

BROWNSVILLE HERALD

VIDA success stories multiply; job-training organization moves forward

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By EMMA PEREZ-TREVINO, The Brownsville Herald

It wasn't too long ago that Mary Ruiz, a mother of two children, was working at a fast food restaurant in Brownsville for \$5.65 an hour.

But today, she said, when her husband is working part-time and struggling, she is prepared to earn more than \$13 an hour.

Ruiz just recently graduated with an associate's degree in accounting and she is one of numerous success stories that the Valley Initiative for Development and Advancement (VIDA) program can claim.

"Investing in programs like project VIDA was investing in me. That is true economic development," Ruiz recently said at a session that the grassroots and religious-based social justice organization Valley Interfaith sponsored.

The education and job training program is funded by numerous sources and for a second year, also by the Greater Brownsville Incentives Corp. (GBIC).

"I heard about VIDA through a friend who was in the program and has been enrolled in VIDA for two years," Ruiz recounted.

At the request of Valley Interfaith leaders, GBIC allocated \$180,000 to the program in the 2007-2008 fiscal year and \$192,000 in the present 2008-2009 fiscal year. Cities and counties also will be able to access matching funds from the state to expand their programs.

"The state is seeing how valuable job development is," Valley Interfaith leader Rev. Jerry Frank said.

Within the two-year program period here, 45 persons have graduated from the program, the retention rate is 94 percent, 81 percent are employed and the average current wage that they earn is \$11.18 per hour.

There are many success stories throughout the Rio Grande Valley.

Mary Peña enrolled in the program in McAllen in 2000. She graduated from a nursing program in 2003 and secured a starting wage of \$17 an hour with full benefits.

And now, she is waiting for her license to open a home health agency.

"I went from earning \$10,000 to over \$100,000 per year," Peña said.

VIDA was created in 1996 through the efforts of Valley Interfaith in collaboration with community and business leaders to design a job training program, program literature notes.

"Our philosophy is very simple, a well trained, well educated population will not only be ready for tomorrow's jobs but will be able to live a more prosperous, healthy, and happy lifestyle," VIDA states in its mission statement.