

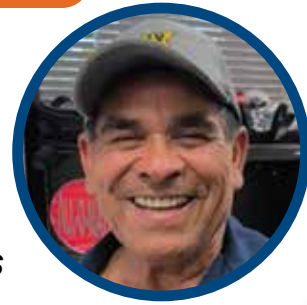
## D+AS DEALER SPOTLIGHT

### FACES OF THE INDUSTRY

# OCTAVIO AVILA'S 40-YEAR JOURNEY IN THE GATE INDUSTRY

*From building scrolls to installing gate systems*

By Vicki Jones, Editor



#### **Editor's note:**

*There are thousands of dealers in the access control industry, and each has a unique story of how they found their way into this rather niche field. In this new D+AS "Dealer Spotlight" segment, we will showcase door and gate professionals and their companies and share the fascinating and sometimes unexpected paths that led them here. Read on to discover one gate dealer's journey.*

## Growing up in Mexico

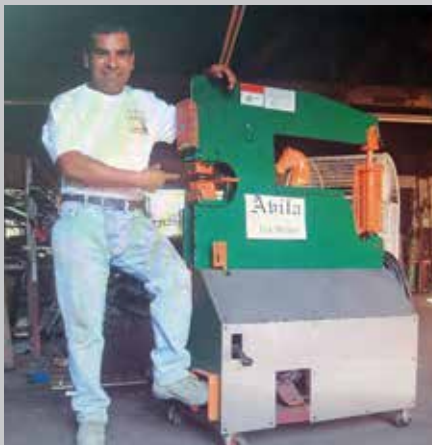
Octavio Avila grew up in a small town in Mexico under modest circumstances. His hometown lacked electricity, so at night he said he would navigate the roads guided only by memory and moonlight. He recalled going without shoes for months at a time — often during the rainiest months. Despite these challenges, Avila speaks fondly of his childhood, telling stories of how he and his siblings would often visit family in the area.

At that time, the small community in Mexico was his entire world. "I didn't know another language existed, let alone that another country existed," he said.

## Beginning a career

At just 10 years old, Avila was introduced to the gate industry. A neighbor asked him and his friends to help build decorative scrolls by hand. Eager to learn something new and contribute to the family's income, Avila jumped at the opportunity. Using only a premade mold and poor-quality manual hand saw, he began shaping the scrolls. He then used various techniques to heat, mold, and finalize each piece.

He picked it up quickly, eventually reaching a point



*Avila standing next to the iron worker machine he built for the company.*

where he could produce several scrolls a day. This experience marked his first step into the world of gate building and would later serve as the foundation for his own custom gate building company.

## Moving to the U.S.

Around the age of 14, Avila's mother — who was born in the U.S. — decided to return, bringing the family with her to settle in Stockton, Calif.

Avila initially struggled in school — especially while learning English. "When I came to Stockton, I was in another world," he said. "I knew I had to learn the language as soon as possible; I also immediately recognized all the opportunities that were available here."

From that moment on, he committed himself to pursuing those opportunities. He took a part-time job at a drive-in movie theater, where he made snacks and for the first time gained customer service experience.

With each new job, Avila became more eager to learn and grow. "It was wild. When I was in Mexico, my biggest wish was to own a bicycle. When I moved here, I discovered I could have much bigger dreams."

Avila began signing up for local educational programs. "I signed up for any and every summer program offered in my area," he said. That included welding, insulation, and more. "Whatever program they were offering, I was taking."

## Returning to his roots

Drawing on his supplemental trade education and early experience building gates, windows, and fences in Mexico, Avila set up a small shop in his backyard. He started building gates for friends and neighbors, and it wasn't long before he launched Avila Ornamental Ironworks.

Though he was working solo out of his backyard, Avila earned a reputation for quality work in the Stockton area. His company was featured in a local newspaper story that spotlighted emerging ironwork businesses in the area.

The article noted that "Octavio Avila is a relative newcomer to Stockton's



ornamental ironwork industry, and the only Mexican shop owner who didn't start out working for the Gonzales brothers." The Gonzales brothers ran a well-established and respected business in the area, so Octavio's ability to break into the market on his own, despite strong competition, was especially noteworthy.

In the late 1980s, he set up a shop on Wilson Way in Stockton, just five blocks south of another competitor.

Avila said that one of the early jobs that helped elevate his business came when a local lottery winner selected him to design and build a custom high-end entry gate for a new home.

## Transitioning to gate installation

As the business expanded, more customers began asking if Avila also installed gate operators. He thought, I probably could learn! So, he started attending manufacturer training classes, reading operator manuals, and teaching himself with whatever resources he could find.

In 1987, he completed his first gate operator job: installing two Stanley slide gate operators. He admits that at the beginning there were some hiccups. "My first installation job probably took me an entire week," he said. "I could do the same job in a day now."

Avila explained that most of his knowledge came from learning by doing and learning through mistakes. Early on, he accidentally applied power to a relay. When he activated it with the radio control, the current went



*A custom gate Avila designed and built for a Stockton lottery winner was featured in the local newspaper.*

straight to the board and fried it. "Mistakes make you more alert and more focused because you don't want to make the same mistake again."

He also learned from experienced professionals about how to grow the installation side of his business. For the first few years, he worked closely with Danny Klein, a gate operator supplier. Then, Encon Electronics Sales Director Joe Weber stopped by Avila's shop, and Avila discovered the wide selection of inventory that a wholesale distributor can offer.



*Avila kept the invoice from his first gate operator job installed in May 1987.*

At the time, many of his customers were requesting Elite gate operators for apartment complexes — but he had never installed that brand before. "I knew that if I learned the different brands, it would create more business opportunities for me."

He made a trip to the company's demo room in Hayward, Calif., to become familiar not only with Elite products but with the full range of gate operators offered. "I learned that all operators are engineered similarly; they just have different boards."

## Secret to success

Some installers prefer to stick with one product line — either because it's what they're comfortable with or because they are hesitant to branch out. Avila takes the opposite approach.

"I educate myself about all the products that are available, so if a customer asks for that particular gate operator, I know I can do the job." While he will make product recommendations when asked, his priority is to always meet a customer's needs. He believes that flexibility has played a big role in the growth of his business.

However, not everyone who sets out to master multiple product lines succeeds. As a self-taught gate builder and operator installer, Avila depends on manufacturer manuals, his own technical knowledge, and real-world experience to get the job done.

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## Installing and thriving

After over 40 years serving the industry, Avila shows no signs of slowing down. In addition to the many jobs he receives through referrals and recommendations, he also works closely with a company in Roseville, Calif. Alex Iron Works has been offering him a steady flow of gate installation jobs for over 30 years.

In 2020, Avila stopped building custom gates to focus entirely on the operator installation business. While he misses the creative qualities of gate building, he truly enjoys the technical aspects involved with learning new gate operator products. "I love learning about the new technology and innovations incorporated into today's gate operator products."

He is not intimidated by new technology. On the contrary, he thrives on learning about it and incorporating it into future jobs. "I know that customers today want the latest technology, so it's my responsibility to know what products are available and how to use them." Providing

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customers with the products they want has been Avila's mission from the beginning, and he maintains that philosophy today.

## Finding your calling

Avila is grateful that he found a career that he's passionate about, and he has no immediate plans to retire. "I really enjoy the work, and I feel like I am helping people, so why would I stop working?"

It's obvious how much Avila loves the work when he talks about "impossible" installations. When a customer asks, "Are you sure it can be done?" he is always up for the challenge. "I don't mind making custom gadgets to fulfill a customer's needs." So far, he's been able to find or create a solution to overcome any application obstacle.

As far as advice for newcomers, he says, "This industry is not for the faint of heart. If you want to be successful, you have to do the work, train, and learn by experience."

He also continues to be an excellent role model for his three children — all of whom have graduated from the University of California Santa Cruz with astrophysics degrees. It appears technical prowess runs in the family.

He has told his kids, "We have so many opportunities. There are no limits. Study hard and become something." The words carry extra meaning when you look at how Octavio Avila grew his company and lives his life. He embraced opportunities, educated himself, and has thrived in the gate industry for over 40 years.

In his words, "Life is good if you treat it right." ■

### How did you get into this industry?

Please let us know! Email [vicki@vjonesmedia.com](mailto:vicki@vjonesmedia.com) so we can share your story in a future issue of the magazine.



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