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## Set in stone

By IAN YEE

BY THE time the Lau siblings Marilynna, Calvin and William were in their early teens, they had already developed an extraordinary ability, a highly specialised skill that normally takes years to study – they could determine if gemstones were real or fake.

Growing up, their father a jade dealer and gemstone expert Lau Yin Leong would surround them with all sorts of precious stones; teaching them not only how to identify different types of stones, but also how to determine their grade and authenticity. These were the only toys they had, so in no time they had them all figured out.

"I remember we used to play building blocks with all these gemstones," said the middle child Calvin, 24.



An eye for quality: Trained gemologist Calvin Lau has all the necessary talent, skills and tools to grade and certify diamonds.

"There were diamonds, rubies, sapphires, jade ... everything. Our dad would test us, getting us to point out which were fake and which were real, and if we got it right, he'd treat us to McDonald's."

Judging by how proud Lau is of his children's level of expertise on gemstones, they must have grown up on a steady diet of Big Macs.

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“Since they were youngsters they could already ‘sight-ID’ stones, which is to identify the type and authenticity of gems just by looking at them,” said Lau. “And having been around the gemstone mines in Burma, they can heft a raw, plain-looking piece of rock there and determine if there was jade or other precious material within it, based on the weight of the rock.

“They were so good at it, I could bring them along with me to trade exhibitions! They were still young kids but they were already helping me at gemstone fairs in places like New York and Las Vegas!” said the proud father.

### **Getting set**

Naturally, the siblings decided to put their amazing abilities to use, following in their father’s footsteps to become the youngest students ever enrolled at the Gemological Institute of America (GIA) in New York, the world’s top authority on diamond grading and gem identification. Their father was once the school’s oldest student.

At first, GIA was reluctant to accept Marilynna, the eldest of the siblings at 25, because she was considered too young back then at 18. Most students in the Graduate Gemologist programme were in their mid- to late-20s, and the minimum age is 21.

Her father however, vouched on her behalf, insisting that her talent in gemology would pull her through, and that GIA would be free to expel her if she failed a single subject – even though the passing mark was 75%.

He would do the same for his next two children, with Calvin in particular joining GIA at 17 and just one week after his SPM exams. And true enough, they all graduated without even breaking a sweat.



The gemstone siblings: (From left) Marilynna, William and Calvin.

Calvin and Marilynna went on to graduate from New York’s prestigious Fashion

Institute of Technology (FIT, whose alumni includes Calvin Klein, Michael Kors and Carolina Herrera), studying jewellery design. Calvin even graduated ahead of time with his sister, completing the two-and-a-half year course in just 18 months.

Lau, of course, never doubted for a second his children would pass, saying: “they were already way ahead, because they grew up playing with gemstones. And they’ve all been very highly sought after in New York as diamond graders (people who certify the grade of a diamond) since they graduated.”

Calvin is now back in Malaysia, while as Marilyn and William are still in the United States working as gemologists. William is also completing a business course there.

Calvin had already worked two years in Manhattan, New York’s “diamond district” for a renowned gem laboratory as a diamond grader, and established his very own jewellery store there called Lavin NY. But even after achieving all that, he decided to return to Malaysia to fulfil a childhood dream – opening a store in 1-Utama Shopping Centre in Petaling Jaya, which he accomplished last month with the launching of his first Malaysian branch.

“I learned so much in my time in New York, because there, it’s all about survival. It’s every man for himself, so I learned a lot about being independent and that has definitely helped me back here,” he said.

### **Diamond grading**

According to Calvin, there are probably not more than 10 Malaysian GIA graduate gemologists (and that includes his siblings and his father), so apart from designing and selling jewelry, he also gets large precious stones coming through his store every day to be graded and certified.



Family way: While Marilyn and William are in New York working as gemologists, Lau and Calvin are in Malaysia taking care of the jewellery business.

“We get diamonds that are 30, 40 karats every day – diamonds that we need to check, certify and return to whoever it belongs to. So imagine that, getting all those amazing stones, but having to give them back,” said Calvin.

Apart from the difficulty in returning the stones, there are many other complexities in grading diamonds, and it’s not always like in the movies where the mafia

bosses can just toss them over to a guy with a magnifying tool.

Determining the authenticity and grade of a diamond is a very technical, scientific process, but Calvin's training at GIA (who certify most of the world's diamonds) has certainly given him the necessary skills to do so. Even then, sometimes it's a painstaking process.

"If the diamond is already set (placed in a piece of jewellery), then it's pretty hard and certifying it would be a long, complicated process. But if it isn't set, you can actually just put it on a piece of paper and if you can see through it to the words, it's fake.

"When it comes to grading high value diamonds like internally flawless ones, it's a big headache and I'll usually spend an entire day on just one stone. That's because the difference between the value of a flawless and an internally flawless diamond can be double or triple. And that's just a one grade difference," he added.



**Delicate hands: Calvin checking a diamond.**

Such is Calvin's level of expertise in gemology, he's been giving lectures for the Geological Society of Malaysia even though he is only 24. Yesterday, they organised a technical talk at University Malaya, where geology professors and students listened to him lecture on subjects like diamond price trends and investment grade diamonds.

"I also give a lot of non-academic lectures. Lots of banks organise talks on diamond grading for their privilege or gold card holders, because a lot of these people like to invest in precious stones," said Calvin.

### **Not your average dealers**

Much of the Lau siblings' success is owed to their father, who Calvin calls the "Indiana Jones of Asia", as his passion for jade and gemstones have taken him into the rural mines in Myanmar, where they run deep underground mines without the use of any modern technology. And as a form of training, he would bring his children along.

“You’ll have to really rough it out there if you want to understand gemstones. A real gem expert shouldn’t just design jewellery, or even know how to grade stones. They should learn how the stones came about, how they are mined and sold,” Lau explained.

“But experiences like these aren’t for everyone, because conditions there are very rough. It takes almost an entire day of travelling on terribly bumpy roads just to get there, and there’s no electricity, no running water, no proper hotels. You really have to rough it out.”

Calvin in particular, knows how difficult the conditions there can be, having descended down one of their 213m deep mines before.

“They have no ventilation, and the weather there can go above 40°! Worst still, for every 30.4m (100 feet) you descend, the temperature goes up another degree, and you’re climbing down on creaky wooden ladders that go straight down. It can get pretty scary,” said Calvin.

His father added: “The worst experience for me was when Calvin was once on the ladder halfway down the mine, and they used dynamite to blast some rocks. There was a huge boom, and it cut off the lights inside the mine. That was the first time I’ve ever really prayed in my life, because I didn’t know what happened to Calvin.

“But still, it’s something that we’ve always loved doing. I quit my well-paying job at a bank at 42 and flew to New York to study gemology – all because I love gemstones. When you’re at the mines, or at the auctions in Myanmar bidding for raw stones, and you uncover a good piece – you’ll get a real kick out of it. And when you look at some of these stones, and see their brilliance ... I’m telling you, you’ll never want to give it up.”

- To learn more about gemology, or if you have gemstones that you want to have checked, you can contact Calvin about his next seminar at 03-7727 6331 or e-mail [lavinnewyork@gmail.com](mailto:lavinnewyork@gmail.com).