

PROFILE: LOTANNA AMINA OKPUKPARA, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, MINA STONES

Brecken Branstrator, GIA GG

The responsible sourcing entrepreneur wants to bring more awareness to the gems from her native Nigeria and other African countries as well as more value to those working so diligently to bring them out of the ground and set into jewelry.

For some, entering the gem and jewelry world is a calling. It sure seems that way for Lotanna Amina Okpukpara, who goes by Mina. The gemologist and social entrepreneur found her way to the sector and is now using her passion for responsible sourcing and experience working in ASM to bring real change to part of the gemstone world. Her company, Mina Stones, is involved in every aspect of the supply chain, from mine to market.

Here, *GemGuide* asks Okpukpara about the growth of the company and its priorities in responsible sourcing as well as where she wants it to go from here.

GemGuide: What is your background in the industry? How did you get started?

Mina Okpukpara: I have a bachelor's degree in engineering, a master's in business and innovation from the University of Lancaster in the U.K., and a GIA Graduate Gemologist diploma. I have always been drawn to gemstones and believe I was led to the sector. At the inception of my journey, I was very fortunate to receive scholarships and support by industry organizations and individuals who believed in my dream.

GG: At what point did you realize you wanted to launch your own jewelry company?

MO: Mina Stones is actually a vertically integrated gemstone and jewelry company. We started out collecting gemstones, and jewelry was one of the channels we used to express our beautiful gems. I always knew I was meant to be in the gemstone industry,



Lotanna Amina Okpukpara

and I realized we were ready to make it official when I understood the impact we could make in the gemstone space and what we could achieve with an organized business.

GG: At the core of the company is helping raise awareness for the gems and miners of your home country, Nigeria, and other source countries in Africa. Why did you feel it was important to make that a part of your brand?

MO: Originating from west Africa, we have a deep connection to our roots. Over the years, we have worked with artisanal and small-scale miners and seen that the many issues we encounter are very similar across various gem mining communities in Africa. There is no real value being gained at the source or by

the producing communities and countries at large. We have seen poverty firsthand in some of these mining communities and believe that we can somehow positively influence the government and industry to take a closer look at source communities and plan accordingly. We believe it is an anomaly that



Mina Stones Coloreé Gemstone Diamond set in 18-karat gold. (Image courtesy of Mina Stones)



Faceted sapphires, loose and set in 14-karat gold with a diamond halo. (Image courtesy of Mina Stones)

such value potentially associated with these places cannot attract basic amenities.

GG: From what regions does your brand source the gems and gold? And where are your designs produced?

MO: We source gemstones mainly from Africa—Nigeria (a major source), Cameroon, and other countries within Africa. Our designs are produced mainly in Nigeria. We have also produced a couple of our collections abroad.

GG: When it comes to designing the finishing pieces, from where do you draw your inspiration?

MO: We draw our inspiration from nature, our gemstones, and our west African origin. Our designs and stories are influenced by diverse cultures and traditions across Africa.

GG: “Responsible sourcing” means different things to everyone. What does it mean to you and the way you established your business?

MO: Responsible sourcing is at the core of what we do at Mina Stones. We work closely with artisanal and small-scale miner groups and cooperatives to provide support and ensure they establish a consistent formal channel from the mine to the processing and marketing of gemstones. Mina Stones has also developed a system that implements OECD due diligence guidelines for responsible mineral supply chains along with our in-house checks. We are intentional about creating sustained positive impact in areas in which we work by providing aid to license ASM miners, educating and training artisans, providing tools and equipment, and offering micro-grants.

GG: What has been the hardest part about establishing a transparent supply chain?

MO: Lack of structure, lack of strong policies, and lack of an enabling environment for ASM. The overall conditions of ASM as it is widely practiced with miners having little or no knowledge about the materials they mine, their pathway to the market, and the requirements to meet global standards also continues to be a challenge.

GG: What do you see as the biggest opportunities for the trade when businesses operate that way?



Arewa Medallion and Igwebuike Pendant Diamond set, from the Mina Stones Unity Collection, in 14-karat or 18-karat gold. (Image courtesy of Mina Stones)



Rough teal sapphires. (Image courtesy of Mina Stones)

MO: We believe everybody gets to benefit, from the miner in the pit to the person wearing the piece of jewelry. It is a more socially conscious way to engage in the gemstone sector that will, in the long term, benefit all parties.

GG: What challenges still remain for the businesses trying to establish responsible supply chains?

MO: Financial challenges as it is more expensive to establish a responsible supply chain.

GG: What do you wish more of the trade knew about ASM mining and working with ASM miners? How can we as an industry make change in the area?

MO: That responsible mining, sourcing, processing, and trading starts with knowing where the minerals come from. Understanding that the conditions in many of these areas are still so poor. There is also a huge knowledge gap with the miners. In many cases, these ASM miners are not just mining to sell; it's a means of survival for a lot of the people involved, so it will be a great move for more people to consider how to support and create long-term sustainable business in that aspect of the industry.

GG: What goals are you hoping to help achieve over the next few years when it comes to Nigeria's gem trade?

MO: To continue our work to support and grow the gemstone sector and expand our trade in other parts of the continent as well. ♦

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