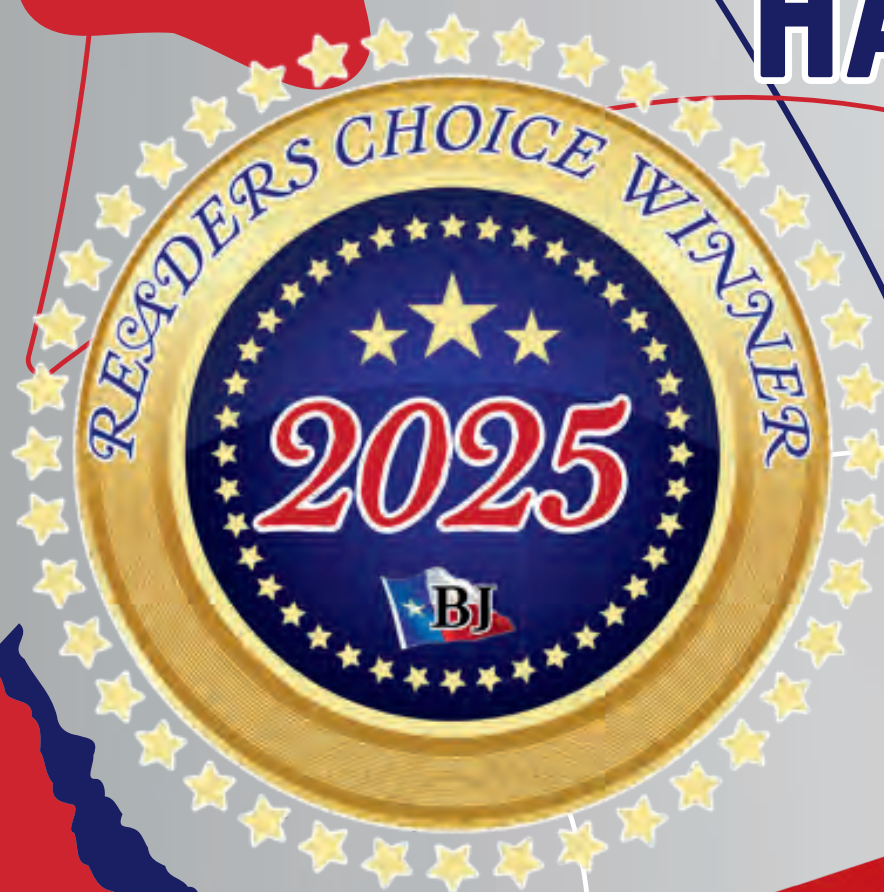


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*The Readers have  
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# John Corsi State Farm voted as the best insurance agency

By Michelle Rodriguez

The Belton Journal

The Belton Journal readers voted and chose John Corsi State Farm, located at 101 Lake Road as the best insurance agency. State Farm offers auto, homeowners, renters, life, disability, business, and several other products related to insurance.

"I'm super excited I won the best insurance agency seven years in a row. I'm very honored for the support of Bell County. I always strive to give the best customer service and protect our clients. I love getting the opportunity to take care of my clients and make sure they are okay. I file claims and follow up for them," said insurance agent John Corsi.

Corsi tries to be involved in the community civically. He's the former President of the Belton Lions Club, has been involved in several school committees for Belton I.S.D., and other projects. He's on the board of directors for the Belton Area Chamber of Commerce.

"I'm a former educator, I was a high school principal, coach, and teacher then changed careers after fifteen years. I met an agent, and he inspired me to go that route," said Corsi. He also worked as a sales leader

for State Farm Corporate. "I'm happy I got to come back to Belton in 2017 and take over for Barry Harper who retired. He was a great agent. I have a wonderful staff that works very hard and strives to care for our customers and give exceptional service," said Corsi.



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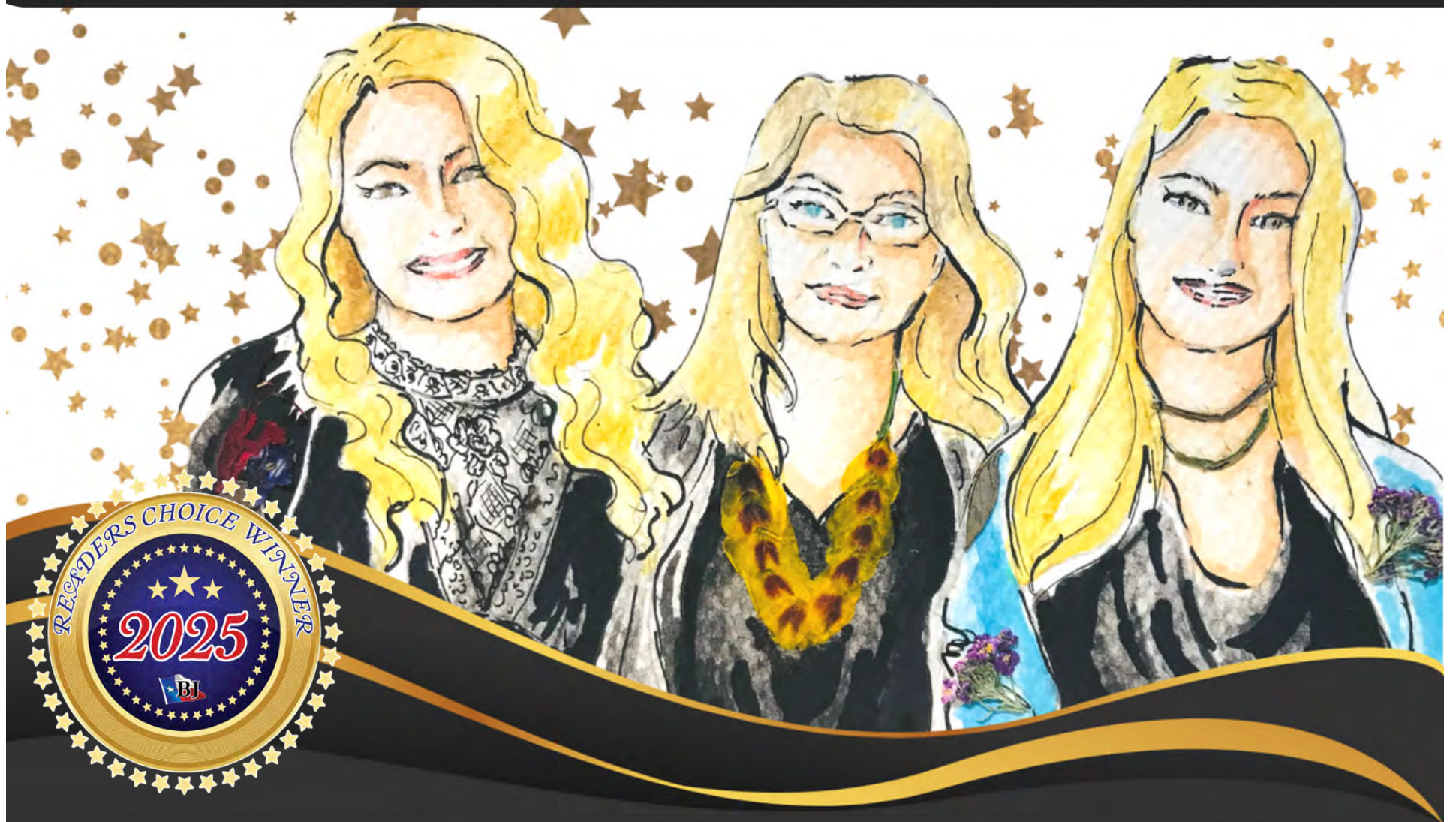


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## Grace Art Gallery's new exhibit Emerging Voices features BISD students' artwork

By **Michelle Rodriguez**

*The Belton Journal*

Grace Art Gallery located at 108 W. Central Avenue opened a new exhibit, Emerging Voices. The artists are high school students from BISD. Grace Art Gallery is open Fridays and Saturdays from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and by appointment.

"We had a good turnout for the grand opening. There were a lot of high school students and their families. The students were selected by their teachers. Our next exhibit will be the teachers at BISD," said owner of Grace Art Gallery, Jo Mapel.

Mapel met with the BISD teachers. They felt the name of the exhibit Emerging Voices represented the students and the development of their art. The artists used different mediums like yard and embroidery.

"My granddaughter, Emma Haberer, has art here. The Raggedy Ann doll in her art was mine, and I gave it to her. The dress Raggedy Ann wears is calico print," said Lisa Niemeier.

Haberer had a stack of books that she shredded. The dress on Raggedy Ann took a while to make. She used a magazine, books, and a newspaper.

"It was difficult because it was mixed media. The prompt was containment. I used an exact-o knife for the strings. I used black and white then color. I grabbed what was in the classroom. I used a paper cutter to make the doily," said artist and sophomore at Lake Belton High School, Haberer.

Haberer watched the movie version of Raggedy Ann, the Broadway musical, as inspiration for the art. She also plays the flute in the Lake Belton High School band.

"I found a colorized picture of Ivey Austin where she was Raggedy Ann. The red and white stockings were from the Temple Daily Telegram," said Haberer.

Another featuring artist from Lake Belton High School is Azaya Blair. Blair's work represents her creativity and personality. She loves to draw real world things, make it unique, or give it a sense of unnaturalness. Her work as a whole helps her experience

how she feels or what she wants to reflect, in a sense. The imperfections are always perfections, if you give it a chance.

Featuring artist from New Tech High School is Severin Martinez from Austin. Martinez grew up surrounded with music and art. She's been able to explore different artistic outlets such as drawing, singing, and painting. She likes going to concerts and is especially drawn to jazz and blues singers.

Another featuring artist from New Tech High School is Justice Fetting from Salado and currently lives in Belton. She's been drawing for a really long time and just got into painting in the last few years. She likes to draw, read, and "crank that soulja boy".

Featuring artist from Belton High School is Angel Romanhurd. He has been doing art since sixth grade; however, his art really didn't become something he's focused on until last year during their senior year where he got into drawing superheroes. His art regularly consists of colored pencils and graphite, but he really wants to move away from that for his piece, Icarus.

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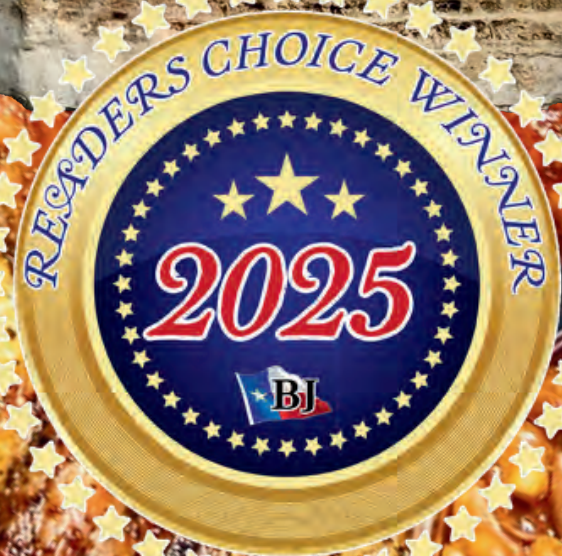
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## Trio has made significant contributions to the Belton community

By **DAVID TUMA**

*The Belton Journal*

Leila Valchar embarked on her entrepreneurial journey in January 2011 when she opened My Giving Tree Gift Shop & Gallery in the heart of downtown Belton. This venture was not without its challenges, particularly in the early months when Leila had to forgo a steady paycheck to invest in her dream. Her commitment to the shop was unwavering, even as it faced significant hurdles, including a particularly tough trial during the COVID-19 pandemic, which severely impacted many small businesses. Fortunately, the Belton community rallied around local shops like My Giving Tree and iMERAKi, demonstrating remarkable solidarity during difficult times.

Small businesses like Leila's play a vital role in the local economy, contributing over 50 percent to its overall health and providing employment to a multitude of residents. Leila's entrepreneurial journey began in 2010, when she noticed a quaint rental space that piqued her interest. After careful consideration, she decided to take

the plunge and eventually purchased a 6,000-square-foot building, which became the foundation of My Giving Tree. Initially, the shop was a mixed assortment of various items, lacking a clear identity. However, through her perseverance, tireless dedication, and a keen understanding of market trends, Leila shaped it into a thriving retail destination.

Today, downtown Belton is vibrant with life, filled with residents and visitors alike exploring its offerings. My Giving Tree has evolved into a well-curated store, showcasing a diverse and eclectic collection of custom-made jewelry, stylish clothing, unique gifts, and stunning artwork from local artists. This focus on local craftsmanship not only supports artists in the area but also helps foster a sense of community.

In 2019, Leila's vision was further amplified when her daughters, Jessica Shelton and Jamie Davenport, joined the family business by opening their own store, iMERAKi. With their shared entrepreneurial spirit, the trio has made significant contributions to their community, organizing events that bring people together, supporting the launch of new businesses, and nurturing a collaborative environment among local entrepreneurs.

Looking ahead, the story of My Giving Tree and iMERAKi exemplifies the values of sacrifice, resilience, and a genuine passion for their work. Leila takes immense pride in her daughters and their dedication to both the business and the community at large. Their collective journey serves as a powerful testament to the endurance and strength of small businesses and the unwavering support of the communities that cherish them. Through their efforts, they continue to inspire others and create a lasting positive impact on Belton.



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**City Employee:** James Grant  
**Club President:** Jon Fontenot - Lions Club  
**Dentist:** Dr. Cox  
**Grocery Store Clerk:** Logan Mayberry  
**Insurance Agent:** John Corsi  
**Local Band:** Jay White  
**Photographer:** Christopher Winston



**Radio News Anchor:** Ann Harder  
**Real Estate Agent:** Terri Covington  
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# 16 *The Belton Journal ~ Reader's Choice* 2025

## Harper-Talasek Funeral Homes is family-owned once again

By Michelle Rodriguez  
The Belton Journal

The Belton Journal readers voted and chose Harper-Talasek Funeral Homes as the best funeral home. Their Belton location at 503 N. Main St. (previously Heartfield Funeral Home) has been around since the 1860s, their Temple location at 500 W. Barton Ave, and their Killeen location at 506 N. 38<sup>th</sup> St. have been around since the 1960s.

"We are very grateful to our community for choosing us and to the families that we are able to serve for trusting us. My wife, Lori, and I are the new owners. The funeral homes are no longer owned by a corporation, but are family-owned and operated again," said

Dominic Holsome, President and CEO, CFSP, of Harper-Talasek.

They plan on continuing to host their Annual 9/11 First Responders Appreciation event at each of their locations, where a free meal is provided for fire, police, and any other first responders in their communities.

"We are very excited! It's important to be able to bring the values of a family-owned business to our community. As a family-owned business, we can offer our families a personable feel that helps people feel heard and valued," said Holsome.

Holsome and his wife acquired the business in October. Holsome previously worked for the corporation, fell in love with the communities, and wanted to serve them with

excellence.

"I called the corporation and asked if they were interested in selling the businesses to me, and they were. While it's a big responsibility and undertaking, it's exciting to get to meet folks and let them know that we're here for them," said Holsome.

Holsome and his team are working to create an affordable option for families that experience stillbirth. In those instances, Holsome works with the family to cover the expenses of their services. This only leaves the family responsible for the cost of merchandise items, such as caskets.

"We're excited to serve our communities with respect, honor, and excellence for generations," said Holsome.



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# Topanga Boutique, new in downtown Belton

By Michele Weisman

The Belton Journal

Kelsie Williams, owner of Topanga Boutique, a clothing store for women, opened the shop on July 26.

Located at 122 N. Pearl St., in what is said to have been the judge's house in the 1800s now houses fashion that can save you a trip to Austin.

Williams said, "I cracked the doors open, put the sign on, and the girls came in...playing dress up...they are comfortable browsing."

The boutique carries extra small through extra-large. Williams plans to have a plus-size section, but for now, occasionally, plus sizes are available. Newborn sizes up to six toddlers for girls, and just in for boys are graphic tees, per customer requests. Other items include low-end costume jewelry, higher-priced jewelry, handbags, scarves, books, stickers, and candles.

Educated in business and with a background in sales,

Williams wanted to build a community for women in Belton, combining her love of being a "girl's girl."

Topanga Boutique design makes customers feel like they have entered a girlfriend's closet. Shoppers range from pre-teens up to women in their 80s.

"What's a Topanga?" is a fun tagline to get people talking about the store. Ordering what customers tell her they wish she stocked is another way Williams stays on their mind.

"There's something for everybody. I wanted to have my roots here, and, you know, have my daughter watch me...and she's like, Mommy, 'our store'," said Williams of her daughter Hazel Moon Williams.

"I'm very interactive on Instagram. If they message me, they DM me...I can invoice them items. I can order it for them," Williams said.

Current hours, with plans to expand Dec. hours:

Wednesday, 11 a.m.–3 p.m.

Thursday, 11 a.m.–4 p.m.

Friday, 11 a.m.–4 p.m.

Saturday, 11 a.m.–3 p.m.

A women's Valentine's Day event is scheduled in Feb. and a ribbon cutting in the spring. Follow Topanga Boutique on Instagram at [topangaboutiquebelton](#), TikTok at [topangaboutique](#), or phone 254-613-4107. Tell Kelsie Williams you read this article in The Belton Journal and get a discount.

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## Dana McKinney shares her story about her tax business

By **Michelle Rodriguez**  
The Belton Journal

Before starting her business McKinney Tax Services, Dana McKinney spent over a decade working as an accountant for small companies in Bell County.

"The experience prepared me to take a leap of faith and start my business in 2011. I wanted to offer my knowledge to our community at an affordable price and friendly environment, said Dana McKinney. "We are locally owned and operated. I reside in Belton, along with my husband Ken and our three children Faith, Quinlan, and Colin.

Dana McKinney and her husband are both Philadelphia, Pennsylvania natives who came to Texas while he worked in

the military in 1998. Dana McKinney has been a professional federal tax preparer, an AFSP record holder for over twenty-three years, and maintains an annual designation with the IRS.

"I enjoy getting to know all my clients. I believe they deserve one-on-one personal relationships throughout the year, not just during tax season. Taxes do not have to be complicated, but with our approach, we just don't prepare a return, we inform you in a way that is easy to understand and guide them," said Dana McKinney.

They added the Belton Business Buckle next door this year, as an educational tool to empower small businesses. It will be a dynamic hub where small businesses, from inception, find the knowledge



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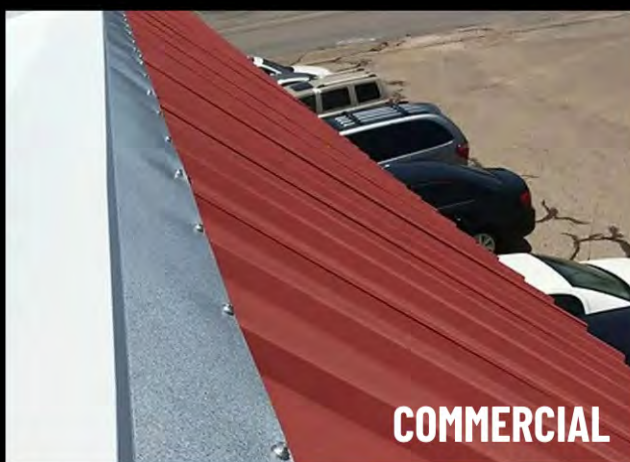




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