

Early Career in New York City by Kim Hyde

My B.A. degree in International Business was a springboard for my aspirations to travel. My vision was to become a trader in gemstones. To achieve this, I was advised to complete the Gemological Institute of America's 2 year course in New York City to become a Graduate Gemologist. My visit to extended family in NYC on the winter break of my last year of college introduced me to NYC's arts, culture, architecture, entertainment, and fashion. In the run-up years to 2000, NYC was a vibrant, high energy city where doors could open with exciting possibilities. My visit was only a taste, and I opted to experience more of this life. I moved from Oakland, California to NYC in the summer after I graduated. Although I was now in the premier city of the international gemstone industry, I needed to work to afford the tuition at GIA.



Here's where luck played a hand, along with being in the right place and having a network of people who knew what I was trying to do. My dear friend alerted me to a job opening for a Diamond Grader in the GIA Gem Trade Laboratory. I applied for the job, passed the interview, and waited anxiously for 2 weeks before I was offered the position. The probationary period extended over 3 months of intensive training, and I passed the exam. All employees working in the diamond grading lab were young – Asians, Jewish, Italian, Eastern European Ancestries. For 2 years I was the only cooper-colored Indigenous Aboriginal American.

It was exciting to work at the headquarters of GIA on Fifth Avenue, but the work itself was far from glamorous. We graders sat at desks in a room with window shades drawn, allowing only light from our microscope and a spotlight at our desks. With intense visual inspection we meticulously graded diamonds of 1 karat and above with the aid of a microscope, tweezers, a loupe, probing pin, calibrator to size stones, and a measuring tape. We inspected diamonds to detect inclusions and plotted all aspects of the measurements and analysis on a graph, finally noting the red, blue, and green hues. We adjusted our microscopes from lower to higher powers, weighed each stone, and graded it, also noting fluoresce.



The detailed analysis included chemical composition and frequencies of stones. During my second year, we began to use computers equipped with a plotting pad to enter our data. Still, it was a methodological process to grade just one stone. Each facet of the stone was documented, and a stone could have up to 140 facets.

We worked under time pressure and also because the pricing of diamonds depended on the grading. I knew several staff managers who were fired for taking financial kickbacks for falsely rating stones higher than the inspection grading reports noted. As a security protocol, every 3

months we rotated our desks. I received promotions from Standard Grader to Double Checker and Color Grader. A benefit of my GIA test lab position was free tuition to the 2 year education to become a Graduate Gemologist. I progressed through these courses, passed the test, and graduated. My last promotion was to Graduate Staff Gemologist.

As I networked within the jewelry district, my GIA credentials gave me credibility and acceptance. Working in the lab transported me into the world of the affluent. I had rare proximity to renowned gemstones. I held the Hope Diamond and observed the grading of historical and museum level gemstones, crown jewels of royalty, and diamonds of the De Beers family, as well as rare rubies and emeralds. A highlight was inspecting Elton John's sapphire eyeglass lenses.

After 2 to 3 years of grading diamonds in minute detail, the glitter of the job had worn off. The extreme precision was stressful, zooming in and out with my microscope led to carpal tunnel disorder, and the perpetual darkness of the lab setting became onerous. Publicity around the exploitive conditions in Africa's diamond mines reached me and I was sympathetic to the miners. Even with promotions, the pay at GIA seemed below standards. Besides being the token African American in the gem lab, I was not Jewish, which was the dominant ethnicity that usually received promotions in the jewelry trade. I had reached my ceiling at GIA.

While employed at GIA, I had also worked at Macy's flagship store in NYC as Associate Manager in fine jewelry sales. Another step beyond GIA was to begin selling jewelry at street fairs and festivals. I had been gifted with the excess inventory a retailer wanted to offload. With a collapsible table and jewelry cases, I was in business. Inspired by observing trends and jewelry designers, I also created my original designs. I bought the equipment and tools for wiring, soldering, and cutting and enlisted a silver casting specialist to mold my sterling silver jewelry from shape of a cowry shell. I offered these and additional jewelry pieces to my new and established clients, and orders came in regularly. For a time I also sold fur coats at a high-end retail store. I managed the Finlay Fine Jewelry store in NYC for 2 years.



A professional development interest I had started in my 2nd year after joining GIA became my forefront activity and subsequent employment. This was the Ophelia DeVore Business Division of the Grace Del Marco Agency for modeling she had founded. Ophelia was a legend as the first African-American woman to operate a successful modeling agency in NYC, in the Empire State Building. Mrs. DeVore established her initial modeling credits throughout Europe where she passed as a Norwegian. Later with her own agency in NYC she created breakthrough opportunities for many African-American models. The professional division was founded on motivating and inspiring hope as it trained young professionals in business etiquette, public speaking, assertiveness, and personal presentation. Ophelia DeVore was a guiding light to many who aspired to advance in their careers. Mrs. DeVore spoke of "the magic of the mind" and shared her belief that "anything you could dream, you could do."



I had completed the set of courses and met Ophelia when she spoke at a graduation ceremony. Soon after, I received an invitation to meet with her at her home in NYC. There she offered me a lead role as an instructor, handed me the training manuals, and entrusted me to carry her message forward. This role expanded when she tapped me to serve as spokesperson and public relations official for the training unit. I was a guest on radio interview shows and made television show appearances to strengthen the publicity program. The business unit also operated a non-profit organization that raised funds to offer scholarships to students. I was pulled in to volunteer for a major fundraising event, a showcase residence tour created by interior designer Ron Shade. During this project I met additional celebrities including Al Sharpton, Ilyasah Shabazz, Susan Taylor, Kim Porter, Sean Combs, Morgan Freeman, Samuel Jackson, Spike Lee, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis.



The New York experience of my early career was an education like no other. It instilled ideas, images, possibilities, and successes—and confronted me with abundant challenges. I gained life-long experiences that continue to fuel my career. Filled with 7 years of NYC experience, the sense of time passing with my family and friends moving on and settling in prodded me to relocate home, Oakland, California, and get in step with the life there. I returned to Oakland where I began study for my Master's degree in leadership and continued with new career directions.



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