



News

Showcasing Talent

The recent Instore Show, held August 11-12 in Rosemont, Illinois, was a hub of creativity and competition, with the return of the highly anticipated Mystery Box Challenge and Bench Pressure Challenge. These events, produced by MJSA and sponsored by Master Casting & Cad and Rio Grande, provided a platform for jewelers to demonstrate their skills and innovation.

The Mystery Box Challenge was a test of ingenuity and craftsmanship. In the weeks before the show, the participating designers received a “mystery box” of materials that they would have to turn into a piece of wearable jewelry. This year’s box contained sterling silver donated by Rio Grande in Albuquerque, New Mexico; an assortment of colored gemstones from Columbia Gem House in Vancouver, Washington; and a small collection of seashells. Additionally, the designers were given a story about a fictional client, which they had to use as inspiration to create a piece of jewelry incorporating all the materials.

Three talented jewelers stepped up to the challenge: Chris Ploof of Chris Ploof Designs in Leominster, Massachusetts; Susan Eisen of Susan Eisen Fine Jewelry & Watches in El Paso, Texas; and David Thorp of Mercurius Jewelry in Oakland, California. Each brought their unique perspective and skill set to the table, resulting in three distinct pieces that reflected their

interpretation of the materials and the client story.

The winner of the Mystery Box Challenge was determined by show attendees, who each were asked to vote for the design they liked best. After a close competition, it was Eisen who emerged victorious, impressing attendees with her ability to blend the disparate elements into a cohesive and stunning brooch.

Equally compelling was the Bench Pressure Challenge, a timed event that pushed participants to their limits. This challenge tasked jewelers with fabricating a pendant within a three-hour window. The pressure was on as the jewelers worked against the clock, demonstrating their precision, speed, and problem-solving abilities.

The competition featured three skilled participants: Jimmy Butts of Pine Bluff, Arkansas; Patrick Dobbs of Jamie Turner Designs in Austin, Texas; and Katie Manak of Dragonfly Jewelry Studio in St. Charles, Illinois. Unlike the Mystery Box Challenge, the Bench Pressure Challenge was judged by a panel of jewelers, who evaluated the participants on their technical execution and ability to work under pressure. Once again, it was returning champion Butts who claimed the top spot. His consistent performance and ability to deliver under pressure earned him the trophy, further cementing his status as a master jeweler.

These challenges not only celebrated the technical and creative talents within the jewelry industry but also highlighted the camaraderie and shared passion among the participants. Both Eisen and Butts received well-deserved praise for their outstanding achievements, adding another layer of excitement to the Instore Show. ♦