

# Mid-America Jewelry News

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## Cancer foundation 'Blings' 21,000 patients over 15 years

By Paul Holewa

Every jewelry store has a customer who's so passionate about jewelry they could easily be on the other side of the counter in sales. For Chris Ferdinand and her husband Bill, owners of Ferdinand Jewelers, that customer was Barbara. When Barbara's routine jewelry cleaning visits dropped off suddenly in early 2008 the couple knew something was wrong. Barbara was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

For the Morris Township, NJ-based couple news of Barbara's cancer diagnosis was like a gut punch, especially for Chris. "My mother died from ovarian cancer in 1991," says Chris. When the couple visited Barbara in the hospital their favorite customer shared her concerns about wearing her fine jewelry during tests and procedures.

"Barbara was afraid that her jewelry might get lost or stolen,



so she didn't wear a stitch of jewelry during hospital visits," says Chris. "During our first visit with her in the hospital she said she 'missed her bling.' The next day the idea of Operation Bling came to me in prayer."

Chris quickly sprang into action and had sterling silver rings set with CZ shipped overnight to her store. When presenting the rings to her dear friend and favorite customer Chris said: "We can't bring you flowers [not allowed in the oncology wards] but we can bring you bling."

Barbara was incredibly moved by the gesture. "She was so delighted she cried," says Chris. "Barbara spoke of how she loved to wear the rings that the Ferdinands had made from her mother's diamonds, and how much she missed wearing them. Having fake bling that looked like real bling meant so much to Barbara and gave her great pleasure."

Chris's guiding principle was if a Bling presentation could bring so much joy for one woman, think of what it could do for hundreds of women. And with

this mission in mind the seeds of Operation Bling were sewn. On March 6, 2008, Operation Bling became a not-for-profit corporation. And, on May 11, 2009, Chris obtained 501(c)(3) status for her Foundation.

This year, Operation Bling turns 15. Since the Foundation's inception to present day, more than 21,000 cancer patients have been "Blinged." "It amazes me and awes me," says Chris. "My heart is still warmed on a daily basis because of it."

Good intentions are easy.

Good deeds require hard work - and lots of it. Administrative and organizational efforts behind the scenes were time-consuming. And, being retail jewelers it was all about jewelry options and presentation.

"When a patient is presented with an Operation Bling gift they will have the choice of a sterling silver cubic zirconium ring, earrings, necklace or bracelet," says Chris. "The Bling gift is presented in a Lucite crystal box enclosed in a white organza pouch. Also enclosed in the pouch is a laminated Bling card with the foundation's mission statement and an inspirational poem entitled What Cancer Cannot Do as well as the foundation's logo and contact information."

In the formative years Chris and her husband had to get the word out in Northern New Jersey to find cancer patients and various means of support for the Foundation.

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## Riding the Wave with Essential Lab Grown Diamonds in a Changing Market

By Deborah Yonick

Essential Lab Grown Diamonds has been a price-point leader and market disruptor in lab-grown diamonds since its inception in 2019.

Recognized as one of the largest lab-grown diamond wholesalers in the United States, Essential Lab Grown Diamonds focuses on bringing to independent retail jewelers nationwide the best market price for certified and non-certified loose stones, as well as popular lab-grown diamond jewelry basics.

Vinit Jobanputra founded the New York City-based wholesaler on the premise of delivering the lowest price for every loose lab-grown diamond it sells, highlighting its compelling "Beat the Price" campaign.

"The key to handling the product and category is to 'parachute down'," says Vinit. "The people who don't sell quick enough are taking the biggest hit," he shared at JCK during the Las Vegas Show in June, where lab-grown diamonds remained a leading topic of conversation among retailers.

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Nitin Jobanputra (center) with sons Aakash (l) and Vinit at the JCK Las Vegas Show.

## Positive Outlook for Holiday Sales

By Deborah Yonick

With the holiday season fast approaching, consumers are hunting for that perfect gift for loved ones and preparing for family gatherings.

Jewelry continues to rank among the top 10 gifts consumers expect to give, according to Proximity by Comscore's Holiday 2023 Guide. In its tips for success checklist, it cites a shift in holiday spending to start well before the season, with 45 percent of consumers beginning their gift quest by early October.

Nearly 60 percent of consumers in the report say that so-

cial media will heavily influence their holiday purchasing decisions, underscoring that Q4 2022 ranked as the highest quarter on record for U.S. online retail shopping.

Expectations are good for jewelry sales Q4 and year-end.

"We expect [jewelry sales] to fluctuate cyclically, as it has always done, but not to significantly drop," shares Julia Pullman, marketing director for Box Brokers Group (BBG). The Brea, California based provider of premier packaging and displays for independent jewelers predicts holiday 2023 will finish on a high note. See **Holiday** page 32



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## BLING

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in Hackensack, NJ, and The Summit Medical Group in Berkeley Heights, NJ. Over time the couple increased the number of hospitals as the Foundation grew.

Funding and donations became another challenge. Chris's Mystery Box contest has been a lucrative fundraiser for years. To commemorate this year's milestone anniversary the Mystery Box gift is a white gold halo-set pendant featuring a center diamond of just over half a carat and surrounded by small accent diamonds.

Customers know that of the 100 Mystery Boxes one wrapped item will contain the real deal. The others are sterling silver and CZ lookalikes. "People are essentially buying a [Operation] Bling gift for \$45 and making a \$55 straight donation," says Chris. "We have a reveal party where I hand out all of the pre-purchased Mystery Boxes. Everyone opens their boxes at the same time. It's a lot of fun."

The unsung heroes of Operation Bling are Chris's Foundation Angels, volunteers that do the actual Bling presentation in hospital cancer wards. The Foundation's mission speaks to families and individuals affected by cancer. In recent years Loreli Stochaj, Chris Carswell and oncology social worker Brandy Johnson, at St. Clare's in Denville have become indispensable Angels helping on many levels of the Foundation's operations.



Chris Ferdinand (L) drew inspiration from her friend Debbie Johnston's heroic battle against cancer.

"They [Stochaj and Carswell] are the queens of organizing me and my Bling," says Chris. "They always help at sales, events, running, organizing and planning."

Chris also wanted to give shout outs to Sue Cregan who has been beautifully handwriting thank-you notes to everyone who donates and buys bling. Sue, a breast cancer survivor herself and Chris's long-time friend, has been with the Foundation since its inception.

Deborah McComber and her husband have also been instrumental in producing online, social media and hard copy promotional materials for the Foundation. Rick Bye has been helpful with product photography.

Chris and her husband had so many ambitions for their Foundation since its start in 2008. And, for the most part, they've been extremely pleased with the growth in awareness and support. But much of that progress was derailed with COVID. Bling presentations from the Foundation's Angels were stopped immediately at the outset of the pandemic.

"Even a cancer patient's support person couldn't accompany them," says Chris. "Imagine going through these treatments and procedures alone."

New Jersey was one of the more restrictive states during COVID. As restrictions were lifted Chris and her volunteers found their way back into the hospitals doing their Bling thing. In 2021, Chris was awarded with New Jersey State's Jefferson Award, "Honoring Those Who Multiply Good."

After 15 years Operation Bling's mission remains personal for Chris. It was started to help a friend and loyal customer get through her cancer diagnosis, but the Foundation was created and continues to be dedicated to Chris's mother, Ruth Brands McLuskey. For more information or to donate to the Operation Bling Foundation, visit [OperationBling-Foundation.org](http://OperationBling-Foundation.org).



Bling Foundation Angels are volunteers that do the Bling presentation in hospital oncology wards.



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