

Day's displays drive to stop blood diamonds

Stones from Botswana that reflect a positive change are on view at the new South Portland store.

BY MATT DIFILIPPO, Morning Sentinel November 15, 2008

Jeff Corey, president of Day's Jewelers, 56, jokes that he has been in the diamond business since he was 6 years old.

Corey, whose parents were also jewelers, has seen the happiness diamonds can bring. In 2002, he heard about the sadness when he learned about "blood diamonds" – African diamonds sold on the black market to finance wars.

"What's ironic is that the most valuable natural resources in the world come from the poorest continent in the world," Corey said. "There are villages where there are hardly any adults because they've all died of AIDS. It's horrible. So why can't diamonds be used to help some of the poorest nations on earth?"

Corey set out to change the process. Six years later, he says Day's Jewelers is the only company selling diamonds from Botswana that are mined, cut and polished by Botswanian citizens. The first of those diamonds will be on display at the grand opening of the new Day's store in South Portland today.

Botswana is known for having some of the best diamonds in the world. But Corey says the number of Botswanians getting jobs in the diamond industry has been very small.

Corey says the history of the market has seen companies such as De Beers shipping uncut diamonds out of Africa to London. "From London they're distributed to sightholders and they're being cut in many different parts of the world, but not in Africa," he says.

Corey and his wife, Kathy, went to Washington, D.C., in 2003 to lobby for the Clean Diamond Act, which later was passed.

The World Diamond Council reported in 2006 that blood diamonds represented less than 1 percent of the world's diamonds. Still, many jewelers, fearful of contributing to the blood diamond process, stopped buying diamonds from Africa, further hurting those countries.

The solution, advocated by then-South African president Nelson Mandela and others, was called beneficiation, in which citizens are trained to cut and polish their country's diamonds.

There are two major obstacles to beneficiation. It requires a large investment to build a factory and train the work force, and it typically takes several years for a person to get to the point where he or she is entrusted to cut a valuable diamond.

With the financing of Moti Ganz Diamond Manufacturing of Israel, beneficiation has become a reality in Botswana. The country released 200 diamonds produced through the new process about a month ago.

"If it works in Botswana, then the other African countries who mine diamonds, this will be the shining light for them. They'll have proof positive that beneficiation can work," Corey says.

The diamonds have a serial number and the word "Botswana" printed on them (the printing can be seen under a microscope set to 20X magnification). Corey's bother, Jim, a gemologist in charge of diamond initiatives for Day's, first saw the diamonds last week and said, "They're in line with our premier cut diamonds."

"If they're going to do it and benefit from it, they're going to make sure that this is their entry into the diamond world. They're going to do it right," Jim Corey said.

"One blood diamond in this country is one too many," Jeff Corey said. "We're going to continue to do everything we can to end the blood diamond issue, but also to allow the people of Africa to enjoy the beautiful things that diamonds can bring to them."

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