



**GIA**  
GEMOLOGICAL INSTITUTE OF AMERICA\*

## Always Up for a Challenge

Volume 17-Issue 2-Spring 2008

*Susan Eisen finds success by constantly seeking new endeavors*

*By Emily Stegman*

Your first hint that Susan Eisen lives for challenges of the creative kind could be the time she spent studying fine arts and metals at the University of Texas in her hometown of El Paso.

The second clue, which comes two years later in 1980, could be her decision to take over a one-year-old retail jewelry store from two girlfriends without having any management experience or detailed knowledge of the jewelry industry, only her skills as a goldsmith.

From there, Eisen's inventive nature and need to pursue new projects is painstakingly clear: she becomes an accomplished jewelry designer, gemologist, appraiser, teacher, public speaker, inventor, community leader and book author.

Taking over her friends' retail store after welcoming her second child nine months earlier was one of Eisen's first major career challenges and the catalyst for many of her professional pursuits to follow.

She had to learn nearly everything on the job and the first thing to learn, she says, was how to look the part. Her hippy, artist-type look with torn blue jeans and no make-up didn't translate well to the store's clientele or image, she says.

The next thing Eisen knew she needed to improve was her gemological knowledge; not being able to identify customers' stones was discouraging.

Eisen turned to GIA in 1985 after reading about its course offerings and earned a Graduate Gemologist diploma through Distance Education in a year and a half. She noticed an immediate confidence boost in her customer interactions.

"Also, there was a willingness and pride in educating my customers about what I learned," she says, admitting she was guilty of "milking professors" for as much information as she could during her studies.

Once Eisen could identify her clients' stones, the next question she typically got was, "What's it worth?" And so, the always ambitious jeweler pursued appraisal training at the International Society of Appraisers and the American Society of Appraisers and earned the titles of Master Gemologist Appraiser and Accredited Senior Appraiser.

With the growth of her knowledge base came the growth of her business. Susan Eisen Fine Jewelry & Watches and its staff of nine offers El Paso residents countless services, including custom jewelry design and redesign, insurance services, gem identification, jewelry maintenance tips, museum consulting and appraisals and appraisal review. It was named one of the "Emerging 30 Businesses" by the El Paso Chamber of Commerce in 1997.

Eisen says she's grown to love everything about the retail business over the past 27 years. "I love the customers, being around beautiful things, the creativity involved in running a business, from designing jewelry to designing the store, choosing the



**Susan Eisen, G.G., president/designer of Susan Eisen Fine Jewelry and Watches**

*Courtesy of Susan Eisen*

designers we'll feature and even the business side of things, analyzing returns and looking at profits."

Working in an industry as fast-changing as the jewelry business is fitting for Eisen, who enjoys the challenge of keeping up on the times.

"I'm not a reactor; I like to be ahead of the game."

### Life Inspires Practical Ideas

Eisen has learned a lot over the years by listening to customer concerns and devoting herself to solving their jewelry dilemmas.

She recalls two customers who purchased rings from other stores at discounted prices: the first customer's ring had too few prongs, causing the stone to fall out, and the second customer's ring split at the bottom because the metal was too thin.



Eisen creates original designs for sale in her store, which she is in the process of remodeling to create a "more avant-garde and artsy" look. She stays busy with appraisals and says she loves to help customers redesign their jewelry.

*Courtesy of Susan Eisen*

Instances like these inspired Eisen to devote an entire chapter in her new book to the joys and precautions involved in shopping for jewelry.

*Crazy About Jewelry!: The Expert Guide to Buying, Selling and Caring For Your Jewelry* is a compilation of all the knowledge

Eisen has gained in her time as a retail jeweler. The book, released in November 2007, includes ways to make jewelry more comfortable to wear, advice on storage and cleaning, tips for teaching your significant other to shop for you and steps to become a better jewelry buyer.

"There are so many wonderful things that happen in my store all day long that I just wanted to let everyone know how great the jewelry business is and how much it enriches our lives. Jewelry is very important in the grand scheme of things," Eisen says.

The project (or "achievement" as Eisen likes to call it) took three years to complete and has been featured in InStore Magazine, Southern Jewelry News and Bella Online. Her insight on topics related to her book is also frequently solicited by trade publications – JCK, National Jeweler and Rapaport Diamond Report among them.

"Mostly [the book is] for consumers to know how to be better shoppers, to understand jewelry and how involved and emotional it is; how many memories pieces can contain; how much more there is to learn about it and inspire people to buy it, collect it, restore it and pass it on," the author says.

Eisen understands firsthand how precious jewelry is and, in some cases, how essential it can be. She was diagnosed with type 1 diabetes at 38 years old and was advised to always wear medical information stating her condition. Her options were limited and unsightly.

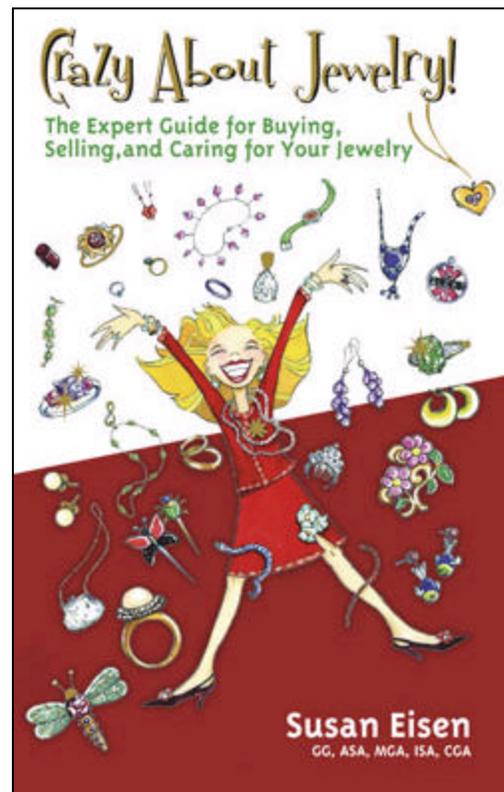
She was quick to approach the situation as yet another creative challenge.

LIFETAG®, "Jewelry That Can Save Your Life!", was what she came up with. It started with stick-on medical icons until several people inquired about jewelry pieces incorporating the same information. The LIFETAG brand now offers sterling silver, yellow gold and beaded bracelets, some incorporating gemstones, as well as several other non-jewelry items like key rings and wallet cards. Twenty-five different medical conditions are now available in the line.

"It's a way for people to alert medics of their condition without publicly advertising their condition to everyone," says Eisen, who has several other trademarked items under her belt, including two jewelry storage tools dubbed Treasure Trays and Purse Pockets.

### Institute Support is Key

<http://www.gia.edu/print.htm>



Eisen says her three-year book project began with her jotting down her experiences in the store. "I sat down, made an outline and it just flowed from there. I didn't need to do much research - they're all real-life stories I heard in my store."

Eisen was a jewelry fan from age 13 when her mother took her to buy her first gold ring, and when she decided to make a career out of jewelry, she didn't have the benefit of turning to a relative in the business for guidance.

"GIA is a treasure for those who don't have the luxury of being raised in the business. My education is one of the precious things I have that money can't buy," Eisen says.

Eisen became the first small independent jewelry retailer to be inducted into GIA's League of Honor, the recognition program for donors who gave \$100,000 or more to the Institute, in 2001. The endowed scholarship she established will reach that total in 2010 and be available for future students to use toward GIA education costs. (See more on GIA scholarships, page 20.)

Some may consider it risky for an independent retailer to commit to donating such a large sum, but Eisen says it is some of the best money she's ever spent.

Eisen also gives back to her community and her industry by filling key roles in several local and jewelry-related organizations, including president of the American Society of Appraisers' El Paso Chapter and chairperson of the Board of Directors for the Better Business Bureau of El Paso from 1999-2000.

Last year she was honored with a Women's Jewelry Association Award for Excellence in Retail and has won the Best "Bling-Bling" award in the Best of the Best contest by the El Paso Inc.'s "What's Up" publication for three years in a row.

Throughout all her success, Eisen remains thankful to GIA for the help it gave her early on in her jewelry career.

"I would not be where I am today," Eisen says, "without the experience of attending GIA."

---

©2002-2004 Gemological Institute of America, Inc. All rights reserved. GIA is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization. GIA -- the World's Foremost Authority in Gemology. Ensuring the Public Trust through Nonprofit Service since 1931. | GIA World Headquarters | The Robert Mouawad Campus | 5345 Armada Dr. | Carlsbad, California | Tel: 760-603-4000 | Web: [www.gia.edu](http://www.gia.edu)