



Elser showcases her cut (below, left) and rough (below, right) gemstones.

Romancing the stones

WHO
LISA ELSER |50|

WHERE
VANCOUVER

WHAT SHE WAS
IT MANAGER AND CONSULTANT

WHAT SHE IS
GEM CUTTER

HOW SHE MADE THE LEAP



ON A HOTEL BALCONY in hot and muggy Madagascar, Lisa Elser, seated at a cloth-covered table, peers through a jeweller's loupe at a magnified chunk of verdigris-bright rock. Six gem dealers sit patiently across from her, a constellation of coloured pebbles spread on the table before them. Standing close, with a backpack full of money, is burly Tom Schlegel, Elser's "banker and body-guard" as well as husband. Elser assesses the potential beauty and size of the rocks and negotiates a price. Schlegel doles out a seven-centimetre-high stack of Malagasy ariary, equivalent to about \$700, and tucks the rocks away in a small plastic bag. Back home in Canada, Elser will transform the pebbles into cut tourmalines that bear one of her distinct signature designs: more than 100 facets cut into the top and bottom to create a glittering jewel.

For Elser, Madagascar is a vast physical distance as well as a spiritual odyssey away from her former home in Zurich where, beginning in 1999, she worked for global computer titan Sun Microsystems (since acquired by Oracle). Elser

lived a life that can only be described as — borrowing from literature — *My Brilliant Career*. Like Sybylla Melvyn, the Australian novel's young heroine, Elser was self-possessed — one of the highest-ranking female managers in the patriarchal office of Sun's Swiss corporate office.

Schlegel was also a Sun consultant and, between them, the pair shared a territory of 84 countries on three continents and an exclusive clientele of governments, banks and insurance companies. Her efforts garnered Elser a sizable annual salary: from \$130,000 during her early days at Sun to more than \$250,000 by the time she left the company in 2007 at age 45.

The couple didn't squander their precious weekends, which consisted of quick flights to the magnificent cities of Europe for romantic getaways. During a jaunt to Prague, Elser explored an antique store and was enamoured by a 1910 gold necklace with blue sapphires, priced at more than \$1,000. She didn't buy the pendant, unsure if the sapphires were genuine. Instead, she decided she would learn about precious stones and signed up for a gem-cutting course. "I walked out of the course with a one-centimetre, round, brilliant danburite — and realized that this was what I wanted to do."

Meanwhile, her high-flying career exacted a personal toll, Elser admits, seated in the kitchen of her immaculate home overlooking a pine forest outside Vancouver. Elser and Schlegel would say their reluctant goodbyes to each other most Monday mornings on the way to the airport and exhausted hellos on Friday nights in the Zurich apartment where they were based. The effect was physical as well as emotional. Less than 110 pounds fleshed out her five-foot-four frame and chronic bronchitis remained stubbornly im-

mune to antibiotics. Says Elser of that time: "I was skinny, sick and miserable. Tom would come home and I would be crying, 'I don't want to do this anymore. I want to be a jeweller in Vancouver,'" a city the couple had often visited and long admired.

Eventually, the dot-com bubble that fuelled Sun Microsystems' expansion burst. Corporate morale and decorum plummeted along with stock prices, says Elser. "The smaller the pie got, the more people fought over it," she recalls. "Someone would call me to say, 'We were in a meeting and someone was trashing you very, very badly.'"

Sun downsized and American-born Elser and Schlegel relocated to Seattle,

But the skill Elser admits she needed most was one that can't be taught: humility. Her first gem job — as a jewellery store clerk — shook her sense of self-worth. "A big part of my identity was that I had a 'big girl' job," Elser admits. "I went from being someone whose opinion is sought and to whom people defer to being treated like an ordinary person." She would have to give up the cachet of corporate high flyer and embrace a more modest lifestyle. "I woke up in the morning convinced that I was going to starve," she says.

It took five years, but Elser's business — buying, cutting and polishing precious stones to sell to jewellery designers in Canada, the United States

WORDS OF WISDOM

"The hardest part of the transition was separating my sense of self-worth from the money and title. I now focus on what I truly want to do instead of what I think will impress others."

where Elser continued working for the company while her husband retired.

Elser was determined to make her dream of becoming a gem cutter a reality and worked to accumulate the necessary skills and connections. While continuing full-time work at Sun, she obtained a gemology degree, refined her faceting and polishing skills and spent \$200,000 on equipment, marketing and travel to try to cultivate a clientele of goldsmiths who would buy her gems. "I would be on conference calls and I used to practise gem pick-up with tweezers. If you can't do this properly, then people know you're an amateur. So if I was going to buy rough gems, I would have to look like I knew what I was doing."

and Switzerland — now covers the bills.

She supports economic development in gem-mining communities in Nigeria, Tanzania, Kenya, Madagascar and Southeast Asia, some of the places where she buys rough stones. The grants fund wells for water and improved sanitation for the villages, along with scholarships for miners and their children to attend gem-cutting school.

At 50, Elser reflects on how much more content and healthy she is, compared to when she toiled in the corporate world. "I'm happy," she says, "ridiculously so — like so much it's probably not good for me." **M**

BY ROBERTA STALEY

PHOTOS: ANGELA FAMA, HAIR AND MAKEUP: LUCYANNE BOUTHAM FOR TRESSEMMÉ HAIR CARE, JEWELLERY ON ELSER: LYNN STRELAU EARRINGS, RUDI PEET NECKLACE, KRISTEN JONES CUFF, RALPH TOBER RING

