

BEHIND EVERY GREAT WOMAN

Today's female jewelers can help empower the next generation by sharing knowledge and providing support.

BY MELISSA WOLFGANG AMENC



Melissa Wolfgang Amenc.

I decided to join the jewelry business in my late teens. I use the term “decided” loosely, because many will say you don’t choose this business; it chooses you.

I wasn’t an industry kid who had childhood dreams of glitter and gold or who spent weekends and vacations learning the business working for my family. In fact, as a kid, I never knew exactly what my father did. He owned a jewelry store, and there was a leather-walled elevator that smelled like him — a mixture of cigarettes and his cologne. It went directly from his office to the ground floor, which seemed pretty boss-like and important. He could tell if a diamond was real, and he had given me a Swatch with a banana-scented scratch-and-sniff bracelet before they were on the market. What more did I need to know?

At 18, I still didn’t really know exactly what my father did, but I had come to Basel, Switzerland, at his request to give him a hand in his booth at the show. I doubt I was of much help. My most vivid memory of that first experience with our industry was the two days I watched him go back and forth in an intense negotiation for a Tiffany & Co. emerald and diamond ring. Following a heated discussion and just before the “*mazal*,” I saw a drop of sweat trickle down his forehead and realized for the first time ever that what he did for a living was so much more than having a store with a private elevator.

A year and a half later, with my graduate gemologist diploma in hand, I moved to Geneva and became the sixth generation in our family business. A year after that, my father told me I would learn more if I went to work for someone else. “You don’t know enough for me to teach you,” he said.

It took about five years for me to understand what he meant, another five to realize he had been right, and five more to admit it was the only way I could have learned. Much of my steep learning

curve involved trial and error, different jobs and several mentors. But the heart and soul of our business, I learned from my father.

FOUND FAMILY

The gem and jewelry industry is known to be dynastic; knowledge and savoir-faire are often passed on from one generation to the next. There are, however, many successful people in our industry with no familial ties, no passing of the generational torch.

“I find that this business is filled with extremely bright people,” says Dana Kiyomura, owner of New York jeweler Keyamour. “Personalities aside, those that are successful are invariably smart. It takes some level of drive and passion for someone who was not born into the business to break into it. But to learn it, every newbie has to be a sponge — soaking up prices, quality and styles while remembering mistakes as well as successes.”

Diana Singer, owner of D & E Singer in New York — my surrogate “industry mom” and someone I am privileged to call one of my mentors — often regales me with stories of her beginnings not only as a young woman in the trade, but also as the daughter of a prominent industry family. “Being a part of a family business is a mixed blessing — very mixed,” she says. “I know things are quite different now — thankfully — but when I was growing up and entered the business, a woman’s function was to do preliminary work like viewing and marking goods at auction, mounting up lines we manufactured, getting lunch when the men got hungry, and entertaining the wives of visiting customers. We were not to work with the men who were the buyers.”

In the early 1900s, my great-great-grandmother traveled within the Austro-Hungarian empire selling diamonds. Her husband was religious and preferred going to yeshiva over traveling and selling stones. So off she went, leaving her six children in the care of the eldest, my great-grandmother. As you can imagine, a woman traveling alone in the early 1900s — for business, no less — couldn’t be further from the norm. To deter unwelcome attention, she would put a pair of men’s shoes in front of her hotel room so nobody would know she was an unaccompanied female — particularly one with diamonds under her pillow. I can’t help but think that the spirit of this brazen and quick-witted woman has helped to literally *pavé* the way for the generations of women who came after her.

CREATING A LEGACY

As a woman who has followed in the footsteps of five generations of men, and as mother to a daughter who may follow in mine, I often wonder: What is my role today? How can I help those who come after me to do so with skill, passion and morality? How do I/we pass on knowledge in a trade that is going through more changes and bumps in the road than ever before?

Through work I have done on various committees and working groups over the last two years, the conclusions I keep coming back to are transmission, mentorship, ethics and knowledge.

This is the blueprint for the future. Poet Maya Angelou’s inspiring words, “If you get, give. If you learn, teach,” were, along with my great-great-grandmother’s bold and progressive energy, my inspiration for cofounding The Glitterati, a nonprofit association with the goal of promoting solidarity, education and mentoring for women in the jewelry and watch industry.

“The Glitterati is bringing together women in the jewelry business in a way that has not existed in the past,” says Catherine Arsala, who has worked for jeweler Friman & Stein in New York for 22 years and is a Glitterati charter member. “Historically, our business is not overly collaborative. [The organization has] brought together an international and diverse group of women with the express purpose of promoting solidarity and education.”

The Glitterati is my way of giving back. Being able to pay forward the education and experience I was privileged to receive from a number of knowledgeable employers and mentors is paramount to me. Nobody becomes successful without the help of one person who believed in them.

“We were all shown kindness and given opportunities while we were coming up,” Kiyomura confirms. “The new generation is more about helping each other grow, together.”

THE HUMAN CONNECTION

Times of turmoil often bring great change. In our currently troubled times, we are seeing people unite to create new ways of working together despite lockdowns, closures and grounded travel. What once took place on a trade show floor can mostly happen online through a slew of new platforms. The Jewelers Circle, created by the International Antique Jewelers Association (IAJA), is a noteworthy example of a collaborative effort to create new opportunities for our trade. There’s also the Charamonde chat on WhatsApp by Kris Charamonde, and Gem Ladies, another WhatsApp group that Kiyomura initiated for female dealers. All of these enable us to buy, sell, source and, equally importantly, interact. They are just a few of the resources that can help us stay current, connected and collaborative.

That said, the heart and soul of our industry is the human element. The highest-resolution computer screen can’t mirror the excitement I felt watching that first deal in Basel, or the smile in someone’s eyes when they see a beautiful stone. An electronic signature can never replace a “*mazal*” or the adrenaline-induced trickling drop of sweat. It is our experience, gut feelings and intuition, relayed successes and failures, and — most importantly — the relationships we build along the way that are the real substance of what we pass on to those who follow in our footsteps. ■

WHO IS MELISSA WOLFGANG AMENC?

A sixth-generation gem and jewelry dealer at Golay Fils & Stahl in Geneva, Switzerland, Melissa Wolfgang Amenc is cofounder of The Glitterati and an active member of various gemological associations, including the Association Suisse des Négociants en Pierres Précieuses (ASNP) and the Swiss Gemmological Institute (SSEF).

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