

The Jewel Awards: A Great Leadership Tool for Groups

BY LAURIE ENDICOTT THOMAS
WITH FRANCK MOUNIER

In June 2020, with the Covid-19 pandemic surging, Franck Mounier took the top leadership role for his Local Group, Northern New Jersey Mensa. Bad timing notwithstanding, Franck began his work as Northern New Jersey's Local Secretary in search of some framework to help focus his group's energies and showcase its achievements. He found a roadmap in the Local Group Jewels, awards that recognize chapters' membership-related activities and program participation. Starting with its first year of entering the Jewels, Northern New Jersey went on to win consecutive Diamond Jewels, the award program's highest level of achievement. Under Franck's leadership, the chapter resumed the successful organization of its Regional Gathering after 30 years, BLAST!, and held the very first Young Mensans Regional Gathering, IGNYTE!, which gathered 176 participants from 22 chapters.

Laurie Endicott Thomas, a professional writer and Northern New Jersey Mensa member, recently interviewed Franck about the awards and how they've helped not only recognize his Local Group's success but contribute to it.

LAURIE ENDICOTT THOMAS: How do the Local Group Jewels work?

FRANCK MOUNIER: To apply for a Jewel award, a Local Group simply documents



the activities that they do throughout the Mensa fiscal year, which is April 1 through March 31. For example, Local Groups get some points for doing administrative tasks on time (such as submitting their annual financial report). They can also get points for publishing a newsletter, holding Leadership Development Workshops, and hosting various kinds of events for members (Mensa Cares®, CultureQuest®, Mensa Testing Day, etc.). Local Groups also get points for gaining new members and retaining existing ones. Northern New Jersey Mensa is in Class II (400 to 1,099 members), so we would need 160 points to win an Emerald, 175 to win a Sapphire, and 190 to win a Ruby. The chapter with the highest number of points in its size class wins the Diamond award.

LET: What did Northern New Jersey Mensa's ExComm members think of this idea?

FM: I explained the Jewel awards program at the next ExComm meeting, which happened to be the meeting where we started developing our yearly strategic

plan. Everyone was immediately enthusiastic. I asked, "Which Jewel should we target?" Almost immediately, someone said, "Diamond, of course. Let's aim for the best!" Everyone agreed instantly.

LET: Aiming for the Diamond Jewel on your first attempt sounds ambitious. Did you think victory was possible?

FM: Actually, I thought that it was a stretch — a big one. We had never competed before, and we were a chapter that had just begun a process of rejuvenation. Also, we had only 600 members, which meant that we were at the low end of our size class. We would be competing with other Local Groups with nearly twice as many members. But as we studied the Jewels scoring system, we realized that we would be earning points for doing the things that we should be doing anyway: things that would make us a high-functioning chapter. It's nice to score points, but our real objective is to create a dynamic chapter. So, we made sure that the items that would earn us points toward a Jewel award were incorporated into our strategic plan.

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FRANCK MOUNIER is the President/LocSec of Northern New Jersey Mensa and was recently elected RVC 1. He is a medical doctor with an MBA and was an executive leader in the pharmaceutical industry. He lived and worked in different cultural environments in the U.S., Europe, Japan, and Africa.



Northern New Jersey Mensa's first gathering for youth, IGNYTE!, was held in November (left), drawing 176 attendees. Former LocSec Franck Mounier (below) said the group also found success with its first Regional Gathering in 30 years, BLAST!



of the four pillars of our 2024 strategic plan. The ExComm enthusiastically agreed.

LET: What was in the strategic plan?

FM: Basically, we made a list of things to do, and we did the things on our list. We also reached out to the membership. We used our monthly newsletter, *IMprint*, to explain the Jewel scoring system and report our current score monthly. We told our members how they could help us earn even more points (becoming proctors, writing articles for the newsletter, attending a Leadership Development Workshop, etc.). Every point matters. Our members rose to the challenge. We won the Diamond award in 2022 and again in 2023. By September of 2023, we were already at the Ruby award level for 2024.

LET: How do Northern New Jersey Mensa members feel about these awards?

FM: Before we won the first award, our annual membership survey found that only 37 percent of respondents had heard of the Jewel awards. This is understandable, given that our Local Group had never taken part before. Yet the following year, the annual survey found that 58 percent of respondents knew about the Jewel awards, and 40 percent were proud that we had won the Diamond Jewel. Participants at our September 2023 Leadership Development Workshop suggested "maintain our Diamond status" as one

LET: What does the Diamond Jewel mean for the membership?

FM: We earned points toward our Diamond Jewels by doing things that deliver real value to our membership. In August of 2020 (still in the depths of the Covid-19 pandemic), we held a virtual Regional Gathering. Then in January 2023, we had the first in-person Regional Gathering that Northern New Jersey Mensa had held in 30 years, BLAST! We now have a weekly online French Conversation group led by our Kathy Stein-Smith, who is a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques, which is a high honor bestowed by the French Republic. Our Young Mensans group is growing rapidly, and we held our first IGNYTE! Regional Gathering for Young Mensans in November, at Drew University in Madison, N.J. It featured a weekend full of activities for three age groups (6-9, 10-13, 14-17), with a track for the parents. We hosted 176 participants, 76 Young Mensans and 100 adults (exactly) from 22 chapters, and received overwhelmingly positive feedback. We have also been holding various smaller events, such as game nights, karaoke nights, dinners, etc. In 2022 and 2023, we also took part in the Mensa Cares initiatives, which are community service events held every April. Also, our annual picnic is more popular than ever.

LET: How has the Local Group Jewels award program helped Northern New Jersey Mensa?

FM: The Jewels help you focus your Local Group's efforts on the activities that will benefit the Local Group and its membership, as well as benefiting Mensa in general. Let me give some concrete examples. Perhaps our biggest points contributor is a Young Mensan named Rohan Raghu, who edits our *IMprint* newsletter. We also got a lot of points for developing our testing program. At first, I was the only Test Proctor. However, our Testing Coordinator, Richard Schaeffer, developed four new sites for testing, and we now have four new proctors, with another about to be approved. Greg Hoffman has been a great leader for our successful Mensa *Cares* events, which serve the community while adding to our point count. Kimberly Strickland did such a great job as our Local Group's membership officer that she was recruited to serve as the membership officer of American Mensa's board of directors. She also ran a standalone leadership development workshop that drew a large group of members. Nisha Zoeller served as our scholarship chair for the Mensa Scholarship program. (You can read the winning essays in the July 2023 issue of *IMprint*.) We are also getting valuable support from the parents of Young Mensans, including our YM parent advisors, Swathi Jayanth and Graham Sy. In fact, so many people have done so much work that I don't have space to mention them all here.

LET: Can you sum this up in a few bullet points?

FM: The Local Group Jewels award program is a great leadership tool that was created by intelligent and thoughtful people at the national level. It makes our organizational work feel like a game.

It helped us imagine what is possible.

It helped us build enthusiasm and direct our energy.

The point count is a simple metric that helps members assess our progress.

The prospect of earning more points has encouraged our ExComm and many members to go the extra mile for the membership and the community. 🏆