

# CRAIN'S

NEW YORK BUSINESS

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**ROCK CANDY:** Each piece Kassam designs is a reflection of the person who wears it.

## Bling bearer

A designer of high-end **engagement rings** says he's just a storyteller at heart

**Y**ou could say Zameer Kassam, CEO and chief designer of five-year-old firm Zameer Kassam Fine Jewelry, did it all for love.

It was 2008 and Kassam, then head of De Beers' bridal department in London, was struck by the fact that on any given day, hundreds of women worldwide receive identical Tiffany diamond engagement rings. Kassam, a former McKinsey & Co. analyst with a Harvard M.B.A., was on a path to becoming a chief product officer, but the idea of selling what felt like a commodity to customers he'd never met left him feeling hollow. He quit shortly after and moved to New York City with no income and around \$150,000 in outstanding student loans. Serendipitously, a friend asked Kassam's advice on buying an engagement ring—which then led to his asking Kassam to design it. His fledgling attempt was so successful that other requests followed. Soon he knew that designing jewelry, not just selling it, was what he wanted to do.

In a way Kassam had come full circle. His parents, who fled East Africa and emigrated to Canada, started Shamin Jewellers in Vancouver, eventually expanding to five stores. He and his three brothers grew up working in the business. "Instead of the playground, I played at the mall," he said.

Now, having designed 1,000 works of bespoke jewelry from his Midtown studio, the self-confessed romantic has honed what he calls his storytelling technique. "The only thing we do is create pieces that tell love stories," he said.

Kassam or a staffer will fly or call all over the world to interview clients, usually millennial men in finance or tech-

nology who can afford at least \$10,000 for a ring. (The average price of his custom rings is \$30,000; one cost \$1.5 million. All are set with De Beers' Forevermark diamonds and handcrafted in Manhattan by a team of about 15.) During an interview, Kassam draws out stories about the moment a man knew his girlfriend was "the one" and places or things that hold meaning. Then he gathers symbols—the spire of a church, the logo of a favorite restaurant—and sketches ideas for incorporating them into each ring's design. For one ring, the prongs holding the diamond in place were made to resemble antlers, evoking the American Southwest. For another, the number of accent stones equaled the number of years the couple had been together.

The process creates a singular bond. "I personally interact with each client and design every piece," said Kassam, who is single. "The clients and their stories become part of my own story." — JEANHEE KIM

**"The only thing we do is create pieces that tell love stories"**

## ZAMEER KASSAM

**AGE** 37

**BORN** Vancouver, British Columbia

**RESIDES** Midtown

**EDUCATION** Bachelor's, Ivey Business School, Western University; M.B.A., Harvard Business School

**FIRST IN CLASS** He is the youngest of four brothers and the first in his family to graduate from college.

**COUCH SURFER** When Kassam arrived in New York, four friends let him share their one-bathroom apartment, located above an East Village hookah bar, for seven months.

**B-SCHOOL EPIPHANY** Kassam was pressed by a professor, Robert Kaplan, now head of the Federal Reserve Bank of Dallas, to declare his dream job. "I said, 'luxury retail,' but he kept pushing until I blurted out, 'a jeweler.'"

BUCK ENNIS