

Next, Carlton showed Rob the society's fine library of color-pictured mineral books. As he flipped through the pages, Rob was transfixed. But when Carlton let Rob view his own private collection of fine minerals, Rob's heart melted. The boy had never seen such beauty. Rob's fossils were all brown and grey. Carlton's minerals sparkled and gleamed the full spectrum of the rainbow. Rob was smitten. He soon became the Columbus Mineral Society's youngest member. In one afternoon, Rob's life had changed forever.

Four decades later, mineral collecting has become a billion-dollar industry. The world's very finest specimens now sell for seven and eight figures to serious collectors. In the early 1980's, though, rock and mineral collecting was just a niche hobby. It was seen as a way for retirees to while away their time. Mineral dealers tended to be older, and business was generally done at local fairs and markets or small retail stores. The mineral collecting hobby wasn't new per se. It had existed for over a hundred years, but the industry ran the way it had always run, and no one ever thought much of changing it. No one, that is, until Rob Lavinsky came along.

I asked Rob how he became the largest retail volume dealer of rare minerals in the world. Rob answered simply that he was overcome by the natural beauty of fine minerals. Rob holds a steadfast belief that if given access and education, anyone will fall in love with fine minerals, too. So how did a young teenager with no money begin to slowly transform an old person's hobby into a global billion-dollar industry? Rob Lavinsky studied the paths of others, then blazed his own.

Young Rob had already won the hearts of the elder members of the Columbus Mineral Society by speed reading their entire library of mineral books. To his mother's consternation, Rob's charm and persistence also convinced members to take him on several mineral-collecting field trips. He volunteered to work, helping members organize their displays. He joined them at mineral shows, to look and learn and wheel and deal. Just as he had with sandstone formations, Rob looked around, then chose the line he wanted to follow.

By the time Rob turned fourteen, he had become an official mineral dealer. He set up shows in Columbus and Cincinnati. Having observed the other dealers closely, Rob noticed inefficiencies in their businesses. Rob saw how inconsistently dealers priced minerals, and he used this to his advantage. When a dealer hired Rob to help him, Rob asked for store credit instead



Here Rob Lavinsky holds a gold specimen called "The Flame" from the Red Ridge Mine.