The Oral History Library
of
The Fashion Institute of Technology

NORMAN AXELROD

The Bloomingdale Interviews
by Estelle Ellis
Q. Well, first of all, tell me about how you got here.
A. Okay. How did I get here? I worked...
Q. First of all, please introduce yourself for the tape.
A. I am Norman Axelrod. I am a senior vice president and general merchandise manager for Bloomingdale's. I have worked for Bloomingdale's since I graduated business school, and have worked 11 years that makes a Bloomingdale's, from trainee straight through to senior vice president. So, I have lived in this company, with Marvin, for those 11 years.
Q. Marvelous. Right from school. Where did you go to school?
A. I finished my graduated degree at NYU, and one summer... (interruption)... Anyhow...And I came to Bloomingdale's...
Q. You came from NYU. What did you get a degree in?
A. In finance and marketing. An MBA. And I worked one summer, right before graduating, here. At that time for someone named Jim "Shelf," (?) who went on to become president. And he started here from trainee assistant to branch manager to buyer, divisional, vice president, senior vice president, whatever vice presidential titles they give you. But, that's
Q. And have you stayed in this area? In this particular area?
A. No. I now merchandise...
Q. How many classifications do you cover?
A. I have a very strange classification: I merchandise hardgoods, I merchandise intimate apparel, unearthed by some of the ready-to-wear, and "Mike Morgan's" (?) swimwear. So you will find it is a very unique combination that sort of enables me to get a broad exposure of the business. But I grew up more in the hardgoods area than the softgoods area.

Q. A lot of people have said to me that the test of whether or not you can make it comes early on when you come here; that there are some people who have the stamina and others who don't.
A. We have had a very high turnover in the early years, and we attract a lot of young people who don't necessarily understand the demands of the business or the real world, as someone might say. But, yes, I think that is a very true statement. I think a lot is discerned very quickly, especially when it comes to some of the graduate degrees. We hire a lot of people right from Harvard and I interview a lot of people from Columbia and the top business schools. And very quickly on there tend to be decisions that you can make as to how to move someone's career and guide them through, and whether retailing is the right career for
Q. Did Marvin interact with you right from the beginning? When did you first encounter Marvin?
A. I couldn't say in a real sense... You know, it's very hard for me to answer the question. As an assistant buyer, you don't interact with who's the president or the chairman of the board. At that time, Larry Blackman was the chairman and Marvin was the president; or, the chief merchant, let's put it that way. There's so many layers between you and them. But Marvin, in his energy, gets out to visit every store and gets out to visit... Once you're in a branch store and away from just the assistant buyer role (which is the second step in a retailing career), you get in contact with whoever is the president or the chairman--chief merchant--and that would be the first couple of times. However, since I was hired for the summer I interviewed with him that summer...

Q. Oh, you did. You interviewed for a summer job?
A. Well, they only hire two people. It's a very strange, funny story, but when I came in... I had sent them an application, with my resume and a cover letter saying I wanted a summer job. I was interested in retailing as a career, I was looking for a summer job. And executive placement didn't read my cover letter, they just looked at the resume, and in the middle of my interview they said, "Well, you can start full time," and I said, "No, this is for the summer. Didn't you read my cover letter?" And they said, "Well,
thank you. You've now wasted my day. That's why you write cover notes with these things." So they said, "Maybe we should hire for the summer, and they decided they would hire me and one other friend (who happened to be(?). . . ), and I interviewed with him, because they were only hiring one or two people and I reported at that time to a senior... to an executive vice president, and so at the beginning and at the end of the summer, it was always a touch-base with Marvin.

Q. What was the nature of the summer?
A. It was to expose me into Bloomingdale's. As we continue to do. We hire a few summer people every year to try to give them exposure to the company, with the hope that we can attract them...

Q. Uh huh. To stay...
A. ...and after they finish graduate school they'll come back. These are candidates who are very serious about retailing. This is not someone who's really trying to search out whether they really want retailing, but if you're going to hire one or two people, everyone that we interview, from every business school for a summer job, it gets down to a selective one or two.

Q. And you were one...or two.
A. I was the first one.

Q. Good.
A. It just turned out they didn't read my cover letter.
Right? Or I probably wouldn't be at Bloomingdale's.

Q. Tell me a little bit about what you remember as your first connection with Marvin. Do you have a recall of what your first encounter was?

A. You know, you're asking a very...a question when I was probably 22 years old...Because my recollection then, it's an awesome one. You're asking, you know, somebody who is starting at Bloomingdale's...

Q. What do you remember? Do you remember meeting... What was his job?

A. He was president.

Q. He was president already.

A. He was president already, and here I am, coming in from...Making up graduate school, studying some forms of marketing and retailing...

Q. You were awed by him.

A. And you...Sure...And you have to be awed by the idea that here is somebody who was molding Bloomingdale's into what at that point already existed as a leading retailing image. It was not one where you might say, 25 years ago, he was involved in making that image. At this...We go back 11 years...He was refining what had already been an upscale, very high profile image. And I think the thing is that as you get to know Marvin, you're awed by his energy and his own passion for his business; that there aren't too many people in any field who have both the stamina and a genuine
passion for what they're doing, which you can see in him.

Q. Give me a sense of some of the business trips you've taken with him in the last few years and what they've been like for you. Also, a sense of the mission...

A. I can remember, at a lot of different levels, in fact. I just had lunch today with him and one of the new owners of Warnerco, Linda Wachner, (?) who is a good personal friend whom he hasn't seen in a year since she's really bought the company. And we sit down to lunch, and she has brought representatives of the Dior men's line and of the women's line and of the intimate apparel line and the swimwear line, so there are five or six chief people. And Marvin is able to converse with each one of them on a product level, of what their successes and what their opportunities are...

Free flow, without...

Q. Without homework.

A. Just because he has that kind of personal involvement, down to an item, down to the merchandise level. He is a very hands-on merchant, and knows what is happening in his business. It is not a theoretical, policy-making position; he's a very hands-on merchant. From that kind of lunch...

I can remember the very first lunch I had, when I was a buyer, working in Paris, and I had been away...This was the very end of my trip...I was away, I had worked 27 of 28 days on this trip, to Europe. I had gone to Germany, to France, Italy, and I was exhausted. I was really tired,
and this was my last day and I went out to dinner because my flight was leaving Paris at 12:00 the next day--on a Sunday. I was going home on a Sunday--And I get a note in my box when I got back from dinner that night which said, "Meet me at 7:00 in the morning to review your trip." This was Sunday morning, 7:00. And I had gone out to dinner late and obviously had a good time. It was the last day of my whole trip. And when I got back to my hotel there is this letter saying, "Please meet me at 7:00 for breakfast so you can explain to me how successful or what you have accomplished on the trip." But....That's how serious he is about his time and...

Q. And your time.
A. And everyone's involvement. He's...I laughed about that, because I still remember trying to get up to make that meeting.

Q. Tell me a little bit about how this has affected you in terms of executive role modeling. Does it shape your career?
A. Yes, and I don't think everything's always positive. I think if everyone always said, "Oh, gee, Marvin is the perfect role model to play, I don't think they'd be giving you a fair indication that Marvin, like anybody, has things he does better and things that I think he doesn't do as well as everybody else. But, in terms of being a leader, there isn't anybody who has, as I've said before on this tape, and in
this discussion, there's a respect for him as a merchant that carries through to vendors, to other retailers outside and certainly to the respect he commands inside. That doesn't mean that his management style is perhaps the most modern, the most open, flexible. It's a type of style that works for him and any good person you try to learn from, you're going to take from his successes and some of his failures, you learn from both of those. But he'd be very proud to tell you he's got 15...I think Barbara Bass was his fifteenth person that he has worked with he's made a principal in...

Q. He didn't tell me that. Now say that again.
A. I believe Barbara is the fifteenth individual who's worked directly for Marvin and has been promoted to principal merchant in a division of Federated.

Q. Isn't that fantastic.
A. And..It is. I said...Very clearly, if you want an opportunity to work with one of the great merchants, that's Marvin. You go back and say there are other things he doesn't do as well, and yeah, there are things...

Q. Like what?
A. I think he'd say he'd like to be able to spend more time with people on a personal level and working on some of those. Not that he doesn't try to spend some. He doesn't have a high tolerance sometimes. He's not easy to challenge, even ...He's not easy. He's a very demanding individual in that sense.
Q. But he's a quick study?
A. I don't think so.
Q. No?
A. I think he's... He's very consistent though. I think Marvin is very, very consistent. He'll be as tough with anyone as anybody else. He treats everyone fairly. Even if you have a business that's not as hot as another business at the time. But, no, I don't think Marvin's a quick study. I think you know where he's coming from.
Q. Well, maybe we mean different things when we say quick study. How do you translate quick study?
A. Well you asked me it.
Q. When I say quick study, I mean someone who quickly absorbs information that you give him about what's going on.
A. He's worked at it as a career. No, it's not... Most subjects that you bring him are not new subjects. It might be a new twist on the subject. But he's studied. He's studied. This is a life...
Q. This is his life.
A. This is his life, as you're... If you want to talk about the men's business, or the women's business, or the rug business, or the lamp business, and he's knowledgeable enough about each one of those businesses. Different than many other people with a high turnover. I come from an area... I grew up as a buyer in what they call the domestics area
and I was a towel buyer. That was my first buying job. There were three other domestics buyers at that time—the sheet buyer (who retired 2-3 years ago, who retired after 51 years with Bloomingdale's and was 82 years old); the table linen buyer, (who is still with us and today is in India, who is 77 years old, been with the company 36 years), and then there was the comforter buyer (who was also with Bloomingdale's...who's 60 years old, who's been with Bloomingdale's 27), and then there was me, who was 24, and with the company a year.

Q. What a combination.
A. So you had all those, and then their boss was Lester Gribetz, whom you talked to, who's here 20 years, and Marvin, who's here 25 years or so. Twenty-eight years. But there has been that kind of consistency in management, and not the kind of turnover that's associated with many other companies, that has made some of these areas great. If you keep having turnover, changes in philosophy, it's very different. Marvin's been able to keep the top notch people.

Q. What is the mission?
A. At Bloomingdale's?
Q. Yes. What is the mission? As you hear it from him?
A. I don't just hear it. I can recall a meeting we had in Montauk with a consulting group which was to write a Bloomingdale mission statement. And...I'm sure Marvin would share that with you. There's a book somewhere where we all
went out for a long weekend to make sure all our long range philosophies were all clear. And I couldn't quote it, but there's a merchandise distinction and excitement that we, as a mission statement, say that we've got to bring to Bloomingdale's to market, to upscale, affluent customers. I think the clearest thing Bloomingdale's has as an image is that Marvin absolutely insists on maintaining, and that makes it easy for us to go into the markets. That makes it easy for us to open up an airport shop. It makes it easy to develop a mail and phone order business. It has credibility in many instances, in all these branches of retailing that we've gone into. A reflection of that and a credibility that we've been able to...

Q. It also seeks its customer wherever you go.
A. Very clear. We have an absolutely...I think...
Q. You've got a constituency.
A. Absolutely. And I'll give him...As I said, there are a handful of people who've been here 20 years or more who have made that possible. And you can't make that in one week. And whether...I think people will talk to and say, okay, the country promotions. What are the things that Marvin brought to, within the last ten years, to this company. You can talk about some of the people he's promoted, whether it be a Steinberg or whether it be a Barbara Bass or whoever else that he's worked with.

You talk about the country promotions which have
been...I guess started about 12 years ago or so. I don't remember the first one, but I think we did an Israeli promotion, and we've done more than one India. But the China promotion has been the most successful, and his role on the buying trips...Marvin spends a lot of time with the governments and looking at these people. You don't do a fortnight in one store. We translate these to all stores...

Marvin likes to think big. He doesn't like to think small on any scale. He's certainly willing to take the risks associated with the successes that he's had.

Q. Your next promotion is the South China Seas.
A. South China Seas. April 7th.

Q. And that's part of that whole Pan-Pacific explosion kind of thing.

A. It started a couple of years ago. We are able to tell you what we would do over the next two years, for promotions. And the whole concept of promotion is to make sure that we have an appeal that's different. Everybody can compete on the same items on a price basis. That's not necessarily successful. So we say, okay, what can we bring as an excitement to our customers that will make the store special and will drag people in.

One of the big things that...When you're young, is the growth of the company. And you look at the China...event...And we took a lot of selling space away for some of the displays of the imperial robes, which had never been
outside of China before. It was brilliant, because people came to see those, came into the store, almost as a museum. Bloomingdale's had a section that wasn't just created for jamming in merchandise. To take that risk—giving up square footage for an art exhibit, or anything else—and then translating that into a sale. Just by having customers in your store. It's different than what most other people would do.

Q. It's breakthrough thinking.
A. In that time it was.
Q. Yes, it was.
A. And you can see it in...If you shop in some of the Japanese stores, in Japan, today, they might have a whole floor devoted to an exhibit today.

Q. Exactly.
A. They're brilliant merchants too, but the whole concept, in that...of actually making Bloomingdale's cultural, as opposed to just in merchandising...

Q. Well, they've been shopping an experience.
A. Totally.

Q. Talk to me about the man. What do you know about him as a man?
A. Let's put it this way: Last year I went skiing with him. And, as he opened his house in Utah, I happened to be out there at the same time so we spent some time together, skiing. Certainly Lee has a very high profile in this company, as his daughter works here and his son's in the
business. He attempts to know his family.

Q. I didn't know his daughter worked here. Where does his daughter work?
A. His daughter is a hosiery buyer. His daughter works for Bloomingdale's. But, I wouldn't be a fair one to tell you about him as a family man and stuff...I don't...Our relationship has been mostly professional.

Q. I see.
A. You can probably talk to other people who have had more contact with him over the years. I've grown up from assistant buyer...As assistant buyer, you know him only as the leader of the company, and only in a professional sense, and...I guess it's now a year and a half or two years that I'm working directly reporting to him.

Q. What stands out, in those two years? What one thing stands out clear? Vis a vis...
A. Marvin has his own management style. He's willing to give you total responsibility and wants you to make decisions in your responsibility; that he is not one who is going to make every decision for you. And what stands out is that he's willing to give that responsibility, and whatever time you need to help support those decisions. But he wants you to be the decision maker. He wants you to...His management style allows somebody to grow in their position...

Q. Even though he has a very fair view of where he wants you to go.
A. Absolutely.
Q. In other words, he creates the guidelines and lets you walk in your own style.
A. Well, look...Yes and no. There are times he does and there are times he doesn't. With my areas of responsibility, I think he has. If he tries to do that with some of the designers, where some of the relationships mean something more, he might have more of a say. In my areas, I've been surprised with the latitudes that he's given me. The information and the sense that he doesn't have to be just a numerical man. I think he is such...What strikes me is that no matter what he does, he's a merchant. And he's not just a banker, as some people in his position tend to be. He doesn't just look at numbers and talk about numbers. He always concentrates on the merchandise.
Q. That's wonderful.
A. It's hard to do today.
Q. You bet it is.
A. The bigger the company gets, the further away, obviously, management gets from the actual customer and from the merchandise. And I think Marvin has made it his point to stay very much in tune with the merchandise and the customers have...It's not just a high profile, with governments and all the parties and everything else. He's very much a merchant and in tune with merchandise. It's not just, okay, how much do you have?
Q. That's wonderful.
A. And that's, I think, been a reflection...I worked for Lester Gribetz for ten years. It's the kind of reflection that. Lester is totally a merchant. He's not just a numbers man.
Q. And very serious and very on balance.
A. Marvin likes that, also, in people. I think everybody should have other interests. The cultural intersts, and that's also something that's new to me in this position. The times that we all share New York community aspects, whether it's fund raising events that we all believe in and that Bloomingdale's supports, or just being part of the cultural events that go on in the city.
Q. Are you familiar with the Fashion Institute of Technology?
A. Sure.
Q. How familiar? Have you ever hired anyone from the school?
A. By name, I couldn't tell you. By resume, 100%. I think that we must see 3-4-5 among the people that I interview who have had some kind of teaching...
Q. When was the last time you were down?
A. Oh, probably a year, two years ago.
Q. You ought to go down and see the new show, on the three women. Have you heard about it?
A. No, I haven't.
Q. One on It's fabulous.
A. Gillian Thompson, whom I think you also know, whom I worked with, also is very involved in some of the teachings down there. There have been classes... Isn't (?) . . also down there?
Q. Yes. They help with the curriculum.
A. Yeah. Loeb, is that his name? One of the professors?
Q. I'm not sure.
A. Because twice we were asked if I could help establish a fund for scholarships, and I was able, in my end--domestics--to get some money together to help foster some of the scholarships for some people there. I've also been asked, and not done, to teach a class with Lester on creative merchandising.
Q. It would be wonderful if you did.
A. I'm sure you're right.
Q. We have to involve you in the school. It's really a very exciting place. Very exciting. You know they're now giving a master's program in conservation. If you haven't really been... walked through the school recently, you haven't...
A. Guilty as charged, and I haven't been there.
Q. Okay. No more. No more guilt.
A. I will tell you that...
Q. We're going to get you all down there. We want to involve you. And the school is wonderful.
A. I think we should.
Q. And he's getting this honor, as you know.
A. Sure...
Q. In May...June...
A. You've got a list of people...You've got five or six..But that number doesn't mean anything. You have that few ... The retailing team of the decade, of the last 10-20 years, and (?) .... is certainly one of them, and Marvin Traub is certainly one of them. And there are people who run vaguely telling organizations who aren't, per se, merchants. Both of those two are really involved in the merchandise and merchandising...
Q. That's right.
A. And you can get...And you'll have a few more people, but they're a handful. I mean, when you ask about...Especially if you ask about department store retailing, who are the key people...
Q. Forget it.
A. I think you'll hear those two names moreso. You'll have the chairman of the board of Federated...
Q. Dayton Hudson. Dayton Hudson.
A. Mackey. And there's a fellow, "Bauxells," (?) who reports to Mackey, who you can really talk about, who worked with Dayton Hudson...But if you ask retailers who the chairman of the board of Federated is, some of them would probably say Marvin Traub, because they don't really know
that it's Howard Goldsmith (?). But Howard doesn't have
the kind of exposure or...
Q. He doesn't have that high a profile, nor has he
sought it out.
A. I'm not saying.....It's not a positive or a
negative statement. It's just that when you think of the
high profile that Marvin and, certainly, that Ed have, both
of them being honored. And who was the third?
Q. Claiborne. Her organization. We wanted the four
people...We wanted to establish the fact that the school
was more than a school for design; that it was for marketing,
that it was for manufacturing, that it was for production.
A. And in the last ten years, you're talking genius.
Q. You're talking genius.
A. So you certainly have...
Q. You're going to be there that night I hope.
A. I will be there.
Q. Good. Thank you very much.
A. Okay.
Q. I think so. I think we're just about finished...
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT OF THE
FASHION INDUSTRIES

Transcripts housed in Special Collections:

1. No photocopying without written permission from the oral author or his designee. The Director of the Library will furnish addresses; the reader must write for permissions.

2. Written permission is needed to cite or quote from a transcript for publication. The user must send the Library Director the pertinent pages of final draft; the Director will assist in obtaining the final permission. The form of citation normally used is: "The Reminiscences of __________, (dates), pages ______, in the Oral History Collection of The Fashion Institute of Technology." No fees will be charged for published use. User is asked to furnish Oral History Program with a copy of the published work.

3. In order to see PERMISSION REQUIRED or CLOSED memoirs, the reader must obtain the written permission of the oral author or his designee. Contact the Library Director for addresses. The reader writes for permissions. Written permission if obtained must be presented when the reader visits.

4. TAPES
If a reader would like to hear a sample of a tape, he must contact the Library Director, who will screen the portions to be heard. No tapes will be heard in their entirety.