



Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement



2020  
ANNUAL REPORT

YEARS



# LEADERS PAGE

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## BOARD CHAIRMAN



I am so proud of VIDA. We have stayed the course on our mission to provide educational and training opportunities to those who want to advance and improve their—and their families’--lives.

We could have used everything that happened in 2020 as an excuse to slow down and limit our services, but our wonderful and caring staff and Board took it to another level, and our funders were just as supportive. Instead of giving up, we remained on course, just as we have over the past 25 years. In the words of Nick Saban, head coach of the University of Alabama football team, “One thing about championship teams is that they’re resilient. No matter what is thrown at them, no matter how deep the hole, they find a way to bounce back and overcome adversity.” VIDA is a championship team.

I continue to meet our former participants in Valley medical facilities, as well as in other essential businesses. They are making a difference for themselves and for the community. Read on page 2 about one such encounter I had during the 2019-2020 fiscal year. God bless and Dios por delante!

TONY AGUIRRE | MANAGING PARTNER | RIVERSIDE DEVELOPMENT SERVICES, LLC

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## EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



At the start of the 2019-2020 fiscal year, none of us could have anticipated where we were headed. We expected the year to be a continuation of our relentless work to provide the support needed to lead our VIDA participants out of poverty and into high-demand, high-skill, high-paying jobs. After all, this is the most fundamental aspect of economic development. In order to attract new companies to our region, we must have the skilled workforce they need. This is precisely VIDA’s mission--to create opportunities for Valley residents to receive the training, certifications and credentials needed to obtain these jobs and to end the cycle of poverty and public assistance.

Little did we know, at the time, that we would be facing a global pandemic head on.

2020 challenged us all at every level. At VIDA, we, too, found ourselves navigating the ever-changing waters in order to develop our response to COVID-19. Our strategy was to modify our daily operations in a manner that would have minimal impact on our partners and, more importantly, on our participants. Understanding that our participants already face a multitude of obstacles, our case managers focused on increasing their contact with them without jeopardizing their health and well-being. Using technology to serve them, Zoom and GoToMeeting became invaluable and insured that participants had access to their case manager at all times. Despite the upheaval around us, 100 percent of our participants persisted! I am so proud of how our staff rose to the challenge and worked so diligently to make this possible.

In 2021, VIDA will continue to help Valley residents overcome enormous obstacles on their paths to self-sufficiency while simultaneously supplying a skilled workforce in our region. That is what VIDA does, **one VIDA at a time!**

PRISCILLA DINN ALVAREZ | VIDA

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## BOARD OF DIRECTORS OCT 1 2019 - SEPT 20, 2020



AL VILLARREAL



APOLONIO BORREGO, JR.



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ROSALIE TRISTAN



EDUARDO ANAYA



MSGR. HEBERTO DIAZ VICE CHAIRPERSON

It is an honor to serve on the board of VIDA--an organization that has done so much for my hospital and our Valley community at large. Valley Baptist Medical Center Brownsville is constantly challenged to meet tremendous healthcare needs in a rapidly growing region. The opportunities to join our team are numerous, and these careers are personally and financially rewarding. There has never been a lack of interest in these jobs, but there is often a shortage of resources needed to educate and train our local candidates. VIDA bridges this gap. As a result, we can improve quality of life by building a skilled workforce and insuring our community receives the excellent healthcare it deserves.

- LESLIE BINGHAM



## MERE COINCIDENCE OR SERENDIPITY? LIVING A BETTER VIDA

**F**or a week in early February, McAllen businessman and City of McAllen Public Utilities Vice Chairman Tony Aguirre spent countless hours at Edinburg Regional Medical Center where his mom was a patient. He watched TV and sang conjunto songs playing on his phone's Pandora app with her. He monitored her vitals while she slept and had conversations with all of the medical professionals treating her.

One of the nurses treating Tony's mom was Maria Herrera. Petite in stature and quiet in nature, Herrera exhibited the qualities of someone destined to serve in this field — knowledge, compassion and commitment to her patients. One day, as Herrera tended to his mom, Aguirre asked her how long she had been working as a nurse. "Seven years," she responded. During the course of their conversation, Aguirre asked Herrera if she had received any help to complete school. "Yes," she readily answered. "From VIDA." Aguirre nodded his head and Herrera expressed a bit of surprise. "You know about VIDA?" she asked him, and again, he nodded. Herrera, still caring for Aguirre's mom throughout their conversation, told him she had been an unemployed, single mother with two daughters. She was taking an introductory class in nursing at South Texas College in McAllen. Herrera was completely uncertain as to how she would continue because of the cost of higher education. "Nursing school is stressful as it is," Herrera said. The financial concern adds even more.

### A TURNING POINT

After hearing about VIDA, Herrera did some research and applied for assistance. She received financial assistance for her books and to pay tuition costs not covered by financial aid. Her case manager at VIDA helped her tremendously, checking with her to make sure she attended tutoring, when needed, and encouraging her during difficult moments. Herrera wanted to know how Aguirre knew about VIDA, so he decided to tell her. Aguirre is the chairman of the VIDA board of directors. Herrera's story and the stories of so many others over the past 25 years of VIDA's existence embody why he serves on this board.

### A BETTER LIFE

Keen to this serendipitous meeting, Herrera told the rest of her story. She graduated from STC with an associate's degree in nursing. Within one month of graduation, she took the National Council Licensure Examination for Registered Nurses (NCLEX-RN) and passed. Herrera accepted an RN position and now earns over \$36 an hour plus benefits and includes a differential for working in the Intensive Care Unit.

*"I had no home and no car," Herrera said. "I was on food stamps, on public assistance, and my daughters and I were living with my mom." Now, she said, she has a home and a car, as well as a husband and two more children. "Thanks to VIDA," said Herrera, "I have accomplished one of the most important goals in my life — to become a nurse. VIDA made a huge impact on my family and me ... and definitely on generations to come."*

**T**wenty-five years ago, Valley Interfaith, created VIDA, providing an opportunity for students to pursue higher education and the ability to obtain a high-paying job. VIDA participants consist of students from across the Rio Grande Valley, including families from rural areas and colonias—the most underserved communities. VIDA believes a high-skilled, trained workforce will become self-sustaining and, in turn, impact their families now and in future generations.

Once Valley residents take advantage of VIDA, they benefit financially and are met with opportunities to get out of poverty. More importantly, when individuals do not have to depend on public assistance to feed their families, they are given the dignity and respect they deserve. As a co-founder of Valley Interfaith, Carmen Anaya taught leaders in her community to

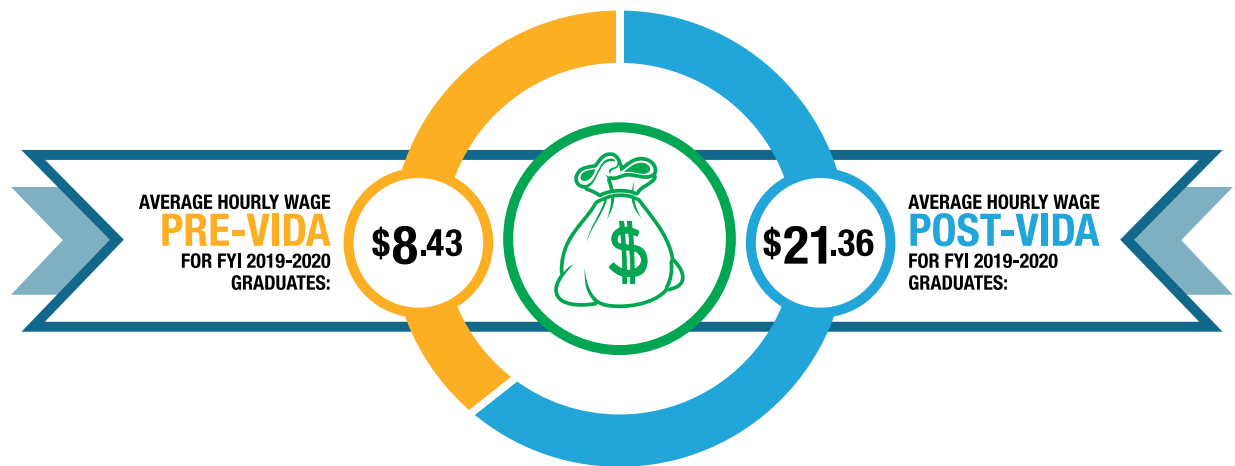
**“NEVER DO FOR  
OTHERS WHAT  
THEY CAN DO FOR  
THEMSELVES”**

and laid a foundation for others to continue. Twenty-five years later, VIDA remains committed to building on this foundation.

EDUARDO ANAYA | ATTORNEY  
LAW OFFICE OF EDUARDO ANAYA

**TOTAL SERVED: 429**  
Total VIDA Graduates: 168  
**PERSISTENCE RATE: 92%**

**AVERAGE ANNUAL SALARY  
UPON GRADUATION:  
\$44,428.80**



## RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR EVERY DOLLAR SPENT: **\$14.74\***

*\*Based on Economic Impact Study 2020 by UTRGV Data and Information Systems Center*

**THE SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN WAGES VIDA GRADUATES EARN CREATES A RIPPLE EFFECT ACROSS THE COMMUNITIES WHERE THEY LIVE.**

- Graduates buy home.
- Graduates buy cars.
- Graduates go out to eat, often with their families.
- Graduates have a much higher disposable income.
- Graduates open small businesses.
- Increased income and spending results in higher tax revenue.
- Graduates who previously received public assistance are now self-sustaining.

**THE RIPPLE EFFECT IS ALSO FELT IN THE GRADUATES' FAMILIES.**

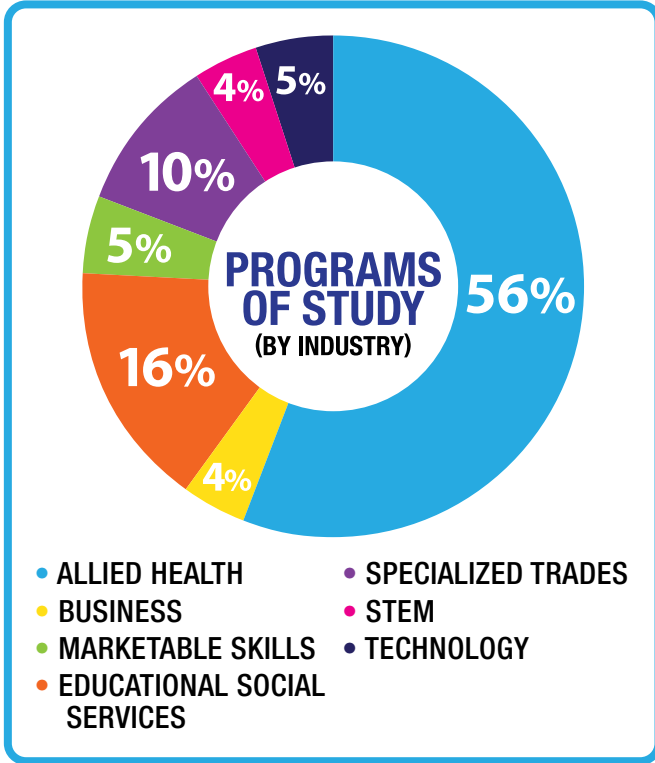
- Food security replaces food insecurity.
- Children perform better in school.
- VIDA graduates become role models for their children.
- Children witness the impact higher education has on living conditions.

## RIO GRANDE VALLEY COMMUNITY PROFILE

While the Rio Grande Valley is home to foreign trade zones, the new SpaceX Boca Chica Launch Site in Brownville, and a developing liquefied natural gas exporting industry, it is also one of the poorest regions in the country. In fact, January 2, 2020, 24/7 Wall St., LLC, published “The Poorest County in Every State” by Samuel Stebbins. Stebbins identified Starr County, one of four counties that comprise the Rio Grande Valley, as the poorest county in Texas, based on these figures:

- Median household income: \$29,294 (state: \$59,570)
- Poverty rate: 35.3% (state: 15.5%)
- Oct. 2019 unemployment: 9.6% (state: 3.4%)
- Adults with a bachelor’s degree: 10.3% (state: 29.3%)

A glimpse of the Rio Grande Valley Community Profile clearly illustrates the need for VIDA.



## FY 2019-2020 PARTICIPANTS

Average Age of Participants: 30

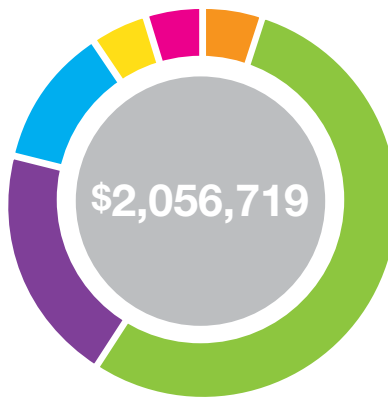
Unemployed, Low income or on public assistance: 98%

Percentage Female: 66%

Percentage Male: 34%

Percentage with Two or More Children in the Household: 43%

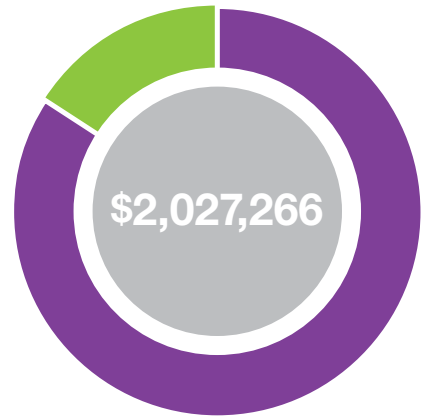
Percentage of Single Parents: 34%



### REVENUE:

- FEDERAL: \$104,779
- LOCAL GOVT: \$1,112,625
- STATE: \$408,066
- FOUNDATIONS: \$240,720
- INDIVIDUAL & CORPORATE GIFTS: \$95,002
- MISCELLANEOUS: \$95,527

**TOTAL REVENUE: \$2,056,719**



### EXPENSES:

- PROGRAM SERVICES: \$1,708,442
  - ADMINISTRATION: \$318,824
- TOTAL EXPENSES: \$2,027,266**

**NET CHANGE IN ASSETS: TOTAL: \$29,453**





# VIDA

## A 25-YEAR HISTORY OF ADDRESSING UNEMPLOYMENT, UNDEREMPLOYMENT, & POVERTY IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY

**T**he Rio Grande Valley lies along the southern Texas-Mexico border. In 1995, the region was home to textile-industry leaders. The dramatic loss of jobs in this industry due to foreign competition had a devastating impact on the Rio Grande Valley. It also triggered the creation of the Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement.

In 1995, Haggar Clothing Co. and Fruit of the Loom, Ltd. announced 1,340 lay-offs in the region, leaving civic leaders unprepared for this sudden and significant increase in unemployed residents. At the time, the region's per-capita income was \$6.35 per hour, and double-digit unemployment was already the norm.

Soon thereafter, the community learned of additional lay-offs and plant closures affecting Haggar, Converse, Levi Strauss & Co, and Williamson-Dickies employees. When the final plant closed in 2003, over 8,000 textile workers had lost their jobs. Already one of the poorest regions in the nation, these lay-offs proved devastating for the workers, their families, and the entire Rio Grande Valley.

Valley Interfaith and private-industry business leaders stepped in at the start of this crisis in an effort to minimize the impact of this collapse. Valley Interfaith is a broad-based, nonpartisan organization that builds bridges across racial, denominational, economic, and geographic boundaries to create a way for otherwise marginalized individuals and families to develop a powerful voice in decision-making processes in their communities.

The leaders of Valley Interfaith used Project QUEST, a job-training initiative in San Antonio, as a model for the organization. They designed VIDA to offer the social and economic benefits achieved through strategic investments in long-term training for underemployed and unemployed Valley residents and those dependent on public assistance.

Valley Interfaith and the business leaders also designed VIDA to quickly respond to changes in the local labor market.

**THE IMPETUS FOR VIDA'S CREATION WAS THE NEED TO EMPOWER THE UNDERSERVED RESIDENTS OF OUR REGION WITH THE TOOLS, EDUCATION, AND TRAINING NEEDED TO BECOME SELF-SUFFICIENT WHILE FUELING THE GROWTH OF EXISTING EMPLOYERS AND INCREASING RECRUITMENT OF NEW INVESTMENT TO THE AREA BY DEVELOPING A HIGHLY SKILLED WORKFORCE.**

Since its inception, VIDA's mission has remained constant--to formulate new institutional relationships in the Rio Grande Valley that simultaneously address employers' needs for skilled workers while linking the area's unemployed and underemployed with high-skill, high-wage jobs identified in the region. VIDA continues to work closely with the business sector, training providers, and community-based organizations to develop a skilled workforce that will meet the demands of employers in the Rio Grande Valley now and for years to come.

## SUCCESS STORIES

### ELSA LERMA



Elsa Lerma came to VIDA in 2017 as a 38 year old single mom of 3 children. At the time of application, Elsa was unemployed, relied on SNAP benefits and was not receiving child support for her children. Elsa survived financially by taking on part-time jobs to be able to concentrate on her studies. Elsa had been working as a CNA for many years but knew she could not support her children unless she went back to school to earn a nursing degree.

**WITH VIDA'S COMMITMENT TO ASSIST HER, ELSA WAS ABLE TO GRADUATE WITH HER A.D.N. DEGREE IN 2020. EARNING OVER \$50,000 PLUS BENEFITS, ELSA STATES, "MY LIFE HAS CHANGED IN A WAY OF OVERCOMING OBSTACLES AND CHALLENGES I NEVER IMAGINED I COULD."**

"VIDA is a big part of my opportunity to make my lifelong dream possible. We will forever be grateful to VIDA and their counselors who week after week sit with us and encourage us to push our limits to reach greatness."

### JOSE M. GUTIERREZ



Jose M. Gutierrez, was 36 years of age and unemployed when he heard about VIDA. As a native of Mercedes, Texas where he has lived all his life with his retired mom, Jose knew working at Dollar Tree for 10 years was not where his passion was. Four years ago, Jose decided he was not content with his current occupation and started looking into going back to college. He had been working for Dollar Tree stores for 10 years already and was a store manager and district trainer.

He started taking night classes at South Texas College and soon applied to the nursing program. The week of his acceptance into the program, Jose prayed and asked God to guide him in the right direction. As excited that he was to begin his studies, he didn't know how he would be able to pay for the program. After hearing about VIDA, he submitted his application and was accepted by VIDA to receive assistance.

Having VIDA's assistance made it possible for Jose to concentrate on school only and not worry about paying for it. Jose states that it's never late to go back to school and achieve a brighter future, success comes with sacrifice. Jose states that

**"VIDA IS IMPORTANT BECAUSE IT HELPS PEOPLE REACH THE GOALS THEY THOUGHT THEY COULDN'T ACHIEVE DUE TO LACK OF RESOURCES. BUT WITH THE HELP OF VIDA, EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE."**

### FABIOLA JUAREZ



Fabiola Juarez was a 29 year old unemployed female on SNAP benefits at the time of entry into VIDA in 2017. Fabiola is married with 2 children ages 3 and 1 year old. Fabiola received her GED in 2013. Her husband had been unemployed since 2016 at the time of entry. The family managed finances with her husband's weekly unemployment of \$493. Fabiola states that she heard about VIDA through a classmate with similar struggles. At that point she decided to apply for assistance with VIDA.

Jessica states, "VIDA's counseling and financial support helped me to obtain my Associate Degree in Nursing from STC. I had no financial aid and it was hardship for me to pay for my tuition. I had no job and my husband was the only one providing for the family. My counselor was super helpful. We had meetings and she always had words of encouragement. She covered topics in our meetings that were very helpful during my semester.

She always answered our questions and was available to us whenever we needed her. I cannot thank you enough."

**FABIOLA GRADUATED SPRING 2020 WITH AN ASSOCIATE DEGREE IN NURSING AND IS NOW EMPLOYED EARNING OVER \$47,000 ANNUALLY.**





## VIDA'S CRAFT TRADES INITIATIVE

### A History of Responding to Changes in the Local Labor Market

Twenty-five years ago, one of the foundational elements of the Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA) has been a commitment to rapidly responding to changes in the local labor market.

“We are always looking for ways to stay innovative,” said Isidro “Sid” Ramos, VIDA’s workforce development manager. “Industry is constantly evolving and we have always been an industry-driven program.” “An evolving trend in manufacturing and technical industries is a focus on skill sets. These changes challenge the training status quo and require VIDA to stay vigilant.” Ramos said it is his job to continuously canvas industries in the region to stay abreast of trends, to make program decisions, and to identify demand occupations.

### ONE OF VIDA'S MOST RECENT RESPONSES TO THE LABOR MARKET IN THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY IS THE CREATION OF THE COMMERCIAL ELECTRICIAN PROGRAM.

The VIDA Commercial Electrician Program provides a career pathway taking participants through to their state journeyman license. VIDA commits to providing assistance through the first two years, then by teaming up with the IBEW, participants are assisted through the last two years of training. The game changer is that participants will begin working with commercial electrical contractors as early as 4 months into their training.

The program was made possible through a \$100,000 grant from the Texas Workforce Commission, leveraged with funding from VIDA’s local partners.

By responding to changes in the local labor market, we continue to impact sustainable economic growth, one VIDA at a time!



“VIDA helps lift up families to become self-sustaining and successful in a lot of ways. Our special population needed a little boost and we helped through a partnership with the City, South Texas College and VIDA. We wanted to make sure we provided services to everyone in our community and VIDA helped us meet that goal of providing services, an education and opportunities.”

Jim Darling, Mayor, City of McAllen



All it takes is a car breaking down, a grandmother getting sick, someone gets pregnant and the student drops out of college and more than likely never comes back to earn a college degree. That is what is so critical about VIDA - to be there for whatever life challenges come forward, VIDA is there to support that student and help them graduate. I've seen the vulnerability of students because of their economic challenges. They simply must have the financial, emotional and social support that VIDA provides them.”

Dr. Shirley Reed, Founding President, South Texas Community College (1994- 2020)



# THANK YOU TO OUR PARTNERS

## OUR PARTNERS

VIDA could not exist without the generosity of our investment, educational, collaborative, and fundraising sponsors. The students being served by VIDA have this opportunity for a better life because of them.

**Thank you to all of our FY 2019-2020 partners!**

## INVESTMENT PARTNERS

ACE IV  
Alamo Economic Development Corporation  
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Brownsville Foundation for Health and Education  
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City of Mercedes  
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(Now Greater Brownsville Economic Development Corporation)  
Greater Texas Foundation  
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Margaret and Robert McAllen  
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Socialife  
South Texas College  
The Monitor  
Valley Baptist Medical Center

## EDUCATIONAL PARTNERS

Cameron County Education Initiative, Inc.  
South Texas College  
Texas Southmost College  
Texas State Technical College  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Brownsville  
The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley, Edinburg

## COLLABORATIVE PARTNERS

Valley Business Report  
Valley Interfaith  
Workforce Solutions, Cameron County  
Workforce Solutions, Hidalgo County

## ***Thank You Employers Hiring VIDA Graduates in 2020:***

Accuhealth Technologies, LLC  
Ageless Living Home Health  
All Texas Health Care, Inc.  
Allstate Hospice  
Ascension Providence  
Aveanna Healthcare, LLC  
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Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District  
Harlingen Medical Center  
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Total Rehab Kids  
UMC Health System  
University Health  
Valley Baptist Health System  
Valley Regional Medical Center  
Waterfield Labor Solutions  
Weslaco Independent School District  
Workforce Solutions

# ABOUT US

## OUR PHILOSOPHY

VIDA's philosophy is quite simple: A well-trained, well-educated population will be ready for tomorrow's jobs and able to live more prosperous, healthy, and happy lives. VIDA is a proven model for success, graduating participants into high-demand, high-wage occupations that otherwise remain vacant or are filled by people from outside our community. The ultimate goal is not job placement but job retention because job retention leads to a community filled with self-sufficient taxpayers who are living proof of a significant return on investment of federal, state, local, and private funding. VIDA's graduates not only help the families they support and the businesses that employ them, but moving out of unemployment and public assistance helps all of us.

## OUR MISSION

VIDA's mission is to formulate new institutional relationships in the Rio Grande Valley that simultaneously address employers' needs for skilled workers and prepare the area's unemployed and underemployed residents for high-skill, high-wage jobs identified in the region.

## OUR UNIQUE SERVICE STRATEGY

VIDA's unique program model is at the core of its success, demonstrated by an average 92 percent persistence rate while participants are in training. Our case managers, who also serve as career counselors, work closely with each student to address barriers that historically plague this demographic and ultimately quash their dreams of completing a certificate or degree that could change the trajectory of their lives. Financial struggles, family issues, stress and time management are but a few of the elements addressed during mandatory weekly counseling sessions. In addition, VIDA counselors infuse group sessions with soft-skills training, such as general employability, resume preparation and interviewing, financial management, and study skills. Guest speakers are invited to speak to our participants about home buying, savings, investments, and retirement planning.

VIDA recognizes that financial barriers for our participants go beyond the inability to sustain the cost of tuition. Because of the invaluable support from local, state, and federal governments, as well as private foundations, we are also able to break down the overwhelming barriers of college books, child care, uniforms, and tools of the chosen trade. These wrap-around services, combined with training through our strong partnerships with educational institutions in the Rio Grande Valley, equip VIDA participants with the knowledge, skills, support, and commitment necessary to enter--and excel in--the workforce.

"The Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA)...connects under- and unemployed individuals with certificate and degree programs in high-growth sectors where jobs offer living wages, benefits, and opportunities for professional advancement. VIDA serves a primarily Latino population in four Lower Rio Grande Valley counties that rank among the poorest in the nation."

~Robert Ek, "Bridging the Divide from Jobs to Careers through Education," senior policy associate at American Public Human Services Association (APHSA), April 2012

## VIDA STAFF

### PRISCILLA DINN ALVAREZ

Executive Director

### IRMA GARCIA

Compliance/Program Services  
Manager

### ISIDRO "SID" RAMOS

Workforce Development Manager

### FELIDA VILLARREAL

Director of Finance

### LESLLY BLANCAS

Case Manager/Career Counselor

### SAN JUANITA SANCHEZ

Case Manager/Career Counselor

### STEPHANIE FLOREZ

Case Manager/Career Counselor

### HONESTY MARTINEZ

Career Placement Specialist

### JOANNA DELGADO

Accounting Support Specialist

### MARY LOU SAENZ

Outreach/Program Specialist

### CHRISTIE CANTU

Community Engagement Liaison





Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement

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**McAllen Library**

4001 N. 23rd St. • McAllen, TX

**Brownsville Satellite Office**

UTB / TSC • 80 Fort Brown

Student Service Building • Brownsville, TX



**VidaRGV**



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DONATE TO VIDA. WIN-WIN!**

Are you an Amazon.com shopper? Did you know you can shop at AmazonSmile.com instead, and Amazon will donate to VIDA based on your purchase? It's true, and there's no additional cost for you! You, too, can make a difference, one VIDA at a time!

**1.** Go to AmazonSmile.com and choose Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement as your charity by typing it in the search bar and then selecting it.

**2.** That's it! From now on, whenever you want to shop on

Amazon, go to amazonsmile.com, and the company will donate a portion of your purchases to VIDA!

**3.** Ask your friends and family to do the same!

**DONATE DIRECTLY TO VIDA.**

VIDA is fully funded through local, state, and federal governments, grants, private foundations, and the generous donations of individuals and companies in our community who believe in what we do.

It's easy to donate. Just go to [vidacareers.org](http://vidacareers.org) and click on the Donate now! Be part of the change! button in the header!