



Photo by Adam Goings

**THE GATEKEEPER:** Amber Isham started Aurora Services, Inc., with a \$1,300 investment, seeding the gate design and installation company with the purchase of 200 service accounts from a firm getting out of the business.

## Driven to do better: Urge for better work launches gate company

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Successful people didn't get that way by being pushovers, and her clientele is almost entirely successful people, Amber Isham said from the lovely, wooded home she shares near Amissville with her husband Brad.

Her company, Aurora Services, Inc., specializes in custom iron gate design and automatic gate system installation, and these beautiful, functional, and security-enhancing home improvements come with a pretty hefty price tag.

"People call, and a lot of times they think this is something pretty inexpensive to do,"

Isham said. "That always amazes me."

She typically visits potential clients at their home, bringing her online portfolio with her. She explains the whole fabrication and installation process, probes for clients' ideas, gets a sense of their style, then retreats to the Rappahannock County woods to come up with a design, or, usually, several design ideas to present to the client.

Aurora works with two metal fabricators, one in nearby Flint Hill, another in Alexandria.

"I like to use steel," Isham said. "We do things with wooden gates, often with a steel frame to support it. Typically, we will put steel posts in the ground,

sometimes clad in wood, if that's what the client wants.

"A lot of people want aluminum, thinking it's easier to care for, but it's softer," she said, "and has some problems of its own."

The gates are the artsy side of the enterprise. The electronics, however, likely play a bigger role.

A typical system is the gate itself and a telephone entry system which usually requires a dedicated line.

Should you visit her in Amissville, "you push the call button and it calls the house," Isham explained. "I can control the gate through the phone — open it momentarily, or I can

call the gate and hold it open for a certain amount of time, or hold it open indefinitely, if we were having a party or something like that.

"There are keypad codes that you can program. On the system we have here, there are 100 four-digit codes, and you can assign time constraints to them. I could give you a code and you could have access to my house only for today at a certain time, for instance, then it would expire."

All this adds a whole other level of security, Isham said. If she gives out codes, she can connect with a computer and pull up a log and see what codes have been used, and when.

As with so many other businesses, Aurora Services was born of dissatisfaction.

Her husband was working as a master electrician for a Maryland firm that was in this business and was unhappy with the quality of work being done, and being asked of him.

He quit. "We didn't have anything, but I had gotten \$1,300 for something, I don't even remember what," Isham said. "The company that he had worked for sold off all its accounts and got out of this part of the business. I bought 200 accounts from an electrical company that had bought them from that company. They were thinking that this would be easy money, servicing these. It's not," she said.

He started running the service calls, and she ran the office at the end of her workday in Great Falls.

They wrote letters to 200 potential clients as they were building a business by replacing the gate systems that had

been installed by the former company.

The business was off and running. That was 18 years ago.

"We have done a lot of different gates for a lot of different people," Isham mused. Before the recession, Aurora was doing about 70 installations a year, many in Northern Virginia and Maryland, but also an increasing number on the large horse farms and estates in the northern Piedmont.

Despite the wealth of her clients, her business has not escaped the downturn in the economy, Isham said.

"It's all relative. Everyone looks at their investment statements every month. If I have a lot more money, I'm losing a lot more money, and we have all become more aware of where we are spending money, too. Everyone has felt this."

Business dropped off by as much as 60 percent in the worst of the recession, Isham said. It is coming back, but in fits and starts.

"It starts to come back, then something will happen and it levels off again," Isham said. "People are scared."

"It's funny, though. Something happens, and you can see an increased interest in security. There were some robberies in McLean and Great Falls, and people would call and want a gate. The same thing in Upperville, after the murder of the journalist [Sarah Greenhalgh in July]."

Aurora is a small company — four total employees — and "we operate as a family, almost a nostalgic way of doing business," Isham said.

"We definitely have a strong moral code, and we conduct business the way business used to be done. We are very honest. I like talking to people when they're happy. I don't want people screaming at me. I don't want to set things up for failure right from the beginning."

Small company or not, operating a business is a stressful endeavor, and Isham, who

describes herself as "driven" needed to take some time away from the business at one juncture.

"I always want to do right, and I always want to do the best I can do," she said. "That's caused a lot of stress in my life over the years of having this business, because it is demanding, the clientele that we work for is demanding — and I totally respect that."

"I started to get sick and had to step back from it for a while and regroup and figure out what I needed to do."

To that end, Isham is now a reiki master and a certified meditation instructor.

"I do a lot of spiritual things, and that is the balance in my life," she said. "It's very important. I'm not willing to forgo my health, even if I love what I do."

A lesson for us all.

*Aurora Services is online at [auroraservicesinc.com](http://auroraservicesinc.com) and can be reached by phone at (540) 937-2400.*

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