

The "Celebrating Family" Issue

# WACOAN

WACO'S MAGAZINE™

JUN  
2014

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# A Knack for Education

By Kathleen Seaman / Photographs by Sarah Hess, [fleetingmomentsphotography.com](http://fleetingmomentsphotography.com)

*Patricia and Aaron Peña both have experience educating and wrangling hundreds of children a day.*

Aaron is the principal at Woodway Elementary School, and Patricia is a kindergarten bilingual teacher at Hewitt Elementary School. As the parents of three young girls — Isabella, 11, Gabriella, 10, and Mia, 8 — they feel like their jobs have allowed them to be one step ahead when it comes to their daughters' education. It's an advantage they're lucky to have because their schedules are packed with school functions at three campuses, church activities, dance lessons and a doctoral program.

On a rare free evening for the Peñas, Aaron and Patricia spoke with editor Kathleen Seaman about becoming teachers, living in Waco and building a community of friends.

**WACOAN:** How did you end up living in Waco?

**Aaron:** We went to Baylor, both of us, then we moved back to Houston in '96 or '97. We moved back to

Houston for roughly six or seven years before ending up in Waco. Between our second and our third daughter, we moved back to Waco because of church. We go to Antioch [Community Church], and Antioch at the time had a training school for people interested in getting into ministry and doing church planting. We actually thought we might do that, but we just kind of fell in love with the area and the city and have been here ever since.

How long ago was that?

**Patricia:** Well, Mia is 8, so that was nine years ago. We moved specifically to do the training school at Antioch and then just —

**Aaron:** The plan was to do that for just a couple of years and then take off and go somewhere else, but we're still here.

**Patricia:** We just didn't feel like that was what God





The *Peña* Family





had for us, so we decided to just plug in —  
**Aaron:** To the school systems. To the community. Our girls, obviously, are getting older. It just seems right to stay here.

**WACOAN:** You mentioned moving back to Houston. Are you both originally from Houston?

**Aaron:** Yep. We went to high school together, so we moved back 'home,' I guess, and then came out here. We had a little stop in Bastrop, Texas, for a couple of years before ending up here in Waco again.

**WACOAN:** Other than just attending the same high school, how did you meet each other?

**Patricia:** We went to high school together, but we didn't date. We saw each other at Christmas break freshman year [of college]. He had gone to Baylor [University], and I had gone to [Houston Baptist University], and we saw each other right at that break. He asked me out for New Year's

and since he was a friend, I thought that would be fun. So, we went out on a few dates during that break and before he came back to Baylor to start the second semester, he asked me if I would be his girlfriend. We've dated ever since, and I transferred to Baylor our junior year, so I eventually ended up at Baylor.

**WACOAN:** When did you get married?

**Patricia:** We got married in August of '97. We turned 17 this year.

**Aaron:** She graduated in December of '96. I should have graduated in '96, too. I was on the five-year program, and then I graduated, and we got married right after that in '97.

**WACOAN:** Can you tell me a little more about your path to becoming educators?

**Aaron:** We both graduated Baylor [with a bachelor's degree in] elementary education, and we immediately started our master's together at University of Houston—Clear Lake. She did curriculum; I did

*Continued on page 82*



administration. That was cool. We got to take classes together again, a few basic [courses].

**Patricia:** We started teaching, and we taught kindergarten bilingual at different campuses, but we were in the same district. We did that, and we went to [graduate school] at night.

**Aaron:** We worked at Foley's, [a defunct department store chain]. Do you remember those stores? They're like Dillard's. We worked to save money for grad school. We were busy that first year of teaching; we had two jobs, and we immediately started grad school. But we didn't have kids, so it was easy.

When our first daughter was born, Isabella, Pat stayed home, and I kept working. At that time I was an assistant principal, and again, we were in the Houston area — Pearland ISD at the time. And like I said, we moved to Bastrop for a couple of years, and then we came to Waco.

I got a job as assistant principal at University High School, the old building that's no longer there. She was still staying home, and then I moved to be principal of Provident Heights [Elementary School], another school in Waco ISD. Then slowly she started getting back into education. She did some tutoring, and then she came on part time and then full time. Now we're at Midway ISD.

**WACOAN:** What interested you about a career in education?

**Patricia:** Before I transferred [to Baylor], Aaron was a business major, and I was a science major. We had totally different thoughts about what we were going to do, and when I transferred to Baylor, it was like an opportunity to start fresh. When we met with [an advisor], they asked, 'Is that what you want to continue with?' And we just felt like, 'No. We just don't feel passionate about that.' And Aaron's mom is an educator, and so she mentioned, 'Education! We always need people, so why don't y'all give that a try?' So we did, and we tried out some classes, and we really enjoyed it. We found that we had a knack for it.

Pretty quickly, we knew that's what we wanted to do.

**Aaron:** It just felt right. We made the change. Business, for me anyway, those courses never felt right. When I got to Baylor, I became a business major because that was the shortest line. It's the honest truth. The pre-med line was super long, and the business line was really short. [I thought], 'I think I'll do that.'

Going into education was a little bit more purposeful. My mom was a big influence. She's a bilingual coordinator in Garland, [Texas]. She kind of helped to at least put that on our radar.

**WACOAN:** What was your initial plan for a business degree?

**Aaron:** I really didn't know. That was just my freshman and sophomore year. I thought about accounting. My friends all talked about marketing. That sounded cool until I started to take the classes. That didn't go too far.

**WACOAN:** What did you want to do with a science degree?

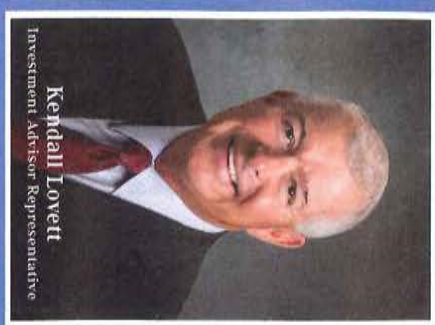
**Patricia:** I was pre-med, just like everybody else. We were trudging through our classes, but there was just something missing. As soon as we started getting into the classrooms [through the education department], working with the kids and working with the curriculum, it just seemed like it all clicked and we were actually good at it. It stirred up that passion.

**WACOAN:** What do you teach now?

**Patricia:** I'm a kindergarten bilingual teacher at Hewitt Elementary.

**WACOAN:** Have you always taught kindergarten?

**Patricia:** No. When I graduated, I was early childhood [education], and so I've done pre-K, kindergarten, first grade, but then during the years I stayed home, I helped a lot with tutoring in the upper [elementary and middle] grades. Back then it was the TAKS grades, the grades that took the TAKS test, so when I started tutoring and working part time, I was primarily working with those grades — third, fourth, fifth, sixth grade. I



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worked in those grades before I got my job at Midway. I came back to early childhood. At this point, I've done everything [in elementary school] except second grade.

**Aaron:** She was Midway's first bilingual teacher. When we got to the district, Midway didn't have a bilingual program. She got to help start that. Now it's grown on the one campus in Hewitt, but it was fun to start something from the ground up, and that's our background. It was neat to see that get started.

**Patricia:** As much as I enjoy being with the older kids and helping them to prepare for those tests, there was that need at Midway. When Aaron got the job at Woodway, [the district] was wanting to start a bilingual program, and I happen to be bilingual and I happen to be an early childhood person. It just fit. We started that program three years ago, and now we have pre-K up to second grade on the [Hewitt Elementary] campus.

**WACOAN:** How old are each of your girls? What grades are they in?

**Patricia:** This is our even [age] year. Bella will be 12 in September. She's 11, fifth grade. Gabriella is 10, fourth grade. Mia is 8, second grade.

**WACOAN:** Are all of your girls in Midway ISD?

**Aaron:** They are. They all started with me at Woodway [Elementary], and our oldest, Isabella, just went this year as a fifth grader to River Valley [Intermediate School]. My second, Gabriella, will be finishing up with me at Woodway and moving on to River Valley.

**Patricia:** Mia will stay at Woodway.

**Aaron:** When they leave, it's hard for me because I can see them anytime — go to the cafeteria, see them in the hallway. When Bella left, it was weird for me. Not as much for her. It's good though. They're just down the road.

**WACOAN:** How are you involved in the community, both individually and as a family?

**Patricia:** We're part of a life group with the church. We do service projects. We've been to a single mom's

home and cleaned her home for her. We've donated food. We've been to nursing homes, and we deliver things at Christmas and at Valentine's Day. A lot of things that really just stir our heart for others.

**Aaron:** We've done it for two years — Christmas caroling at the nursing home. The girls are getting a little older, and I noticed this year that it's had more of an impact. They're watching the elderly folks there and how loved they felt. That's been cool.

Our girls, all three of them, serve in Antioch's children's ministry. So Sunday morning, they go work with the babies.

A few years ago, we did a trunk-or-treat in the Antioch parking lot, which is right near Provident Heights, that same area. We had about 40 cars show up. We were directing traffic, parking cars and had kids coming by. That was fun. We just wanted [to offer] a safer alternative for that neighborhood.

It's really random. A few years ago we were serving [food] in the Feast, a soup kitchen-type thing.

**Patricia:** They come and hear a message, and they also get fed. There's childcare.

**Aaron:** It's for the homeless or just the underprivileged in that community [near Antioch]. We've gone there and served. I've played guitar for them.

**WACOAN:** You play guitar? Are you a musical family?

**Aaron:** Yes. And she is, too.

**Patricia:** I was part of the praise band for a while at Antioch and participated in the choir. Especially when we were in the training school, he would lead worship a lot. They would ask him to come back and do the training school worship.

**Aaron:** Not as much anymore because I don't have as much free time. We're trying to teach the girls how to play guitar, and they were taking piano lessons. We're trying to get them into music little by little.

**WACOAN:** What are some of the things that take up your free time?

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**Aaron:** I started school recently. I'm at [University of Texas at Austin] working on my doctorate. Sometimes it's crazy, but we're surviving it.

**Patricia:** He's commuting. Anytime you're commuting that adds a little bit [of stress], but also the girls are busy. They take dance, gymnastics. They were doing piano. They just have a lot of activities and then with church activities, that's where our plate gets full. Plus Midway activities, like UIL.

**Aaron:** Stuff with the district or my school, plus [Patricia's] school, Hewitt. We attend those things and now with Bella at River Valley, we try to go to some things at River Valley. The calendar gets full pretty fast.

**WACOAN:** How often do you commute to UT?

**Aaron:** Luckily, it's a special program to where I just drive down there every other week [and attend class] all day long. It's a crazy day of classes from 8:30 in the morning to 7 at night, and it's every other week. Then a couple of online things — I might take a class here or there. It's tailored for people that are working, but it still is kind of heavy.

I did 30 hours this past year. That's what I did as a freshman at Baylor. I'm a principal, and I got straight A's. We just found out yesterday. The program is kind of made where your first year, they want to see if you're going to make it, and they load you down. You get a lot of your course work done, and before you know it you come up to breathe and you're like, 'Well, I might actually be able to finish this thing.' So, that's where we are now.

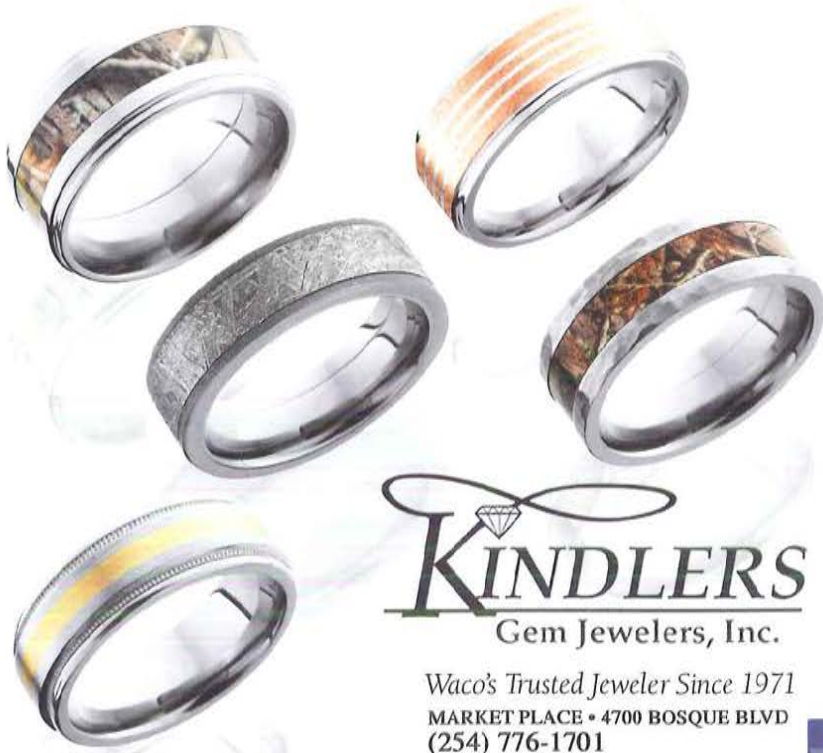
The Austin thing, it's not that fun commuting. Going down [Interstate 35], if there's ever an accident you're stuck there for, like, an hour for sure, so that's always a gamble, but so far so good.

**WACOAN:** How does his busy schedule as a principal as well as a doctoral student affect everyone else's schedule?

**Patricia:** The girls are at a really good age to where they help out a lot. They help me around the house to get



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stuff done. Where Aaron might help me with laundry before, now it's the girls. They're getting into a routine of doing whatever needs to get done and that helps. As far as being the household manager, where I keep track of everyone's schedule and dates, I've always done that, so that hasn't really affected things.

The main thing is if he is out and I can't get there, then I call on our community of friends, and everybody pitches in. That's one of the things we love about Waco. It's small enough where everyone becomes your community of friends. We've been here nine years. We have lots of people we feel that we can call on. I have not only church friends, but I have Woodway community, Hewitt community and Joy's School of Dance moms. If I can't make it to a practice or a costume fitting, the other moms are there, and they step in and help out. I really feel like it's been an exercise in being humble enough to ask for help, and my friends have stepped up. It's been neat in that respect.

I do feel it's easier because [our girls] are older. They're not babies.

**Aaron:** Yeah, we're not asking people to change diapers.

**Patricia:** And we're relatively getting a good night's sleep. All of that has helped to make it to where we haven't really been affected that much. He's completed 30 hours this year, and it sounds so unbelievable, but at the same time we've kind of kept going. Our pace hasn't stopped with the girls because of it.

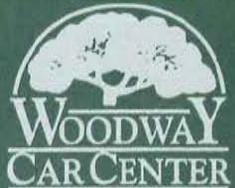
**Aaron:** With my work and Hewitt, too, it's such a blessing to be there, and the teachers are so strong, and the kids are wonderful. I'm fortunate to be there at Woodway at this time because it's going so well. All the right things are in place for it to be a really successful school, and that helps a lot.

**WACOAN:** Aaron's mother is in Garland, but where are the rest of your families? Do you have family support nearby as well as your community of friends?

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**Patricia:** My mom and dad and my sister and brother are in Houston. My [other] sister, Lisa, is here in town. She's also in the district. She's an assistant principal, so she's busy, too, but at any moment I can call on her. She'll go and pick up the girls and feed them for me and bring them to me — whatever it is we need. My sister's definitely in that mix. She's the first person I call.

One time it was a Thursday, and Aaron was in Austin. My sister had the flu, and one of the girls was sick, and I was like, 'Oh man, all of my first-line people are out.' But it didn't matter. I just called one of my other friends, and people stepped in to make sure the other [girls] got to where they needed to go. My classroom was covered, and Mia got to the doctor, and we got medicine. Everything worked out.

**Aaron:** So, most of her family is in Houston, and my dad is in Houston, but the bulk of my family is in Dallas.

**WACOAN:** That's nice that they're all in Texas.

**Patricia:** Yeah, we can see them often, and we do. They're close.

**WACOAN:** How do you think being educators has affected how you've raised your girls?

**Patricia:** Everything we do has purpose. We started reading to them when they were little and speaking in complete sentences and just working on those things that are so important foundationally.

I used to homeschool Bella when she was 2 years old, and we would do crafts, sings songs, do cooking and all these things that were the fun learning at home. We do homework in the summer, and I'm sure other teachers do the same thing. [The girls] have homework for school, but then they have homework for us.

I actually have some papers set aside that Mia brought home that she got some low grades on. When we look at low grades, we don't think it's a bad thing. We think it's an opportunity for us to see, 'What are they not learning? What are they missing?' so we teach them. That's one of the benefits. They



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come home and get tutoring for whatever it is that they're missing. It drives everything we do with them. We're very purposeful.

**Aaron:** Having worked with different age groups — like I said, I worked at University High School for a couple years and [elementary education] up through fifth grade and Pat through sixth grade — we kind of know what to expect.

Actually, they're getting to those years, those middle school years we're not too sure about. We'll figure that out when we get there. But we've kind of been a step ahead because we've dealt with hundreds of kids at this level. When they start going through little weird stuff, it doesn't surprise us too much. We have some strategies in mind. We kind of know, 'This we need to stop because it can turn into this other thing,' or, 'This isn't a big deal.' It's less guesswork for us because that's just what we do. We're around [kids] constantly, all kinds of them. We see every kind of behavior you can imagine.

**WACOAN:** We've established that you're busy, but when you do have free time, what do you like to do as a family?

**Patricia:** We like to ride bikes near the Suspension Bridge. We like to go hiking.

**Aaron:** We've been hiking Cameron Park trails with the girls since they were little. We used to push Mia and Gabriella in the stroller up and down the hills. Now they can probably outdo us.

**Patricia:** We can't run it, but they can run it.

One thing we love doing, and we've done this since we've been here, is going to go walk at Baylor. Sometimes the girls will take their scooters and bikes, and Aaron and I will walk. They're riding around us, or we'll walk together. We'll start at visitor parking and walk all the way to the student center.

**Aaron:** We try to get exercise. And also another benefit is the girls really know the campus. We're hoping that



they'll all go to Baylor eventually.

We love going to the movies.

**Patricia:** The dollar movies.

**Aaron:** Yeah, we'll wait for their kid-friendly movies to be out there, and we'll try to see them. We love going to short getaways, like Great Wolf Lodge in the Grapevine area. They love it, and we love it because they have plenty to do.

We've been to [Walt Disney World] twice, and we've been on a Disney cruise and, man, we just can't wait to go back. Our [Disney] credit card, we pay it off, but it's all for the points. The girls just love it.

**WACOAN:** What ages were they each time you went?

**Patricia:** Mia was 3 when we went the first year.

**Aaron:** Then we went two years later?

**Patricia:** No. It was the very next year. We just loved it.

**Aaron:** When we went on our cruise, I thought I was going to be bored. [I thought], 'What am I going to do on a ship? I'm going to be stuck there.' Oh gosh, I loved it. I am ready to go back. It was so relaxing. The girls had a magical time.

So, stuff like that but little stuff, too. We love going to visit our family. There are cousins on both sides. Her sister has kids their age, and my brother also has kids their age. We go to Houston; they're having fun with cousins. We go to Dallas, same thing.

**Patricia:** Feeding the ducks. We just did that yesterday.

**Aaron:** Yeah, going and taking our stale bread and feeding the ducks.


We're hoping to get some kayaks so we can get out on the river. We'll have to start doing that. That will be fun. We like to do a lot of outdoor stuff.

**WACOAN:** When you get the chance for just the two of you to go out, what do you like to do?

**Patricia:** My sister usually will take them. The first thing we do, we try to see if we can go to a movie. A *real* movie.

**Aaron:** Not a cartoon.

**Patricia:** Not the dollar theater.



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That's usually our first stop, and if that can't happen we like to go on a hike just us. That way we can go at our own pace and maybe go on a longer one. We go out to eat or go to a movie or go on a hike.

**Aaron:** We like to occasionally go to [Cafe Homestead] and have coffee. They have the best cream cheese pie. I like to get a slice of pie and just sit around and have coffee. We don't get to do that too much because *somebody* wants to come with us — Mia, the little one.

Bella's getting to where she can even be here at the house [by herself] if it's going to be a little short thing, go to the store real quick. And our neighbors are really good. We know all of our neighbors right around here, so we can say, 'Hey, we're going to step out real quick. Can you keep an eye on our girls?' But Mia won't allow it.

**WACOAN:** Are there any other restaurants you go to regularly?

**Patricia:** We like Torchy's [Tacos]. That's new though, and that's just been us.

**Aaron:** Yeah, we like to go there and stand in the big long line.

**WACOAN:** It moves fast, though.

**Aaron:** It does move fast.

What we'll do sometimes is go to Central Texas Marketplace and park at the end by Petco and then walk to Logan's [Roadhouse], and we'll get the dessert. We'll get two of those big brownie things with ice cream, and we'll all share. And then we walk back. At least we've gotten some exercise. We go to Katie's [Frozen] Custard, too. Man, I'm mentioning a lot of dessert.

**Patricia:** We do a lot of dessert. We go to Coco's [Shaved Ice] and get some snow cones.

**Aaron:** But you know, all the standard places. We'll hit Ninfa's on the weekend. The girls love that.

**WACOAN:** What do you think has kept you in Waco?

**Aaron:** The size is one thing we like. It's not a Houston. We're both from Houston, and we go to Dallas a lot. You don't have to contend with the

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traffic. But it's also not a small town. We lived in Bastrop, and it's pretty small, and that's just not for us. Do you agree?

**Patricia:** Oh, yeah. When my sister comes to visit, she always comments on how you can just do so many things in one day. You can keep the fun going. You go to the zoo, you go to the movies and you go out to eat. Whereas in Houston you pick your one thing, and it's an hour and half to get there and an hour and half to get back. You're tired after it. Here, with so many neat things to do with the kids, it was a neat surprise to find out that Waco was a good place to raise kids. We're loving the place that they're calling home.

**Aaron:** When we were both at Baylor, we couldn't wait to get out of here.

**Patricia:** We missed the big city and the fast pace.

**Aaron:** But coming back, it's actually been nice having kids here.

**WACOAN:** What was your perception of Waco when you went to Baylor?

**Aaron:** My perception back then — I thought it was a poor city. Now as an adult, I see all that it has to offer. I see all the revitalization that's happening in the downtown area and all up and down the river. We spend a lot of time there going to restaurants, just walking around, running and just enjoying the different things the city's putting up there. Cameron Park, if we ever leave, I'm going to miss Cameron Park.

Another thing is the Midway district. We're just really happy with it. Our girls happen to be at Woodway because that's where I am, but we know that our girls could be at any of the elementary schools and get a top-notch education. You can't really go wrong, and it's hard to find that. That's another big draw for us.

**Patricia:** They're getting a quality education in the district, and they're at one of the best dance studios. It's produced so many awesome dancers that are on not only the Midway drill

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team, but the Baylor drill team, too. That's neat to see that they're getting the same training.

**Aaron:** A lot of opportunities for the girls.

**Patricia:** We feel like a lot of things we wanted when we'd talk about, 'One day, when we have a daughter' — and now we have three — that we would want them to do the arts, and we feel like this is a place where they can do that.

And we feel like they are just loved and disciplined by our church well. Antioch is another big one. It's a big reason why [we stayed]. When we finished our training, we were kind of like free agents. We didn't really feel like we fit with any of the [church plant] teams, so we couldn't pick up and leave. We feel like this is where we were meant to raise our kids.

**Aaron:** We just felt like, 'Plug in here in Waco and invest in this city.'

**WACOAN:** Why did you choose to live in North Waco instead of near Midway schools?

**Aaron:** Originally, we were in Waco ISD, and it was down the road for me. We like that it's a little bit off. You don't feel like you're in Waco, especially our particular street and block — there are just a handful of houses here. We know all the neighbors. We have horses behind us.

**Patricia:** And no one is going to build there just because of the way the land is laid out. When people come to visit us, they're like, 'It feels like you're out in the country.' We're in the middle of the city. It feels secluded, but we're still 15 minutes away from Midway.

**Aaron:** Church is close. Cameron Park is 0.8 miles. I can run and take our German shepherd. [McLennan Community College] is nearby. We can run around that. I used to do triathlons, so I like to bike ride a lot. There is some great bike riding around here. You can go out to China Spring and go around the airport. We've got the dam, and I can bike across the dam. It's a good area, but not a lot of people take advantage of it. ■

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