



It's hard to imagine a time when the AGTA did not exist. Though I am a relative newcomer, AGTA has been a familiar name since I first joined the industry. When I found out that Cesar Abi-Habib and Kaiser Gems were founding members of the organization, I knew I needed to pick his brain about what gemstone industry was like at AGTA's inception.

I think it is important to mention that Noelle Abi-Habib, Cesar's daughter, and the Kaiser Gems family were some of the first people I met in the gemstone industry outside of my GIA classmates. Noelle remains my close friend to this day. In fact, it was a GIA classmate who began working for Kaiser Gems after completing her GG who introduced me to the company at my first AGTA GemFair Tucson. It feels particularly poignant to be writing this firm member profile on Kaiser Gems as the company approaches its final exhibition at AGTA GemFair Tucson this year.

In the late 1970s Cesar left his home in Lebanon to go to Brazil where he had a cousin who was a gemstone cutter and wholesale gem dealer. His cousin asked Cesar to move to New York and open an office there to sell Brazilian gemstones. After spending some time in New York and Brazil and learning the gem trade, in 1978 Cesar started Kaiser Gems as a sole proprietorship at age 31. 1980 saw the move of Kaiser Gems from New York to Los Angeles, where the main office of the business has been headquartered ever since.

When it began, Kaiser Gems was only dealing in gemstones, they were not manufacturing. After seeing a need for calibrated gemstones in the United States at a time when the market was mostly being served by the Germans, Cesar jumped on the opportunity to be the source for these stones in the American market. His first step was to travel to Brazil to learn about rough and sourcing. In 1983 he brought his cousin Tony into the business to help him open a cutting factory in Thailand. Even from its earliest years in business, Kaiser Gems embraced and prioritized the "mine to market" philosophy of maintaining and managing gemstones as they travel from their source to the the consumer. This philosophy has become ubiquitous in gemstone marketing in recent years as concerns over the ethical treatment of workers and ecologically friendly practices in the gemstone production chain are prioritized.

Kaiser Gems was among the earliest American businesses to open a gemstone cutting factory in Bangkok. While Cesar was focused on sales in the United States, Tony took on the task of setting up the factory. His approach to this task demonstrates the care that Kaiser Gems takes in all its endeavors. Tony learned how to facet a stone himself in order to better understand both the gemstone rough that he later began to source and also the equipment and needs of his factory staff in order to create the best environment for their work.

By 1986, Tony no longer needed to be in Thailand for extended stretches to fill cutting orders and instead he traded his time in Asia for time in Arusha where he was buying rhodolite garnet, spessartine garnet and tanzanite rough. Similar to his process for learning cutting, it was by trial and error that Tony learned the business of buying rough - how to estimate the yield, color, and quality of the cut stones.

The 1990s saw the slowing of the economy, paraiba tourmaline's debut in the market, and an increased interest in fancy cuts. Kaiser Gems evolved with these trends. As fancy cutting styles began to emerge on the market, Kaiser Gems was uniquely situated to take advantage of this new trend with it's factory in Thailand. Delving into fancy cuts gave the Kaiser Gems cutters the opportunity to get creative and play with the gemstones, both creating their own cuts and cutting clients' requests. The business grew beyond it's initial mission of providing calibrated gemstones to the American community and eventually expanded to have offices abroad and to exhibit at shows internationally.

Though the business was created by men, Kaiser Gems has always seen the power of including women in the company, from Bella Campbell who ran the New York Kaiser Gems office for 27 years, to Miss Ai who has been running the factory in Thailand for over 25 years, to the female powered office staff in Los Angeles and of course Noelle herself who has been at the helm of Kaiser Gems in recent years. Cesar and Tony were not specifically trying to build a business of powerful women, instead they made it a priority to hire the best person for the job and their longstanding respect for strong women meant no woman was discounted from the opportunity.

When Noelle joined Kaiser Gems in 2009, she saw being a part of her family's business as an opportunity not an obligation. Though she had grown up around gemstones, she learned the business of gemstones on the job.

During her initial years with Kaiser Gems, Noelle spent her time selling gemstones and traveling on her own, preferring the learning-on-the-spot style of education that had been modeled to her by her father and uncle. By 2014, Noelle was permanently based in LA and spending her time managing the Kaiser Gems Los Angeles office.

Family business is by default a topic of conversation in our industry. But when talking to the second generation in a business started by entrepreneurial spirit, it's always interesting to hear what inspired the new generation to stay with the family. For Noelle, the family business meant freedom, freedom to be her own boss and make her own mark on the business she is running. It also doesn't hurt that being part of this industry allows her to continue to travel the world which has been a lifelong passion of hers. Having spent time in the Kaiser offices I can attest to the fact that Noelle enjoys that being in a family business means spending more time with your family. As a child Noelle would spend the summers in Lebanon with her sister, cousins, and Lebanese family while her Dad and Uncle would travel to Asia and Africa for business. Spending time, in the industry, with her father as an adult has given Noelle a unique understanding of her father's dedication to the business and her family when he was building Kaiser Gems in its early years. Being at work every day in the office with her father Cesar and observing him as he networks with old friends in the industry has given Noelle a chance to see and appreciate another side of her father. Perhaps the most difficult part of working with her father is attempting to get Cesar to clean out the drawers in his office desk where he has been hoarding gemstones, poems, and pre-formed stones for years.

As we are rapidly approaching GemFair Tucson, it is timely to remember that AGTA as an organization grew out of the American gemstone dealers' need for autonomy when exhibiting in Tucson. Cesar explained to me that the group of founding AGTA members had been doing shows together for years, but wanted a voice in how and where they exhibited. Together, these founding members met to start an organization as means to create an exhibition. As an added benefit, transforming this band of American gem dealers into a formal organization strengthened the community they had already created. Repeatedly, Cesar emphasized how the creation of AGTA provided Kaiser Gems a new platform to stand on, and gave not only Kaiser Gems, but American companies as a whole a voice, power and strong visibility in the international gemstone community. As AGTA evolved, Cesar remarked, the organization's creation of ethical standards and nomenclature was of exceptional benefit to the gemstone community.

For Noelle, the AGTA community fostered the growth of her career. She found mentors, support, and friends in the industry who helped her grow personally and professionally. Being part of the organization meant she had a group of other second generation peers who just "get it" in a way that her friends outside the industry could never quite grasp. Even though Cesar had a place of recognition within the AGTA community, Noelle enjoyed having the opportunity to find her own voice within the industry.

With over 40 years in the industry it feels momentous that Kaiser Gems will be closing its United States operation after the AGTA GemFair Tucson this year. I asked each of the family members what they wanted the legacy of Kaiser Gems to be within the industry and, surprisingly, they each said the same thing: they want the industry to remember Kaiser Gems as a business with integrity. As Noelle said, "I want Kaiser Gems to be remembered as a company with integrity. Honest. Built from the ground up. [To remember] how it was willing to take people in, to support them and teach them. Kaiser Gems was always willing to help and share the wealth, work with our neighbors. If we don't have the stone we will tell you a supplier who does."

So let me say, Cheers to 40 years of Kaiser Gems! The industry will miss you, but you will always be part of our community.