



CASE STUDY

GRETNA MACHINE SHOP

An American Success Story



Location: Houston, Texas

Employees: 50+

Equipment: Okuma's MILLAC 761 and MB-5000H Machining Centers

While Gretna Machine Shop is a true American success story, it's one that has a unique twist. Founded by Benjamin "Benny" Perez and his wife Ninfa after they migrated from Colombia to the U.S., today the company has a leadership team comprised of three women: Ninfa, and their two daughters, Nubia and Nancy. Their evolution, which included moving into the highly competitive industry of aerospace, involved a dedicated Okuma distributor—and, of course, a few Okuma machines along the way.

PASSIONATELY PURSUING THE AMERICAN DREAM

Benjamin “Benny” Perez lived the classic immigrant dream, which started with moving from Colombia to America in the 1960s to provide a better life for his family.

When he and his wife Ninfa originally settled in New Orleans within the quaint parish of Gretna, Benny went to work as a machinist for Baker Hughes, an oil services company where Benny, not surprisingly, encountered his first Okuma CNC lathe.

After working for Baker for a few years, managers within the company recognized Benny’s talent and dedication and asked him to move to Houston, Texas, to support the growth of their business in the region. Though honored by the request, Benny had other plans: he wanted to open his own shop.

Benny moved his wife and two young daughters, Nubia and Nancy, to Houston where he opened that shop, which he named Gretna in honor of the family’s first home in America. Benny started the business in his garage, soliciting the help of his wife to assist with the company’s administrative and financial duties.

One of the couple’s first purchases was an Okuma lathe, a brand that Benny had come to know and trust during his Baker days.

The business grew in the subsequent decades; the company actually moved twice to larger facilities to accommodate customer demand, ultimately landing in a 50,000-square-foot space.



FORGING A NEW FUTURE AFTER TRAGEDY

The year 2012 ended up as a turning point for the company; Benny passed away, leaving the business to his wife and two daughters. While it was a devastating time for the family, the three ladies dedicated themselves to the success of their husband's and father's legacy and vision, with Nubia stating, "It's a beautiful thing to continue the legacy of the family and the company."

During their formative years, Nubia and Nancy had frequently visited the shop and witnessed their parents' passion for growing the business; of course, during childhood they had no idea that they would one day play significant roles within the company. Prior to 2012, both Nubia and Nancy had left home for academic studies, afterwards finding jobs in corporate environments.

It was these experiences that provided the professional foundation for the sisters to come back to Houston and lead Gretna into the future with their mother.

EVOLVING THE BUSINESS WHILE BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING

Embracing their new challenge, the sisters attended several industry conferences, consulted industry and business leaders, and ultimately looked for opportunities to expand the business beyond its primary oil and gas focus. This proved to be an exciting and challenging time for the women, as they were already a minority in the machine tool industry and now found themselves knocking on doors of large-scale organizations, including NASA.

Despite manufacturing being a male-dominated industry, the sisters found the aerospace industry to be receptive, and, more importantly, filled with buyers interested in what mattered most: their company's unique product and service capabilities. Their exploration ultimately led to the company's entrance into the aerospace industry. This meant that the business had to be transformed in many ways, including acquisitions of specific certifications (AS-9100) and equipment necessary for producing high-precision machined parts.

To do this, they needed some assistance.



CHOOSING THE RIGHT MACHINES FOR GROWTH

The women turned to Hartwig, Inc.—a well-known local resource and trusted Okuma distributor—for guidance on choosing the right machines to support their vision. Hartwig rep Tyler Roe worked closely with them. He started with understanding their unique immediate and long-term needs so he could recommend a high-performance Okuma machining center to build upon the capabilities of their existing Okuma machine tools (many of which were decades old). At the time, Gretna employees also recommended Okuma machines since they knew that their controls were better than others on the market.

According to Nubia, “Tyler is not just a typical salesman; he is a valued resource to us. There are no second thoughts when it comes to his recommendations.” For years Okuma has maintained their distributor network for precisely this reason; to customers, a distributor is often the true face of Okuma.

And how does Nubia feel about their Okuma machines?

“The Okuma brand is the ‘Cadillac,’ or better yet, the ‘Tesla’ of CNC machines,” she states.



CONTINUING THE DREAM OF THEIR FAMILY'S PATRIARCH

By 2015 the all-woman leadership team had grown the business exponentially, achieving great milestones in the process: they moved to a new 50,000-square-foot facility; they earned the AS-9100 certification necessary to supply the aerospace industry; they acquired specialized equipment, which included Okuma's **MILLAC 761V** and **MB-5000H** horizontal machining center for high-precision metal cutting; they purchased a CMM gauging machine; they were awarded a Hubzone certification; and they were recognized as being a wholly woman-owned business operating within an industrial sector.

All of these assets, coupled with what the sisters and their mother calls "their number one asset—their employees," set the stage for the next chapter of Gretna's 40-year tenure of success. Even with their forward-thinking business strategy, the ladies of Gretna Machine Shop are dedicated to honoring the company founder, and keeping his heritage alive by continuing to assert the company's traditional values in everything they do.

The Gretna value system, along with hard work, an entrepreneurial spirit, and a little help from Okuma, have all contributed to the company being the machine shop of choice for a number of multinational and Fortune 500 companies today.

Okuma machines mentioned in this case study:



MILLAC 761V

Vertical Machining Center



MB-5000H

Horizontal Machining Center

To contact your local distributor, visit www.okuma.com/distributors

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