



For Local Jewelers, Mining Trip Is More About Bonding than Business

It started as a casual conversation for three men working together, and evolved into a male-bonding/business trip.

George Press, who has owned and operated George Press Jewelers in Livingston for the last 36 years, has for some time now enjoyed talking about going on an office gold-panning expedition with two of his employees, Richard Bolen, a Gemological Institute of America graduate and gemstone appraiser who has worked for him for three years; and Brian Swingle, a bench jeweler, metal smith and watch technician with the store for 25 years. It seemed a natural choice of topic for men who have spent their careers in the jewelry business, especially given that Bolen is a fan of television mining shows such as "Prospectors," and Swingle is an aficionado of such survival shows as "Alaska, the Last Frontier."

But recently, they found that just talking about such a trip was not enough. The three men decided to "up their game" by striking out on a mining expedition. They would head to the wilds of Maine in search of tourmaline, aquamarine, garnets, and whatever other precious gems could be gathered there.

Bringing only a tent, a twig stove, a French press coffee maker (thanks to Swingle), two coolers of provisions, and rock tools provided by Press, they endured arduous conditions while camping lakeside. Press started his

fellow campers by arriving in a taxi from the airport.

The three miners hiked up Mount Apatite and spent the first full day of the trip there. There, signs of previous mining activity tantalized them all day. Their own efforts met with some small reward, as they uncovered garnets, smoky quartz, and citrine. Most of the stones were not gem quality, Press judged, although some could be suitable for cabochons.

Day two found the adventurers at nearby Mount Mica, working under the guidance of Poland Mining Camps. This is an active commercial mining initiative through which rock hounds are permitted to comb through piles of rocks left over from blasting. This proved a less enjoyable but more productive venture: the three men discovered tourmaline, quartz, and large sheets of mica that Press plans to use as jewelry displays in the store. Mica, he explains, is very sparkly and tends to flake easily, so they kept mistaking it for the occasionally dropped diamond on the floor.

Some of the men's favorite finds were fist-sized rocks that broke open to reveal large garnet crystals half the size of an ice cube. They enjoy seeing this insight into how the crystals matured from the rock.

The find of the trip, however, was not discovered until they trio returned to New Jersey. Both Bolen and Swingle took home with them unsorted rock for Bolen's son, five

year old Gennaro, and Swingle's grandson, 11 year old Jakub. Little Gennaro was lucky enough to find a piece of watermelon tourmaline – a gem that includes shades of pink, green and white.

Bolen has been a rock hound since childhood, and plans to display his trophies from this expedition in a rock cabinet. Swingle said he felt "like a kid on a class trip," and plans to make a rustic ring from a piece of blue tourmaline set in white rock with the help of his buddy, Bolen. (Hearing that, Swingle's wife is now encouraging her husband to go on an emerald mining expedition next!)

Press, meanwhile, called the trip "a real learning experience" – not just learning about rocks and gems, but also about getting to know and bond with these other two men with whom he works every day. "Rich and Brian weren't sure, initially, that I would want to go," says Press. "But I had a great time." He adds, "It gave me the opportunity to do something I haven't done for close to 40 years – go camping!" But while "picking things out of the ground that were more valuable than just rocks" was fun, the best part of the trip for him was "hanging with the boys."

"We work together 40, 50, sometimes 60 hours a week, but we never have time to actually just talk to each other," Press says. "We got the chance to really bond with each other on this trip."

He says he would also like to go mining again, maybe at some of the New Jersey sites he visited on science field trips during his school days.

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