

MANN'S JEWELERS—
THE ALCHEMISTS: NANCY
MANN & ROBERT MANN,
PART II.

INTERVIEW BY MARY STONE

Making the Impermanent Permanent



A successful partnership combines complementary skills and perspectives. Gertrude Mann's pragmatism and her husband Irving's passion dovetailed perfectly to make Mann's Jewelers a Rochester institution. That balance seems to have been programmed into their children Robert and Nancy Mann for the express purpose of carrying out their parents' dream—to keep making other people's dreams come true.

Ultimately, that is what Mann's Jewelers does for customers. They help mark milestones and achievements in people's lives, amplify feelings and engrave memories from people's hearts, forge lasting unions to show love and deepen meaning in relationships, to honor and immortalize dear ones we never want to forget.

Like Irving, Nancy is the visionary, scanning trends and tirelessly sifting through new jewelry collections looking for the find that makes her have to catch her breath. Like Gertrude, Robert is the foundation of Mann's Jewelers, involved with operations, procuring stones and educating customers about the subtleties in choosing them. Combined, Nancy and Robert's perspectives give the company a discerning view of a jewelry industry that in 2022 takes center stage in American pop culture in a way it never did during Irving and Gertrude's time.

Social media platforms have enhanced the prominence of jewelry now. "You immediately know what somebody's diamond total weight is on a red carpet. It becomes common knowledge. People know the value very quickly, and invariably some household-name celebrity gets engaged with a certain diamond shape or stone type or metal color, and that's suddenly what everybody wants."



Celebrity culture and social media have converged to make sure we know things like the engagement ring Machine Gun Kelly designed for his fiancée, Robert says. "Because Megan Fox got a pear shape, we suddenly have many more requests for pear shapes," he explains.

Nancy and Robert are partners in the jewelry business that has been the family trade since 1836, when Mann family members were silver craftsmen for Russian royalty.

Nancy and Robert's great-grandfather Louis Mann moved the family to North America in 1922. He would go on to open Louis Mann & Sons, a jewelry store in Buffalo. His son Alexander, in 1931, would open his own store in Rochester, near the Liberty Pole.

A year after they were married, Irving and Gertrude Mann started Mann's Jewelers at 158 S. Clinton Ave.; in 1969 they moved the store to 2945 Monroe Ave.

The family shop was Irving Mann's playground as a child, in the same way it would be for Nancy and Robert, whose dinner conversations with their parents revolved around diamonds and rubies and designs. Nancy grew up thinking all families talked about jewelry at dinner.

Since 1996, Nancy and Robert have been running their parents' business with a team of over 20 employees who work to preserve and advance the legacy of nine generations.

It is a weighty mission that Nancy and Robert might have felt oppressively engraved on their destinies. Instead, their parents' business would serve as the stage where they could achieve their potential and fulfill the dreams of tens of thousands of customers, simultaneously.

That was more immediately apparent to Nancy, who at age 7 laid out a play store in the basement of their house, complete with an old cash register and store supplies: paper bags and vellum paper. Nancy says, "All my customers were happy in the end. They went home with a beautiful package."

Nancy, who serves as CEO at Mann's, graduated with a bachelor's degree in art history and business. She has experience working as a bench jeweler as a craftsperson, as well as a gemology degree from the Gemological Institute of America.

Robert serves as president of the company. He purchases diamonds and colored stones and guides customers through the process of choosing them. Robert graduated with a bachelor's degree in English and is a Graduate Gemologist, which he earned at the Gemological Institute of America in New York City.

Unlike Nancy, Robert says it was only once he was ingrained in the business that he realized the extraordinary value in the work the family was doing—the role they were

playing in generations of lives.

"Look, I've got one of the best and most important jobs ever. I'm helping make love incarnate, right? Because when your husband is gone, you look down on your finger, and he's still there.



The reassurance of him is still there," Robert says.

He adds: "You're making love tangible for someone who's not in the room, or no longer with us, and that's the most powerful thing!"

Robert first made that connection between the tangible and intangible looking at his grandfather's watch. "It was like a light bulb went off, and I thought, 'What we do... we're kind of love reminders.' It's that permanence of the reminder that hit home."

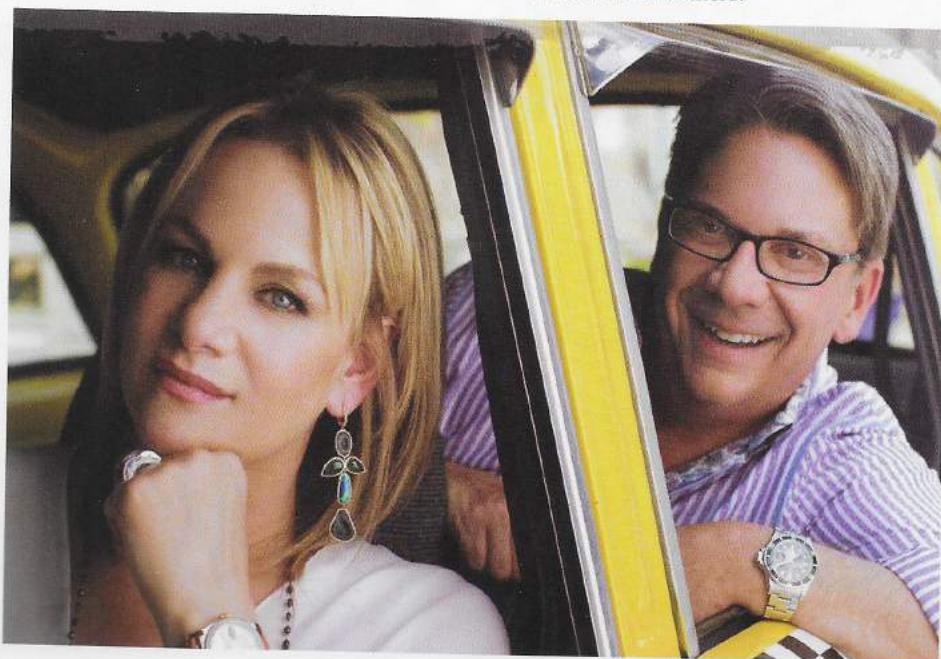
Nancy remembers a similar light bulb moment. "Every time I tell this story, I get teary," she says. It was a holiday trunk show with one of Mann's favorite vendors Alex Sepkus, which specializes in beautifully curated color stones, Nancy explains in an interview with Robert.

There was one ring they make with probably five or seven different color stones—a ruby, sapphire, green sapphire, yellow sapphire—very vivid colors, she says.

"In comes a lady. She stops in front of their display and asks to see this ring. She said, 'I'd like this ring, and I'd like to tell you why. My husband just passed away, and this ring, more than anything, reminds me of my husband'... Oh, here I go..." Nancy pauses as Robert quips: "You were choking up before you started the story, and I'm thinking, 'What is going on with her over there?'"

Nancy says: "The woman said, 'The colors on this ring look like the lights on our Christmas trees. Every year, he would take tremendous patience and care winding the lights around the tree and squinting to make sure they were evenly spaced. That's why I want this ring.'"

"There's



something about that story," Nancy says.
"Yeah. It's powerful," Robert agrees.

Because they are siblings, Mann's president and CEO are at home with each other. During this interview, Nancy rolls her eyes at some of the words Robert chooses to make his points. He looks back at her quizzically trying to understand how what he said was daft. "Don't describe me as simply a salesperson," Nancy tells him. "I'm a matchmaker. And sometimes a magician! We all are at Mann's Jewelers. It's never just about making a sale."

They marvel at the number of stories they've heard over the years from generations of families, and the stories their parents heard as well, in the unusually intimate process of giving customers' most cherished people and memories—a permanent form.

The depth of their relationships with customers, throughout the many milestones in their lives and generations of families is something that generations of Manns have done. There is no formal transition plan for now, Nancy and Robert say. Currently, both Nancy and Robert are happy with the infrastructure they have in place, and work hard to keep their parents' memories alive. They share stories about the many years the family worked together at Mann's Jewelers, and how they learned from their parents that anything is possible.

The Mann family knows that only too well. Their dad's dog tags from World War II were found after more than a half-century on a field in France by a French woman who returned them to Irving a few years before he died in 2015. Irving carried those dog tags with him everywhere he went as an external reminder of that period in his life, of what he survived and accomplished—of all that he was capable.

For Mann's Jewelers, the mission is to connect an intention—an intangible sentiment with the physical form—whether it is a timepiece, a charm, a piece of jewelry or objet d'art. Those treasures contain a feeling, a person, a period in time, for generations to come.

Below, an excerpt from an interview with Nancy and Robert:

MS: What is your favorite part of your job today?

RM: You know, for me, it's—the thing I probably love the most is the generational aspect of it. Helping sons whose fathers have bought their engagement rings here, whose mothers have received gifts from here, you know, that whole continuum to me is what I find most enjoyable.

I love hearing that the Dad bought the engagement ring from my father, which actually just happened today. And the dad let the son choose wherever he wanted to shop. They ended up coming here as one of their points of consideration.

Sometimes they think they can find it all online, but then once they sit down and experience working with a trained

professional that's on their side, it's an easier conversation.

MS: There's a lot to learn.

RM: Yeah, there is. There's lots of little subtleties and nuances that people don't always understand. And so the guy I had this morning was fantastic. He was an accountant. He was very methodical. And he was like, "Wow, you made this so much easier. This would have been so difficult for me to do on my own. I'm so glad I listened to my Dad," and then the Dad gives me the look. He's like, "Thank you."

NM: To answer your question about what's most intriguing for me would probably be two things. One is the ability to help somebody encapsulate a sentiment into something that's more tangible and something that really does stay with you forever. I think that it's an honor when people give us the opportunity to help them translate their words. So that's very meaningful.

The other thing is, for me, something that I've never tired of is the ability to go into the world and find really extraordinary things for people that wow them, that really make a difference, something that's rare or something that's unique, something that's distinctive. And I love having the opportunity to do that.

MS: Absolutely. And so how much do you both do that? Are you both going out and looking for jewels and looking for stones and designs, or does one of you sort of do that more than the other?

RM: So I'd say, Nancy is definitely the visionary in terms of the two of us. You know, she's got the ability to look at fashion trends and kind of see things breaking before they actually break. In the industry, she's somewhat legendary for having that eye, for having that ability to kind of look into the future, to see what's going to be trending way before it comes to fruition. I tend to deal with the more perfunctory things, diamonds, watches...

MS: Diamonds are perfunctory? Are they?

RM: It's much more direct. There's clarity, there's color. And then the subtlety is finding, you know, a great cut, the right price.

NM: Well, and a lot of it is the math and science of it, you know, the more technical aspects.

RM: Correct.

What Nancy does has more feel to it, right? There's more of a—there's an intangible that she has that you can't buy, that you can't quantify and qualify with that ability to look into the future and know what's going to be relevant in the next year, in the next two years. Whereas a lot of the things I buy are just—they're a little more straightforward in nature.

NM: I often have the opportunity to find some really unique, distinctive, rare things and show people who appreciate them and want to own them. So that's what always

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keeps me excited about what I do, among other things.

RM: I think Nancy, in that respect, is very good at having her antennae up and always listening. She's always taking mental notes and thinking. She's really good at piecing them together. I think that she and Irving are very similar in their kind of love to stay current, to be cutting edge, and to have what people are looking for or to be able to match the person with an item that becomes their signature piece, right?

NM: I mean, I would say that my father had a tremendous passion for everything as it related to the world of jewelry. He started as a watchmaker but quickly learned to love jewelry as well. I would say that I also share that passion. I never tire of it. It's what I think about and work on, if you will, all the time. It never feels like work to me. It just feels like always a treasure hunt.

MS: Yeah, I was going to say it must feel like a treasure hunt.

NM: Well, I've been doing this so long that everything old is new again. And it's just a question of how far along it is on the continuum before the current generation thinks it was their idea or it's something really new.

What we try to do is procure the best in class for any particular category. We were one of David Yurman's original customers. We have been selling that brand for almost 40 years, and now there are other designers who are newer on the horizon that we've aligned with, just because we feel that they have an interesting or distinctive point of view.

MS: Part of your success may be in not underestimating the Rochester public, it sounds like.

NM: Definitely. And I think that, once again, it goes back to having the opportunity to see something where, with a sharp intake of breath, I say or we say, "Wow," and we know it's going to find the right home.

RM: I mean, because when you look at it, Rochester has almost got a conservative Midwestern mindset. It's a very kind of traditional, not showy, not fancy. You would never think jewelry like Stephen Webster would fly in Rochester.

MS: I'm less surprised now because I think that Rochester also has changed. I think it's edgier than it used to be.

RM: Yes. I agree. I think she's part of the reason for that because she had the belief that, "Hey, this town, it's not just what you see that's obvious." There's a whole undercurrent. There's a desire for people to be different, to be edgier. But there was no place for them to buy anything like that.

NM: Well, I think it's things that are interesting. Things that make people say, "I really want that." "I've never seen anything like this before." "This is cool." "This is me." "This speaks to me."

RM: I think much like the cycle of fashion and design,

I think there's an ebb and flow to it. You're always riding a wave of, is this hot now? Is this relevant to what's going on in the world? And it's interesting how the things intersect, how fashion and the stone and the sentiment, they all kind of come together.

NM: What often happens across the counter for us is this tremendous amount of intimacy that people share. And, that's for me, the river that runs through so much of what we do is just the ability to be a part of that for people. It's interesting when people tell you their history. Very often when somebody comes in to get engaged, we ask, tell us about your relationship. Tell us how you met. Somebody wants to celebrate an anniversary. Please, tell us about the last 25 years or 10 years or whatever it is, and so that to me is the stuff that I never, ever tire of because jewelry, it's what it represents. It's so, so cool.

MS: What is something that you think is important to understand about this business or that we haven't talked about that you'd like people to know about?

RM: Well, you know, when you guys are talking, the one thing I always think about is now in the days of the internet and everyone having access to every bit of information they can humanly digest, then I think there's an information overload. And at some point, you need to trust a professional. And I look at our role in people's lives in this community and the communities that all our customers live in around the U.S. or around the world. You know, you have to trust someone much like you have a hairdresser that you trust to cut your hair, or a doctor to advise you about your health. At some point, aligning yourself with someone that will guide you in the correct direction is important.

Here's a great example. I had a client whose 50th wedding anniversary was coming up, and I said, "Oh, that's great. What can I help you with?" He says, "I don't have any idea what I've ever bought. It's 50 years of birthdays, anniversaries, Valentine's Day and Mother's Day. I have no idea what I've gotten her over the years." And I said, "Well, have you shopped here for the majority of those years?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Let's go look at the computer."

MS: So you could show him.

RM: "I can show you everything you've ever bought her. We can find complementary pieces." And I think a lot of people today are just, you know, they'll go here for one thing, they'll go there for something else. They'll buy something else online. But I think there's value in finding someone that you're comfortable with that's professional that you can trust and kind of letting them be your Sherpa for whatever this adventure is in jewelry, right?

NM: This is very much a relationship-based business. So many memories created with so many people. One of the many things at Mann's Jewelers that help to keep our parents' memory alive is all of the stories clients share with us about

"The best part of what we do is helping people encapsulate a feeling."

them. We know they touched so many people throughout the years, and we never tire of hearing about those unique moments. A number of our current co-workers worked with my parents as well, and still fondly share so many stories of working together. We've had a lot of fun, and my father had a wonderful sense of humor.

RM: Sometimes, it's the way you're wired or how busy you are or how life is; you need a personal shopper that can guide you. And I think there's value in aligning yourself with a professional in whatever portion of life you feel you might need help in, and then just letting them gently guide you to happiness.

NM: What motivates people to buy jewelry...there are a lot of reasons. And we love the ability to walk people around and help them with their own editing, for them to ultimately end up with something that they've chosen based on an educated decision, or simply just what speaks to them.

MS: Right. How fulfilling and rewarding and meaningful what you do is.

NM: It really is. Which I can tell you is why I've never tired of it. I can tell you for myself I'd never be able to sell clothes because all of that comes and goes too quickly. I'd never be able to sell a lot of categories that really have no opportunity or the potential for any sort of significant sentiment or permanence.



Stephen Webster & Chef Mark Hicks visit Rochester from the UK

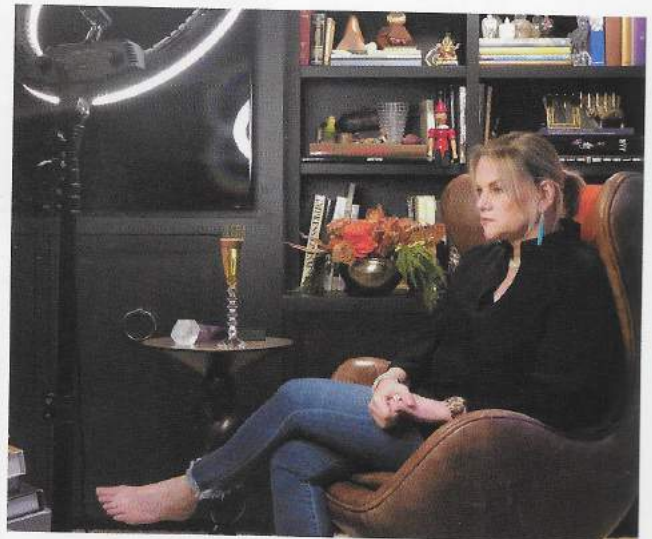


Ippolita with Nancy Mann

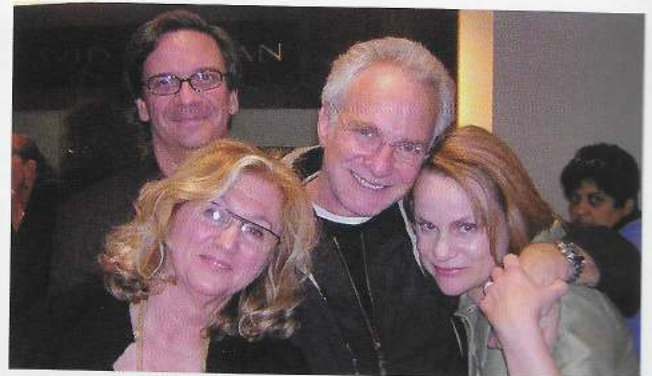
The best part of what we do is helping people encapsulate a feeling. In many cases it's a forever feeling. I think jewelry is the best possible category to be able to do something like that with because everything else is so transient.

RM: It actually reminds me of this story I can share. I wasn't particularly interested in coming into the business because I didn't quite understand it. And when I talked to my dad about it, he kind of laid it out to me pretty simply. And it was beautiful. He said, "I challenge you to find another business where people are coming to you to celebrate happy occasions all the time. You know what? It's not happening at the dentist's office. It's not happening at the doctor's. I mean, name another profession."

There are very few places where people are coming to you for purely happy occasions, and that's why I find this business so rewarding. It reminds me of something Nancy always says: "Open up your jewelry box. You will see the highlights of life's moments. It's like taking a walk down memory lane."



A live interview with Nancy Mann & David and Sybil Yurman



David & Sybil Yurman visit Rochester