

Jeweler stays grounded



By Randy Cordova

With his sharply tailored suit, impeccably groomed hair and elegant jewelry, Alfredo Molina doesn't look like a fighter - or a jungle animal.

"I'm a rhinoceros," he says, with a playful intensity. "Rhinos have 2-inch-thick skin. They charge, they're persistent. . . . I know I'm a rhinoceros."

He didn't stumble upon this theory alone. He's a firm believer in Scott Alexander's *Rhinoceros Success*, a motivational book that likens the drive to succeed to being a rhinoceros.

"This book changed my life," Molina says. "I always knew I was a type double-A personality. I was always charging, and this made me realize why." That's one reason why he began collecting sculptures of rhinos, which decorate his lavish office on Camelback Road that shares space with Molina Fine Jewelers, his business that supplies jewels to the rich and famous. Next door is his boutique, still upscale, but open to the general public for walk-up business. It

takes an appointment to get past the guards to enter the west side of the building in which his office sits.

It's not a needless precaution. Inside rests a sapphire that has a \$1.2 million price tag hanging off it. There's a dazzling ruby, redder than the ripest cherry, which goes for a cool \$13.5 million. Most impressive is the Archduke Joseph diamond, the 12th largest white diamond in the world. At \$25 million, it's waiting for a buyer.

With such wealth and opulence floating around him, Molina, 41, seems remarkably grounded. He cuddles his year-old daughter, Madison, talking to her in both Spanish and English. He cuts a conversation short to take a call from his wife, Lisa, discussing what the two plan to wear for the evening.

He says there's a reason he's remained grounded and approachable: He realizes what a charmed life he's leading. Smuggled out of his native Cuba as an infant, he lived in France, then Chicago. It wasn't always an easy existence, and Molina had to be tough to survive.

"Think of this: I'm in Chicago and I speak only Spanish and French," he says. "You know how brutal kids can be when you're different? Well, imagine how different that is in Chicago."

His jeweler grandfather took him under his wing and taught Molina the family trade. He arrived in Phoenix in 1979 and opened his own shop in 1987, the year he bought a house.

"It was a very humble home, even though I spent a lot of money adding to it," he recalls. "But we stayed in that home until March of last year. I had employees that were living in considerably larger, nicer homes than we were, but you have to live beneath your means sometimes. You have to sacrifice to get ahead." Now that he's "made it," he enjoys his success,

something he learned from watching his grandfather.

"It's a different mind-set now from our parents' generations," he says. "I saw my grandfather deny himself everything during his lifetime. When he died, 70 cents of every dollar he made went to taxes.

"Now, people try to enjoy their lives today, while they're living it. When you have the opportunities, you need to take them."

Another lesson he learned from his grandfather: Remember to give something back. Molina is one of the Valley's highest-profile supporters of charities. Last year, his company gave away more than \$3 million to philanthropic causes.

"When we first arrived in Chicago, my father had one Cuban peso in his pocket," he says. "No money for groceries, no money for nothing. And we met another Cuban man, who took my father to the grocery store and proceeded to buy groceries for us. If it hadn't been for that man, who knows where we would be?

"I just believe in giving. I believe that I have been blessed, so I need to share the blessings, so to speak."

And people share with him. Last year, a friend gave Molina a gift of a fiberglass rhinoceros. It weighs 500 pounds and sits in the family's back yard. With his wife and his four children, Molina took a Christmas portrait with the rhino featured prominently in the photo. He takes this rhino business seriously.

"I'm a rhinoceros," he says again, smiling. Thanks to his conviction, it's easy to believe him.