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The News Tribune, Tacoma, WA - Thursday, October 11th,

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# BUSINESS

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## It's a dazzling opportunity - Jeweler finds fresh way to market gems

C.R. ROBERTS; The News Tribune  
Published: October 11th, 2007 01:00 AM

The ruby sparkled like a faraway star. The watermelon tourmaline beckoned the senses as if by subpoena. A garnet made one woman gasp.

The gems passed from the man who cut them into the hands of the customers seated around the table.

Hence the name: "Gemstone roundtable."

Some say it's a revolution in gemstone marketing.

Last Friday night, and on the previous night and for several nights over the past few months, invited guests have come to a white-clothed table at LeRoy Jewelers in downtown Tacoma. They've spent up to three hours with a cutter – or a faceter, the man who reads the heart of a sapphire or the depth of an aquamarine, who with his expertise and tools gives life and light to the shimmering crystal planes.

He's the fellow who brings a sample of his wares. On Friday evening, the roundtable featured Roger Dery of Royal Oak, Mich. LeRoy owners Steph Farber and Phyllis Harrison provided hors d'oeuvres and wine. A dozen or so guests, women and men, sat selecting their favorites from among a selection of 126 gemstones Dery had cut.

The concept, the gem roundtable, was pioneered 20 years ago by jewelry designer Christopher Jupp, owner of Christopher's Fine Jewelry in Champaign, Ill.

"We played with it. We made mistakes, and then we stopped making those mistakes," Jupp said Wednesday by phone. "It fills a niche."

Jupp has been promoting the concept at gem-related trade shows for three years. His seminars, he said, are largely attended.

He estimates that no more than 30 jewelers across the country have begun hosting roundtables.

Ed Griffin, chief operating officer at the American Gem Trade Association in Dallas, said Farber "is doing a cutting-edge job of bringing the market to the marketplace."

Griffin has consulted with other retailers who are "trying to reach out and do things differently, things creative and innovative, after hours, or before hours. I would say that the roundtable is relatively in its embryonic stages."

Farber, he says, "is ahead of the curve as far as being able to bring a creative way to bring luxury to the consuming public."

Farber begins, "Tonight you will be handling more gemstones than most people who work in a jewelry store will ever handle."

He describes Dery's work: "He takes these crystals, he takes them and turns them into wonderful gemstones."

Farber explains, "If something speaks to you tonight, there will be a way to have it come back and visit you."

Enlarge image



Karie Hamilton/For The News Tribune  
Gem cutter Roger Dery from Royal Oak, Mich., talks with LeRoy Jewelers client Kathleen Olson at a "gemstone roundtable" Friday night at the downtown Tacoma store.

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Karie Hamilton/For The News Tribune  
A potential customer's favorite pieces from the show are set aside for further examination and consideration.

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The stones, labeled and wrapped in stiff paper, will go counterclockwise around the table. Clients may touch the stones, place them on the backs of their hands and watch how they catch the flow of light.

If a customer is taken by a stone, just say so, Dery says. Someone will record the number. Then, when everyone has had a look, the stone will be placed in a holder so the prospective buyer might "flirt" with it. Tonight, Farber says, some of the proceeds from the gems sold will go to benefit the Humane Society for Tacoma and Pierce County.

Out comes an emerald-cut 12.54-carat amethyst from Namibia.

Then a citrine from Brazil.

That oval garnet. Jane Shanaman gasps.

Conversationally – certainly not as if this were a seminar – Dery explains his cutting technique, how he polishes, and then the history of tanzanite.

Here's a 1.55-carat example, from Tanzania, as blue and as deep as the reflection through water of a Mediterranean morning sky. The price: \$1,360.

Another stone is the color of smoke trapped inside honey.

An orange zircon cut in the shape of a parallelogram: \$2,370.

A suite of milky blue Namibian chalcedony: \$1,055.

The stones come from Tibet and Nigeria, Afghanistan, Brazil. There are beryl and aquamarine, sapphires, zircon and more. The stones range from bubble-gum pink, bright, to soft pastel, to solid, to multicolored. The watermelon tourmaline grades from green to red. That ruby, a 4.92-carat oval from Burma, lists at \$47,235. An oval alexandrite goes around the table at \$24,975.

Prices begin in the mid three-figures.

At the end of the evening, Farber will take a small percentage of the sales. But he knows that buyers might come back and commission him to design and produce jewelry pieces using the newly purchased stones.

At the end, Kathleen Olson says she enjoyed the evening: "It's not like going to Target and seeing something they made 500,000 of. It's way more relaxed than looking at something in cases."

Shanaman says, "Specialty-item marketing has become a personal relationship. It's not people being sold something. I learned more tonight than I have in 50 years of looking at stones. There's nowhere we could go for this experience."

Farber says he plans to conduct up to four roundtables a year.

"This makes so much sense," he says. "It's like a reframing of the entire gem business. I'm surprised people didn't think of it 100 years ago."

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