you and guide you is good.”

“I’d never left Australia,” he added. “Getting on that long flight, yeah, I didn’t really

know what to expect. But I got here and everyone was super nice. Coach Brenda [Coldallo], our advisor, and Chase [Haselhort] in the weight room — everyone was just super nice and welcoming.”

Several years later, he said the program’s culture of support continues to put newcomers at ease. Isqueiro said it has helped him overcome many of the struggles of settling into university life.

“Well, the first week is not really tough because we have a lot of team dinners and everybody gets to know each other very well, so it wasn’t as tough as I thought it would be. ... They’re extremely nice people so no problem whatsoever with that.”

Robinson said diversity among players in terms of nationalities, cultures and experiences is another big part of what makes collegiate-level tennis special.

He said, “Everybody’s so unique. Emilien Burnel, who comes to college in January at 18 years old in



Senior team captain Emilien Burnel (from left), freshman Ivo Isqueiro and sophomore Agustin Salazar practice on Oct. 17, 2023, at the UTRGV Orville Cox Tennis Center.



“Everybody’s just trying to adapt to where we currently are instead of just relating to what is back home.”



Senior team captain Emilien Burnel watches the ball during practice Oct. 17, 2023, at the UTRGV Orville I. Cox Tennis Center.

“How many people are you going to meet from Tasmania in your lifetime?”

Northern Kentucky [University] and it’s instantly COVID and he’s sent back home and spends two-and-a-half years there, then transfers down here.

“Ivo, who’s in his second year here from Portugal, but he trained in Spain,” Robinson said. “Sam, he’s from Tasmania. How many people are you going to meet from Tasmania in your lifetime?”

He aims to show them the diverse experiences the United States has to offer.

“We want to take ‘em on the road,” the coach said. “We’ve traveled to Washington, to California, to Louisiana, to Oklahoma. The next state we’ll hit that a lot of the guys haven’t been to yet is Arkansas. Not only are they traveling across the planet to a new place, but they’re not just staying in Texas, either. They’re getting to experience the U.S. and all of its cultures as well. So, when they leave here, they feel like they’ve gotten a great four years of life from this.”

The team also makes time for fun when they travel. Robinson said, “One year we went out to the sand dunes

outside of Las Cruces and they’re racing each other during downtime, literally drawing lines in the sand and racing from line to line and wrestling each other and stuff like that. If they can have the ability to, y’know, trash-talk a little bit, they definitely will.”

Though he said the traveling and diversity are fun, the camaraderie that arises between teammates is Robinson’s favorite thing about coaching.

“The team culture, just the dynamics between each other, y’know, it does say a lot about what sports bring to society. The fact that we can have these guys from all over the planet show up and in a week they’re doing this, y’know: sitting, laughing. Those are cool aspects to be a part of.”

Coach Robinson described the team as “very physically fit, very physically strong. But to compete at the level at which we ask them to compete at, y’know, it’s a lot of work. From May until the following May until the following May. For four years, tennis is your life. Your job is to show up every day, work hard, go to the classroom, get good grades and

make tennis a passion for you.”

Indeed, the team has a busy schedule. During the summer, players participate in training and compete in up to 10 tournaments, then return in late August to begin official on-campus training. The fall season involves three or four singles tournaments and ends in the first week of November. Then during the winter break, players compete in several more tournaments before team season starts in early January.

Robinson explained that, “Our team season will run from the second week of January, through, hopefully, the second week of May, if we do everything right. At the very least, the end of April. And then from there, we play 28 to 30 matches between January and April.” Typically, members play between 65 and 90 matches annually.

Robinson explained this is because, “Each guy’s going to be in a tournament all by themselves, playing and trying to win that tournament.”

Competition among teammates is only natural in a sport that sometimes pits teammates against one another.

Yet, as Isqueiro demonstrated, the ever-present rivalry does nothing to dampen the brotherhood between team members.

“Most of [my teammates from home] I talk to every week. I’m very close to the people back home and I love them very much. I’ll do the same with the guys here, ‘cause I also really enjoy spending time with them,” said Isqueiro.

Whitehead echoed the sentiment. “Each year, when my old teammates have left, so far, I’ve always kept in touch with them and it’s good to see

what they’re up to now, after college.”

Isqueiro is majoring in mechanical engineering, hoping to start a business related to engineering or tennis. Whitehead is majoring in business management and hopes to own one of his own.

UTRGV’s athletics support system of coaches and trainers encourages them to reach out for help managing their competing responsibilities. Robinson works to prepare his team for their future goals by helping them overcome today’s hurdles.

Robinson said, “We’re going to make sure that we’re there for them, as much as we possibly can, and, if they need to fail in an aspect, we’ll let them fail and then we’ll help pick them up. ... They’re going to deal with stress. They’re going to deal with physical, mental and emotional pain, as they work their processes through, but we’re never going to ask them to do something we don’t truly believe that they can do and achieve.”



Junior Sam Whitehead serves during team practice Oct. 17, 2023 at the UTRGV Orville I. Cox Tennis Center.



Senior Emilien Burnel (left) and freshman Ivo Isqueiro wait for the first serve of the set during a doubles match Oct. 17, 2023 at the UTRGV Orville I. Cox Tennis Center.

Are Student-Athletes Happier?

Story by Olivia Lestarpe

Illustration by Vanessa Vega

Asking students about their college experience is a sure way to get an abundance of different answers. For some, college is the best time of their life. The promise of independence and freedom that college brings is an exciting prospect. To others, the transition from childhood to young adulthood can feel daunting for many reasons. College is considered an at-risk period for the development of mental health illnesses, according to the National Library of Medicine,

For example, the 2022-2023 Healthy Minds Study of 96,000 students across 133 colleges found that 41% of students experienced depression from their freshman year. The number of students in the Healthy Minds Study who participated in counseling and therapy sessions has increased from 30% to 46% since 2020. At UTRGV, 571 students were seen by mental health counselors in Fall 2023, according to Christopher Albert, director of the Counseling Center.

The relationship between physical activity and stress relief makes exercise one of the many methods healthcare professionals use to treat depression and anxiety, according to Harvard Health Publishing. Several “feel-good” hormones and neurotransmitters, such as endorphins, dopamine and endocannabinoids are released during exercise. These chemicals relieve pain, reduce stress and produce the euphoric feeling known as runner’s high.

Within the same Healthy Minds

study, 30% of students said they spent less than one hour a week exercising. In a poll on Pulse magazine’s Instagram, 68% of 41 participants said they were too busy to work out during the week.

Considering student-athletes’ routines are built around sports and exercise, do they suffer from depression and other mental health issues?

Pulse magazine spoke with three members of the UTRGV Women’s Tennis Team: Marjorie Souza, Yaiza Vazquez and Isabelle Bahr.

Souza is a junior majoring in psychology. She said playing tennis gives her something to focus on other than school. Souza has played tennis since she was 8 years old and said she believes staying active has positively affected her mental health.

“My friends back home in [Serra Negra, Brazil] are just focused on college and studying,” Souza said. “One of them was having anxiety and her psychologist told her to start going for walks and being active.”

Vazquez, a sophomore majoring in biophysics, also said that going to practice and playing tennis is her time to relax.

“My whole body is just focused on one thing,” Vazquez said. “When I’m on the court, it’s my safe place. I just focus on the ball and my movements.”

The biophysics major said she enjoys tennis so much that when she

broke her fibula in 2021 and had to spend five months off the court, it was difficult. For her, tennis not only provides her with an outlet for stress but also gives her life structure.

“The sport makes us order our day and organize it better because we know we have practice, gym and class,” Vazquez said. “So, we have to make our own schedules to organize our day and maybe that’s a better option than procrastinating.”

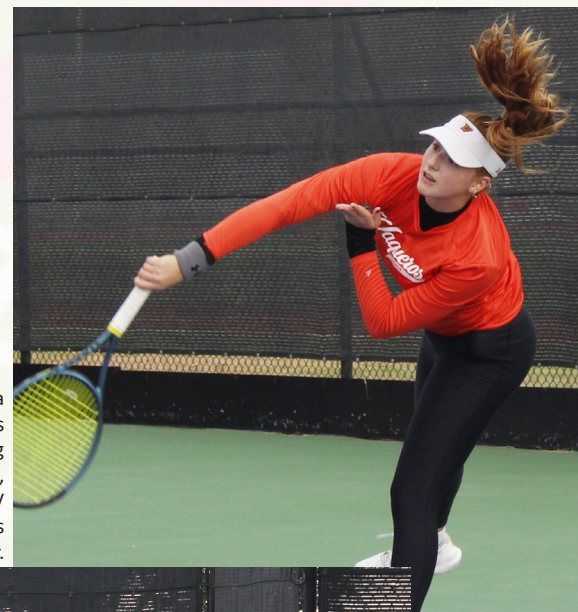
Bahr, a kinesiology graduate student, said being a student-athlete helps her put things into perspective and manage her time wisely.

“We’re playing all these hours, and we [also] have to be able to do school,” she said. “Sometimes if people are consumed with school and work and don’t get to exercise and have those endorphins released, then they probably struggle more.”

Bahr said she noticed that, even on the days she takes off to heal from an intense match, she feels better when doing something to move her body. For her, the benefits that tennis provides are invaluable.

“Being physically active has helped me,” she said. “My parents always joke with me that I’m a happier person when I play tennis, but [they] don’t just mean tennis. [They] mean when I’m working out.”

Sophomore Yaiza Vazquez serves the ball during practice Nov. 1, 2023, at the UTRGV Orville Cox I. Tennis Center.



Junior Marjorie Souza hits the ball during practice Nov. 1, 2023, at the UTRGV Orville I. Cox Tennis Center.



Graduate student Isabelle Bahr waits for the ball during practice Nov. 1, 2023, at the UTRGV Orville I. Cox Tennis Center.

THE VAQUERO FAN EXPERIENCE

Story by Luis Castañeda

UTRGV basketball plays its home games at the Fieldhouse on the Edinburg campus. When you first walk in to a game, there are several other people fighting to get the best seats in the house. The pep band and Spirit program welcome fans from across the region. The concession lines require some patience but UTRGV students usually have courtesy food. The adventure of attending a home game and living the Vaquero entertainment experience can be full of spirit and activities for all ages.

V'S UP!

On Jan. 25, the UTRGV Men's Basketball Vaqueros faced the California Baptist University Lancers.

Two minutes into the game, CBU junior guard Dominique Daniels scored the first two points of the game that eventually led to a 9-0 run by the visitors. It was the beginning of a rough start for the Vaqueros.

Junior guard Sherman Brashear put UTRGV on the board after a 3-pointer to cut the deficit to 9-3. Immediately after, however, CBU junior guard Brantley Stevenson scored a 3-pointer of his own that extended the Lancers' lead to 12-3.

UTRGV started counter attacking, which resulted in the Lancers' first foul midway into the first half. The Vaqueros came close to tying after a 9-2 run that brought the score to 14-11. However, it was followed by an 11-4 CBU run that ended with a bucket from Lancer junior forward Kendal Coleman to make it 25-15.

Vaquero junior guard Sherman Brashear scored a 3-pointer with a clean step back after Coleman missed



UTRGV freshman guard C.J. Booker shoots the ball during the game against California Baptist

University on Jan. 25 in the Fieldhouse.

Photo by Blanca Castillo

two out of three free throws.

After a UTRGV timeout, the first half ended with a buzzer-beater by Vaquero senior forward Daylen Williams to make the score 33-25.

UTRGV freshman guard J.J. Howard scored with a floating jump shot one minute into the second half. CBU's offense followed with an 8-point run that kept it ahead of the Vaqueros 41-27.

After two buckets by Coleman, UTRGV went on the attack that saw a play by freshman guard C.J. Booker,

who crossed the court by himself and scored with a turnaround jumper. The crowd went crazy.

With seven minutes left and the scoreboard at 55-43, the Vaqueros called for a timeout. Both teams were on bonus free throws.

UTRGV's offense reduced CBU's lead to 60-54, which forced the Lancers to use their last timeout with one minute remaining. Anything could happen at this point.

Despite the Vaqueros' effort, the Lancers dominated throughout the

game and finished 63-54.

UTRGV head coach Matt Figger said he believes the team did a good job on the defense. Nevertheless, CBU capitalized on the Vaqueros' offensive mistakes.

"We're not going to quit," Figger said. "... Winning plays come throughout the game. Our spirit was good. Our fight was good."

Sophomore forward Isaiah Barganier also said he feels the team played well despite its leading scorers out injured. The team has to fill in the

"loopholes."

"We need to come together better as a team and just figure things out," Barganier said. "... We gotta stick together and have each other's backs and just let our teammates know they're not alone. We can't do this by ourselves."

UTRGV Women's Soccer midfielder Libby Pole said the university's student athletes attend each others' games to show their support. She has felt support at her matches by her fellow student athletes.

"It's really good," said Pole, regarding the audience's mood. "Everyone's so erratic. Everyone wants to win. I'm really excited."

Sophomore forward Saliou Seye, who is from Senegal, said he feels everyone as student athletes support each other.

"It's really good for us to stay together and come support one another," Seye said. "We're all we've got."

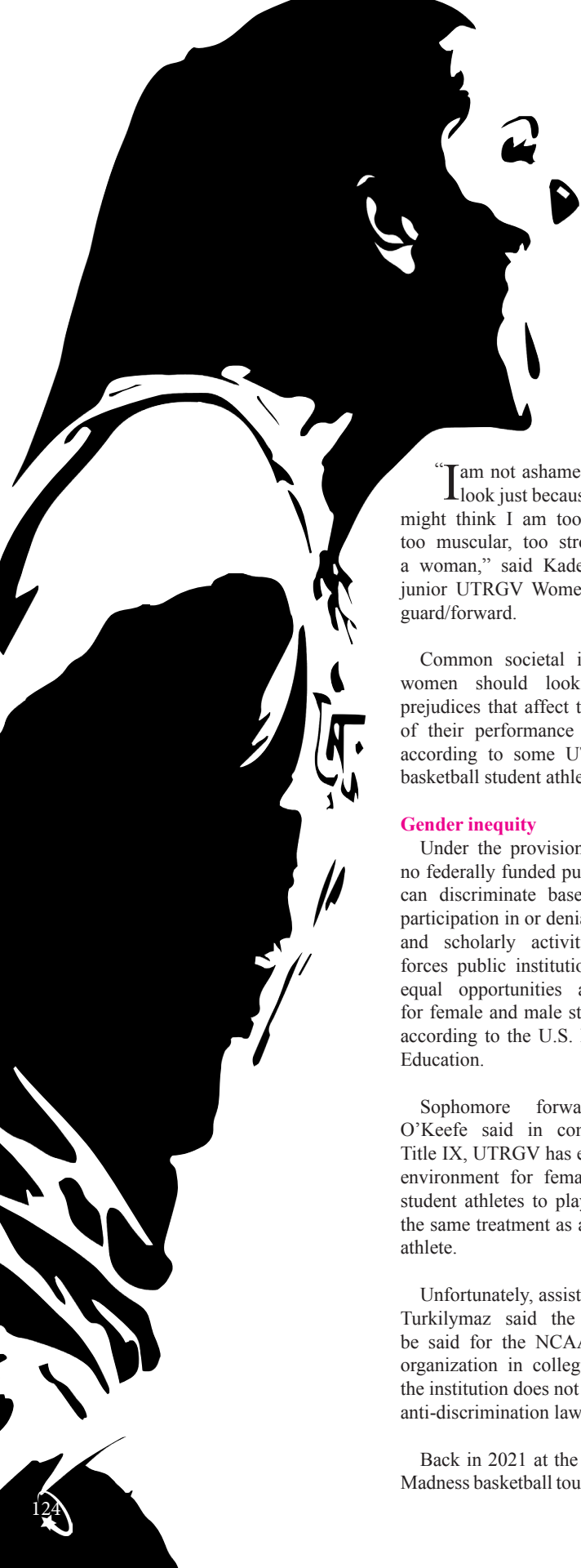
Despite CBU's game-lasting lead and victory, the Fieldhouse was full of Vaquero spirit, according to fans and players. The UTRGV Cheer and Dance teams, along with halftime activities such as the Whataburger "Fry Shuffle," helped set the mood.

Barganier said his favorite part of being a student athlete is game days and seeing support from fans.

"I would say the mood is very anxious but in a good way," he said. "We try our best to put on a show. ... It's a really good environment here in the Valley, so it's super cool to be a part of it."

Besides UTRGV students, who filled the Fieldhouse's student section, children from the youth team Mission Ballers, highschoolers from Porter High School in Brownsville and other fans from across the Rio Grande Valley attended the game.

"The mood is very good," said Carlos Gonzalez, a UTRGV kinesiology sophomore. "I feel it was electric, especially when they make huge plays. You can hear from the audience the reaction when we come back. ... Go Vaqueros!"



PLAY

The Duality

Story by Andrea Maldonado

"I am not ashamed of the way I look just because some people might think I am too tall, too big, too muscular, too strong for being a woman," said Kade Hackerott, a junior UTRGV Women's Basketball guard/forward.

Common societal ideals of how women should look or act are prejudices that affect the recognition of their performance on the court, according to some UTRGV female basketball student athletes.

Gender inequity

Under the provisions of Title IX, no federally funded public institution can discriminate based on sex for participation in or denial of education and scholarly activities. The law forces public institutions to provide equal opportunities and resources for female and male student athletes, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

Sophomore forward Charlotte O'Keefe said in compliance with Title IX, UTRGV has enforced a safe environment for female Division 1 student athletes to play sports under the same treatment as any other male athlete.

Unfortunately, assistant coach Ipek Turkilymaz said the same cannot be said for the NCAA, the leading organization in collegiate sports, as the institution does not implement the anti-discrimination law.

Back in 2021 at the NCAA March Madness basketball tournament in San

Antonio, the women's amenities, such as gymnasiums and practice courts, complementary event souvenirs, "swag bags" and dining services were inferior and unequal in comparison to the men's collegiate teams.

Turkilymaz and O'Keefe expressed their frustration and called for the need to continuously advance as a society to reduce existing stereotypes and biases for gender equality and inclusivity in the sports realm.

Constraints for women in sports

Because of gender stereotypes and inequity, UTRGV Women's Basketball female athletes said they have experienced discrimination at least once during their athletic careers.

At 14 years old, Turkilymaz said she lost the opportunity to play basketball due to normative female stereotypes in Turkey, her home country.

"Since my club team was a part of the government, they decided and had the power to shut down our team because females shouldn't play basketball," she said.

The National Women's Law Center states the playing field is still not level. Women receive only 44% of athletic participation opportunities in comparison to their male counterparts.

Hackerott said at a younger age, boys yelled out to her, "You play like a girl!" from the sidelines and, "I could still beat you one-on-one!" in an effort to undermine her performance.

LIKE A GIRL

of Being Feminine and Competitive

Illustration by Gonzalo Puente

Photos by Blanca Castillo

In spite of the barriers female student athletes may face, members of the UTRGV Women's Basketball team said they are an inspiration to many young girls in the Rio Grande Valley. As fans line up for an autograph after their games, aspiring female athletes look up to the hard work the players put in on the court.

"They see us out there playing hard and several [young girls] tell us, 'I want to play here [at UTRGV] when I'm older,'" Hackerott said. "So, it's a really cool feeling to know that you are an example for these young women to aspire to be amazing."

Toughness and Femininity of Female Athletes

Hackerott said basketball players experience the duality of being tough and feminine. In her experience,

"Are you a Barbie doll or a basketball player?"

female athletes can be feminine and competitive. It does not have to be one or the other.

"It's really hard to see people stereotypically judging you from your look; are you a Barbie doll or a basketball player?" Turkilymaz said. "But when you are on that court, you

play the ball."

Femininity and athleticism are seemingly opposing concepts. However, assistant coach Keanna Keys said this statement is wrongly portrayed because women are powerful and able to "code-switch" between both.

"We can be tough," Keys said. "We can be very dominant in our sport and also within the next day, we could also live in our femininity. I play with female athletes that are very tough on every cycle while they are on the court, but they can't wait to dress up cute just to go get something to eat at Subway."



Junior Kate Hackerott (from left), sophomore Charlotte O'Keefe, Assistant Coach Ipek Turkilymaz and junior Arianna Sturdivant watch the ball during a pregame warmup Jan. 18.

In 2021, during the NCAA Women's Basketball Championship game, Arizona Wildcats head coach Adia Barnes multitasked between caring for her 6-month-old daughter and leading her team through the most important game of the season.

"During the Arizona and Stanford final game, [Barnes] was breastfeeding her baby at halftime and that's something that people don't realize—how tough female coaches are," Turkilymaz said. "We don't get the credit because of how we look, because we are women."

The rise of women's sports
In the 21st century, big strides have been taken in women's sports to have a more inclusive environment for female athletes.

"For example, the LSU and Iowa game was the most viewed in women's collegiate basketball history," Turkilymaz said. "So, it's really nice to see women's teams are getting the support they deserve."



Sophomore forward Charlotte O'Keefe reaches to get the ball back during the game against The University of Texas at Arlington Mavericks on Jan. 18 in the UTRGV Fieldhouse.



Junior Kate Hackerott prepares to shoot the ball during the game against The University of Texas at Arlington Mavericks on Jan. 18 in the UTRGV Fieldhouse.

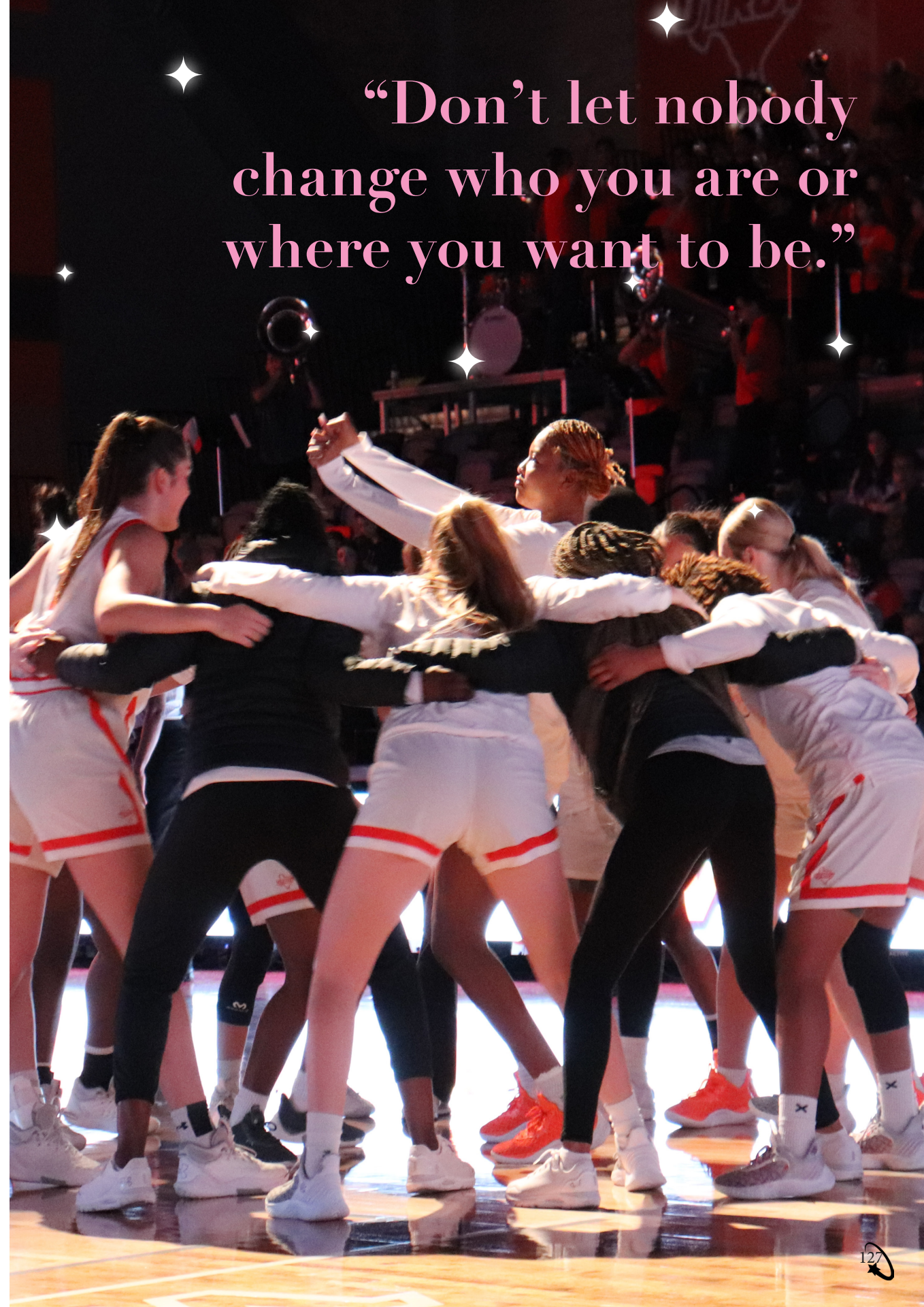
Fourteen years after starting her coaching career, Turkilymaz shared that times have also changed for female coaches as they have for players.

"At the beginning of my coaching career, I had the players tell me they would rather have a male coach because the authority they hold is different," she said. "That [stereotype] has really faded now and, hopefully, it will be even better in the future."

UTRGV's female basketball players advise young girls and aspiring student athletes to be confident and believe in themselves.

"I would tell younger girls to stay true to yourself and always be confident," junior guard Ariana Sturdivant said. "Don't let nobody change who you are or where you want to be."

"Don't let nobody change who you are or where you want to be."



ON THE GREEN

Story by Luis Castañeda

The son of Chinese immigrants, 19-year-old Heshun “Henry” Wang is a long way from home. He grew up in Auckland, New Zealand, which is the island country’s largest city and economic hub. Auckland is over 7,000 miles away from UTRGV.

“[My parents] being immigrants had to work a lot harder,” Wang said. “So, over the years, they just instilled hard work into me. [I am] just trying my best in every aspect of life and staying focused.”

He said he has a daily routine of attending school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., followed by golf practice and homework afterward.

Introduction to Golf

Wang was introduced to golf at 10 years old by one of his friends, Alan Zhang, who first invited him to a driving range for fun.

“We were just on the range hitting balls and it was a lot of fun,” Wang said. “So, I just kept playing [and] playing. Over time, I made it into my state team and ... just kept playing from there.”

Auckland’s U-19 Men’s Team

Wang said some of his best memories of growing up playing golf comes from playing the NZ Junior Interprovincial and traveling across the country with his friends.

“All those matches were a lot of fun,” he said. “I remember after we had won doing some speeches ... just to thank everybody and just kind of creating that team culture [and] team environment for everyone ... hopefully, inspiring the next generation of Auckland representatives.”

Wang eventually became the team captain. However, he only exercised this position for a year as the COVID-19 pandemic had begun.

Coming to Texas

Wang came to the U.S. with the help of Platform Sports Management, a New Zealand-based company dedicated to assisting athletes who want to come study abroad on a sports scholarship. He described to Platform Sports Management what he was looking for in the U.S.

“I [wanted] to go somewhere along the south of Texas ... where there’s a lot of people in the school,” he said. “I want to be able to play golf all year long. ... I just kept playing [and] kept my grades up. ... Eventually, I got a scholarship here.”

After corresponding with former UTRGV Men’s Golf coach Philip Tate for several months, he chose to attend UTRGV and play for the university.

Wang said he felt not only a cultural shock when he first came to the U.S. but also a golf shock. He said golf here is played on longer, wider courses, therefore, he had to learn how to play differently.

“So, when I grew up playing, [it] was courses with smaller fairways but holes on either side, so I could just hit the target,” Wang said. “When I got here, I had to learn to hit the ball up straighter—that sort of stuff.”

Role Models

Wang said his role models in golf are Tiger Woods and Brooks Koepka, who are two of the most prominent players of all time.

However, he said his parents are his role models in life. Having immigrated to New Zealand, they have always wanted the best for their son.

“I always look back to my parents,” he said. “The hard work they’d always put in and the love they would show me ... I just want to be able to remember that and be like them one

with HENRY WANG

Illustration by Gonzalo Puente



Photo courtesy UTRGV Athletics
Sophomore Henry Wang swings and hits the ball during a tournament in 2023.

day.”

@ UTRGV

Wang said before coming to UTRGV, he had a few Zoom calls with Tate, where they realized they had a similar mindset.

“I actually asked [Tate], ‘What [is] one of your values in life?’” he said. “And he said he valued loyalty. ... That’s one of my top values in life as well.”

Wang said he is glad he chose to attend UTRGV. Coming to the U.S. and playing golf here was always a dream of his that came true.

“It’s a lot of fun to be a part of [UTRGV],” he said. “I enjoy being here. ... Thank you for your support; we really appreciate it.”

Others on Henry Wang
UTRGV Men’s Golf head coach

Houston Moore said Wang inspires him to be a better person and a better coach. He also said Wang is a high-character player who came in with a different playing style and has improved his game consistently.

“If Henry hits the ball and plays, he’s lethal,” Moore said. “He’s one of those guys that is kind of a humble hero; quiet, does all the right things. He’s [not] too vocal, but whenever he does say something, it’s generally good information.”

Golf player Leonardo Novella also described Wang as a supportive person with a unique playing style. He said he has bonded with Wang over rugby and has enjoyed getting to know him.

“[I] can say that his [playing style] is very raw and very talented,” Novella said. “He likes to work hard. ... On the golf course, we try to give feedback to each other and ... just helping each other out.”

The Future

Wang is a kinesiology sophomore. He said he always wants to have golf in his life. Once he obtains his degree, Wang said he hopes to get a job teaching or coaching golf at a high school or college level, specializing in strength and conditioning.

“It is something that I enjoy,” he said. “I was like, ‘I want to learn more about nutrition [and] how our body moves.’ ... So, being an apprentice in coaching or being mentored in strength and conditioning [would] be pretty cool.”

“IF HENRY HITS THE

BALL AND PLAYS, HE’S LETHAL.”

Process and Presence

Talking Philosophy & Game With The UTRGV Women's Golf Team

Story by Marissa Rodriguez

“We talk about life in between shots and then over the shot we are ranging everything from the wind to the fly.”

Eighteen to 36 holes at a time. That is how assistant coach Paola Cortes-Ortiz does it. Since 2021, Cortes-Ortiz has worked for the UTRGV golf programs as the men's and women's assistant coach. She said being open and supportive has drastically changed the team's culture.

“What I like to do is walk with one to two players,” Cortes-Ortiz said. “[I] spend all my time walking with them; basically, becoming a professional caddy just without having to carry their bags. So, I walk alongside them for 18 to 36 holes at a time. We talk about life in between shots and then over the shot we are ranging everything from the wind to the fly.”

Cortes-Ortiz credits the strong team culture with the record-breaking season the women's team had in the Spring 2023, with the top three finishes, second place at their home tournament and the lowest strike average in the team's history. Along with head coach Bryan Novoa, women's golf have held retreats, bonding days and specialized practice plans to help create more of a team atmosphere.

“Finding areas of improvement and communicating it in a way to where they don't just buy into that vision, they work towards that vision as well,” Cortes-Ortiz said. “So, when I'm on the golf course with them, I help design very specific practice plans for each player to do individually but I also like team stuff as well [because] I think that plays into team culture pretty good. So, really, it's finding out what those

weaknesses are and developing them into strengths.”

Both coaches, senior Mercedes Vega and freshman Preston Saiz took to the sport at a young age.

“Golf is 75% mental,” Vega said. “I'm working on my mental part. ... I'm just trying to stay calm during the home round and that's helping me a lot.”

Novoa was introduced to the game by his grandfather at the age of 7. He was taken to the municipal golf course in Laredo where he grew up. He dedicated his life to the sport from that point on. Novoa said many people call him technical but he says he is not technical but specific.

“I think in today's modern world, we press a button, we get an answer,” Novoa said. “It's like no one is interested in how you come up with an answer. I think it's really important to still understand your why, to understand your what and to understand your how. That's how you build confidence, that's how you build faith and trust in yourself and knowing that you can follow procedures that produce success.”

Novoa, who competed at the professional level, said learning mental strength is how you succeed in golf. His ultimate goal is to create opportunities where students can show their skills and intelligence.

“We want to create an opportunity of intelligence ... and learning to use intelligence to our advantage and understanding that intelligence wins over talent,” Novoa said. “You're

gonna learn how to think out here. You're gonna learn how to make decisions that are hard to make. You're gonna learn how to use your mind to your advantage. Because student athletes—whether they decide to be physical therapists, lawyers, business people—it's applicable in everyone's life. The truth is that it creates success across the board.”

Saiz, a freshman on the team from San Antonio, said the team has been supportive and accepting.

“They're all very supportive,” Saiz said. “I feel like I can go to each and every one of them. And also, they're all very hardworking. They have a drive ... especially coming from high school golf. The team culture is very different.”

Saiz said one of the most difficult aspects of golf is staying focused for the five- sometimes six-hour play times.

“You have to stay steady the entire time,” she said. “You can't get distracted and you can't let your mind wander off.”

Vega said while the hardest aspect may be focus, she tries to let go and trust herself and her game.

“You learn [focus] from experience through the years, but what I do is between putts I try not to think about golf,” Vega said. “I try to think about other things because sometimes if you think too much about how you are doing in that moment, then you overthink too much and that could affect your game.”

TURN ON THE LIGHTS

A Look Into Matlock's "Player's-First Program" & The Road To Glory With Vaquero Baseball

Story by Marissa Rodriguez

UTRGV
Photos by Blanca Castillo

UTHealth
Rio Grande Valley
5 NEWS
myRGV
Edinburg
THE CITY OF
TOWNEPLACE
SUITES
HARRIOTT
WING BARN
GOLDEN
CANE
UNIVERSITY
DRAFT

"We're all here for these players 24/7. If they need to get some swings at 11 at night we'll flip the lights on. We are here for the kids. That's what we're here for."

UTRGV Baseball has been steadily on the rise since the Matlock era began in 2017. That year, Derek Matlock became head coach while Michel Matlock, his wife and UTRGV Baseball's director of operations, joined in 2018. With help from a team of coaches, coordinators and staff, coach Matlock said the team has two goals: breaking attendance records and bringing home the Western Athletic Conference (WAC) championship again for the second time since 2019.

"We got the same expectation every year," Derek said. "We got to win a championship. If we don't shoot for the moon, we're not gonna get there."

This is also the Division I team's fourth year getting over 30 wins in a season. Derek, who won the 2019 WAC Coach of the Year, said the glory that comes with these accomplishments means nothing if the coaching staff does not commit to the players.

"This isn't a stepping stone to go get another job," he said. "This is here. We're all here for these players 24/7. If they need to get some swings at 11 at night, we're gonna come throw to them. [If] they need some ground balls, we'll come hit to them. We'll flip the lights on. We are here for the kids. That's what we're here for. We're not here for ourselves. ...

"We are not here for our accolades, you know. You can throw that coach of the year trophy in the trash. That's not really anything. ... And you take a lot of pride in loving the kids and being there for them and working them hard and keeping them accountable. That's just a 'Players-First Program.'"

According to Roberto Martinez, associate head coach and recruiting coordinator, the Players' First Program involves knowing even the smallest details about the players on the team, including learning the family dogs' names, phone calls with grandfathers and officiating weddings. Derek added that these are only a few of the things that show how the baseball coaching staff works to become a support system for the



Head coach Derek Matlock watches the team practice batting Feb. 2. at the UTRGV Baseball Stadium.

team. The team is also supported academically and in its service to the community. So far, the baseball team has provided almost 1,000 hours of community service. Together, the team has a cumulative GPA of 3.23 and almost half of the program made the Athletic Director's Honor Roll and the Dean's List for Fall 2023.

Martinez also said their livelihoods as coaches are dependent upon 18 to 22 year olds, which is a lot of pressure but a worthy challenge.

"We continue to raise them in the right direction, not only athletically but in life too," he said. "Our families won't eat if we get fired and that's [the] challenge in it, but it's a fun part as you get to be involved. ... Michel [Matlock]... has been to a lot of ex players' weddings. She's done weddings for them. ...[You] see those guys all of a sudden they call you, 'Coach, I'm having a kid. Hey, coach, I'm getting married.' So, that's what you want to build. Yeah, you want to win a lot, but you also want to be able to stop and see we've been lucky. We've had a lot of our ex players playing on TV making a lot of money. That's fun for us."

In fact, Michel Matlock has officiated the weddings of every member of the current coaching staff. Coach Matlock's office features a wall of photos of every former student-athlete that he has coached



Assistant Coach and Recruiting Coordinator Rob Martinez watches the team practice batting Feb. 2 at the UTRGV Baseball Stadium.

that have gone on to play Major League Baseball.

Coach Derek Matlock said that the team aims to compete in the WAC championship every year, with bigger ambitions of reaching the NCAA regionals. The Vaqueros have not made it to regionals since 1986.

Matlock said it is as easy as ABC—accountability, blue collar and committed—which is required to grow as a player and excel in the program.

The head coach said players have to look at themselves in the mirror at the end of the day and know that they are accountable for themselves. They have to out-work other teams by embodying a blue-collar work ethic and commit to sleeping right, eating right and playing good baseball.

Many players attribute their teams ability to work together to the approach of the coaching staff.

"They're people first, not coaches and I think that's a big help and it will get you used to the environment and

"If we don't shoot for the moon, we're not gonna get there."



Senior pitcher Tyler Valdez (left) and graduate infielder CJ Valdez pose during practice Feb. 2 at the UTRGV Baseball Stadium.

the culture here,” said CJ Valdez, the starting third baseman.

Valdez and his younger brother, Tyler Valdez, a pitcher, started on the team in 2023 but did not play much due to injuries. CJ, an All-Big Ten player who transferred from Purdue University, and Tyler, an Arizona State University transfer, said they grew up and mastered the sport together. They are now taking the field as teammates at UTRGV.

Tyler said the team is well matched and supportive of one another.

“It feels almost like in high school where we all knew each other,” he said. “We grew up [together]. A majority of [the] kids on the team [are] from the same area. So, it feels like it’s more of a family-oriented team.”

Much like CJ and Tyler, Martinez said he started playing baseball as soon as he could walk. He grew up in Mexico and moved to El Paso later in his childhood.

The Division I team said it aims to compete in the WAC championship every year, with bigger ambitions of reaching the NCAA regionals, the College World Series. The Vaqueros have not made it to regionals since 1986.

For its 2024 season, Martinez said UTRGV Baseball welcomed 19 newcomers to the team, a step up from the usual 10 to 15. He said many players graduated in 2023. Among them was Brandon Pimentel, a first baseman who signed with the Washington Nationals as a free-agent. Pimentel is one of six former UTRGV players who have signed with an MLB team since Matlock started.

Martinez said hard work always pays on the field. Athletes choose their own destiny here.

“You control your destiny,” he said. “If you play well, you’re gonna play every day. ... If you don’t, you’re not. Kevin Stevens, a perfect example, came in and walked on. He paved his own way here from Arizona, \$30,000 to come to school... Well, he earned the Friday night starter role without a scholarship [and] the right to be that No. 1 out there and play under the lights in front of the big crowd. ... That’s what it means. ... You get to decide what your destiny is here and how you go about it. ... We’re not gonna play favorites; we’re gonna play the best one because that’s how we eat.”

Stevens signed with the Yankees on July 19, 2022 as a free-agent.

That energy is catching on at Vaquero baseball games, with the

program drawing a record 45,461 fans in 28 games last season. The previous record was 39,700 in 26 games in 1975 under Pan American University. Martinez said sometimes UTRGV has more fans than the home team when it travels to games.

Michel Matlock said that although some players may have a misperception of the Valley, like she herself once did, once they have lived here, they never want to leave.

“Now that we’re down here we’re like, “Yeah, no. We’re never leaving,” she said. “And then the kids coming down from like New York, they haven’t left. We have three boys here and they stayed.”

Martinez said this year’s team is closer than most.

Derek Matlock said he considers the team’s closeness to be born from

the culture of the city and South Texas itself. With six players from the Rio Grande Valley on the starting roster and many athletes who have grown up competing with one another from Texas and Arizona, it is a culture of honor, loyalty and family.

“I think they’re influenced by the local players we have and the community,” Derek said. “It’s kind of linked into a family. ... I think they buy into the culture of the city, which is a really big-time culture of family. We do have a good, little group in here. They care for each other and I think we’ve got that from this community.”

The UTRGV Baseball team kicked off the 2024 season with a split doubleheader, which means the team played against another team twice on the same day. The Vaqueros played against the Rhode Island Rams three times in the series. In the first game,

the Vaqueros lost to the Rams in the 11th inning, 3-4. In the second game, the Vaqueros won with a score of 13-3. In the last game, the Vaqueros blazed into victory with a score of 15-1. CJ hit a career high of six runs batted in and scored 2 runs in the last game.

Michel Matlock says that the team is going for it this year.

“With everybody behind us ... we’ll be able to win some games ... and do something special this year,” she said.

CJ Valdez said that with the support of the community, the athletes are able to play to their best ability.

“The community just helps you play with a little more edge and a little more fire,” he said.

"You control your destiny."





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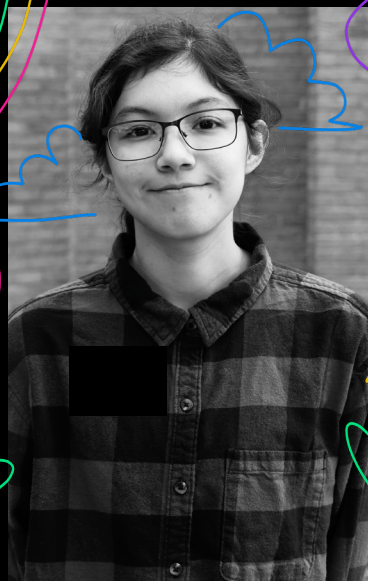
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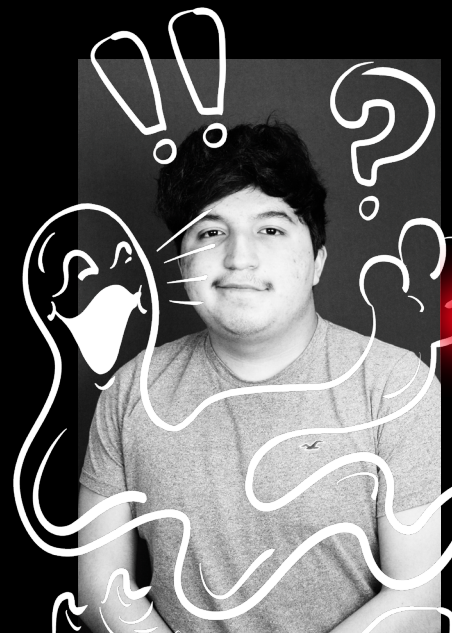
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