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DENNIS GARRO

The Bloomingdale Interviews
by Estelle Ellis
Q. Meeting with Dennis Garro of Bloomingdale's...
A. Well, I have...I joined Bloomingdale's about a year and a half ago, almost two years, in April, and came to Bloomingdale's from Macy's in San Francisco. I had spent nine years of my career in that store.

Q. Macy's San Francisco?
A. Yes. And before that I was with the Macy organization in Kansas City for a brief period of time (a year and a half), and really began my career at A&S back in 1970.

Q. So it was a Federated beginning, a switch to Macy's...
a. For ten years, and then back to Federated. Really, when I began, I began in the men's area at A&S, and when I joined the Macy corporation out in California I was at divisional men's and spent a good deal of my divisional merchandise career as a men's divisional. And then I spent a couple of years, three years, in ready-to-wear. And my last job before leaving Macy's California to come to Bloomingdale's was as a regional director of stores. And I was in that position for about a year and a half, and got a call, found the challenge incredibly interesting, incredibly challenging...

Q. Would you talk to the difference...I mean, every business has its own culture, as we know. And without being pretentious about it, there is a Bloomingdale culture and there
is a Macy culture. Tell me what you think is the unique dimension of this culture.

A. Well, in comparing the cultures, in terms of Macy's vs. Bloomingdale's, you're really also comparing, in my case, the difference of Macy's California (obviously in California) vs. Bloomingdale's in New York. So it's not only a different type of a culture but it's also a different lifestyle, because there is California vs. New York.

Q. Geography.

A. Geography also. The workings, the dynamics of both stores to some extent were similar, because they had similar leaders. Phil Schwann in California and Marvin Traub at Bloomingdale's in New York. When I say similar, I mean very, very merchant-driven people.

Q. Merchant-driven.

A. Yes. Very merchant-driven.

Q. Define merchant-driven for me.

A. More ultimately involved with the merchandise of the store, the conceptual parts of the business. How their stores are defined. Being very, very involved with the merchants in the store. Having very strong points of view about what their visions of the store should be. And things changed in California. That particular chairman moved on to something else and...

Q. He went where?

A. He went out on his own.

Q. That's what I thought. He's now in venture.
A. Correct. And I always have aspired to people who were very creative, very excitable, very merchandise driven.
Q. It's interesting that you say merchandise driven, when the whole beat right now is market or consumer driven. Do you differentiate between merchandise driven and consumer driven?
A. No, when I say merchandise I really...Merchandise, meaning what does the consumer want? And what the consumer wants is merchandise driven.
Q. I see.
A. So it is consumer marketing driven both...
Q. I'm glad I asked.
A. Both were strong in that...Yes...Now, I say...Really, the definition...The nomenclature of merchandise vs. operations is really, you know, with the two kind main separations, and what I'm saying is that both people are what...I didn't know Marvin at the time, I just knew of him, but when Phil left that store, I really had a sense that I, you know, I always knew I gravitated more toward a leader that was more involved in the merchandising and the people and the merchandise part of the store. So I...That, in conjunction with the fact that I got a call to come and speak to Marvin Traub because there was a general merchandising job open in the men's area and in the kids' areas, I got very excited about it, and in about an hour and a half I was pretty enamored and pretty taken aback at how visionary he was...
Q. Can you recall that conversation? What did he tell you that day—in that hour's conversation—that you remember.

A. What can I recall? Well....

Q. A lot of it was probably...Well, at that time he really wasn't even discussin salary. He was really interviewing people. And I guess probably the thing that probably stands out most in my mind were a lot of the questions he asked me (he gave me a chance to talk a lot), it really was to talk about where the men's business had come, in his estimation, where he was seeing it going, and the kind of individual that he really wanted to run it. He pretty much painted the picture as to where he thought the opportunities were, and wanted to hear what made me tick. I came back for a second interview, and was made a job offer. By then I had had a chance at least to look a little more at the store, the assortments. Obviously not the people, but I recognized that it was a sensational opportunity and I got the feeling that Marvin Traub was really going to get behind the whole building of the men's and the kids' businesses. And that that would be great support...

Q. And so you've been here for a year and a half. What has been the critical turning point for you here, in terms of what you've wanted to accomplish in this year and a half.

A. The critical turning point I really believe was the culmination of a lot of...Obviously a lot of hard work, never say die, and really, maybe ultimately, getting the correct people in the positions...
Q. Staffing up?
A. Correct.

Q. That was one of the first objectives?
A. Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q. What kinds of people were you looking for, or was he looking for?
A. That I was looking for? People who were bright, intelligent, "tasty," and that did not only accept what was the rule of the past. Basically people who didn't have blinders on. And that's basically what Marvin was looking for also. He knew a change had to come.

Q. What is the change that's coming in the menswear market do you feel?
A. Well, I guess probably the best way to summarize it is to really talk about bringing the men's division, in the quality aspect and the style aspect of the business up to the standards of what the rest of the store... Or the definition, I should say, of the character of the rest of the store really is. And, you know, to be definitive about it is really upgrading a lot of the quality of the programs, our own programs, putting the correct brands in here, and really training the individual merchants--the buyers, the associates, the divisionals--that the ultimate thing is that what they really should be building is quality and style.

Q. Talk about style, as you think, really, as a reflection of why it has been a Bloomingdale (shall we say) perception
of character reading of the store, but as Marvin defined style to you.
A. As Marvin...
Q. Has he ever talked to you about style?
A. Well...Yes...I mean, style is...You know, it's kind of a broad based term. There are lots of different types of style when you get into defining it as fashion, or lifestyle I should say. There's a traditional lifestyle, there's a contemporary lifestyle, there's an updated lifestyle. And...
Q. Is Bloomingdale's interested in all of those?
A. Absolutely.
Q. So you're interested in a diverse lifestyle.
A. Sure.
Q. Traditional, contemporary and cutting edge.
A. Contemporary, or maybe I should say advanced. Advanced/cutting edge and updated, where you take kind of mainstream wardrobes and really update them, so it's a little bit forward but not exactly advanced. And then, of course, there's traditional. And what it really comes down to is putting a percentage as to what we believe we really should...
Q. It's the percentages that change, don't-you think?
A. Absolutely.
Q. And it's moving more towards...?
A. Well, it's moving away from the mainstream and more towards an updated lifestyle. There's always that percent of traditional, which we...We were strong, I assume, at one
point in time (well before I was part of the organization), and we're looking to capture some of them back. The man believes in a very, very quality oriented merchandise without a lot of hype to it.

Q. I was going to say, when does a moment in time in which tradition is being really discovered by a whole new generation, witness what Ralph Lauren is able to do in re-creating a storybook environment which says we're all English gentry living in the turn of the 19th century or the 18th century. When does that become.....

A. Fashion?

Q. .....updated. Do you see what I'm saying?

A. Yes.

Q. And when does it remain traditional mainstream?

A. I think that what happens is that because you see a lot of cycles. Men's businesses and cycles are just like ready-to-wear, apparel, accessories, etc., and right now it's defining...How does that all happen...Right now it's Ralph's time. He's very much...

Q. But it's been his time for so long now.

A. A couple years now.

Q. Yes. Do you think that that hunger for that country squire gentry...

A. See, I think it's more than just that....

Q. What is it?

A. Well, if you look at Ralph, a lot of his merchandise
is not English gentry. A lot of his merchandise is mainstream.

Q. As L.L. Beane.

A. Yes. It's Lyle shirts, it's Interlock shirts, it's basic piquet. What I think you really see in Ralph is that a comfort from the consumer, knowing that here is this great name, this great purveyor of fashion who puts his stamp of approv--his label, his little polo pony on the chest--and they feel good about wearing this merchandise.

Q. How does that differ from the Brooks Brothers?

A. I think Ralph is much broader than the Brooks Brothers. I think the Brooks Brothers culture is one of more... There aren't as many Brooks Brothers customers I don't be-lieve today's... I believe Ralph is going this way in terms of acceptance and I think there's less of the Brooks Brothers culture.

Q. But in terms of style...

A. Style?

Q. In terms of content. When you talk in terms of certain traditional, fundamental things, what's the difference?

A. Ralph changes every year. He'll change his color palettes, he'll change his stock, he'll change the styles that he does. Brooks doesn't change. I mean, Ralph is more like, to me more like Paul Stuart than Brooks Brothers. In terms of the quality.

Q. Can we now talk a little bit about Marvin. The work that you do with him, your encounters with him. What do you
think sets him apart? What do you think makes the difference in him as a retail leader?

A. Well, I guess I would probably wind up saying the same thing that most everybody else would say...

Q. Say it your way, though.

A. The man is incredibly driven. Absolutely driven by a thirst and a desire to excel at everything he does best, and he expects the people around him to do that. He drives himself. You sometimes think how can you give more than you're giving, then you look and he's doing the same thing. So he really inspires you by his own personal drive that he really imposes on himself.

What has it done for me? It...I guess the thing that in my own personal career, in my own personal life, that is probably...In my own personal life I have always been driven by the fact of the same kind of desire to never say die; to really kind of raise the 'bar constantly. And I've always tried to do the same thing with my people. There's very few people that I've come across in my career (and also my personal life) who have really had the same outlook and that's why...

Q. Do you feel that this is not necessarily the psychological reading of your generation? In other words, we've come through a period (you're a part of that post-war baby boom--I think I'm reading your age right)...

A. Yes.

Q. ...that went through a whole period where the phrase
was "Is that all there is?" and there was a laid back attitude of "life is fuller, it's richer, I'm not living to work, I'm working to live." So that it has really reduced the number of people who have that kind of mission, wouldn't you say?

A. I guess so. I guess the only way that I read it...

Yes, I was definitely, I am part of the baby boom. I guess the only way I can read it is to look at my personal friends and acquaintances, etc., and everybody that I'm mostly concerned with have the same feeling that I have: They personally put their... The only way I can describe it is, they continue to raise the ladder in terms of their own personal challenge. No matter what their careers were.

All I know is that the people I've worked with, and they have been very few, I either worked for directly or worked for indirectly, as part of an organization, there have been very, very few like the Phil Schanns and Marvin Traubs that know how to absorb themselves and how to really turn questions around, continue to challenge themselves and, consequently, their subordinates, into looking at every which way is going to make a better store. And that's what I've really gotten from Marvin. I walk in here sometimes and suddenly there's a challenge that comes at you, that you think you have figured out, and suddenly there's a new way...

Q. Tell me some of them. Tell me some of the challenges you've faced in your field.
A. Whew...A challenge I faced this past year. Well, I guess a lot of them were really somewhat people directed and people related, making sure that the right people...Not just people that...I said people...I'm talking merchants in particular positions...But to be sure that the right person, all the ingredients, personnel wise--intelligence, taste level, etc.--are all in the right positions.

Q. Casting them.

A. Casting them. The other challenge, really, from Marvin--very distinctly and very strongly and very appropriately--is, you know, balancing that taste level--that style, so to speak, in terms of the merchandise on the floor--and the drama of that merchandise on the floor. Of course, the money--the gross margin implications--Marvin has got a great sense of watching to see that there's a balance everywhere; that, you know, if the challenges, the esoterica, the finesse of a particular business, to make sure that you don't go too far into that direction and then miss the basic money making part of it. And then if you go too far into the basic money-making, he'll challenge the style and fashion--the concept--of...Where are you going with the total? So he-really keeps things in balance very well. And that's one of this greatest challenges.

Q. I would say that is the delicate balance. That's the fragile balance. Particularly now, in the menswear area, where there have been, historically, not too many people who
have wanted to reach out and move in new directions. Do you find that the industry, as a whole, is now awakening to what the challenge is? In terms of...

A. I wouldn't say now. I would say it's been going on for a couple of years, so I think that there are...

Q. The department stores have not really been part of that revolution.

A. Absolutely not. Absolutely not. They're...I was fortunate to be part of one of...a department store that had in the...basically in the late '70s, early '80s, and currently part of them now, but I see a lot of department stores that become "Let's play it safe," let's...

Q. Well, they gave up. They gave up the menswear business.

A. I think too many people have blinders on. They really play it very safe. They won't venture out. And where they do take a shot, they don't have staying power. If something is a great concept and prolongs as part of the umbrella, if it doesn't work this season, I'm out of it next season. That's a lotta...Too many stores do that. I don't think enough stores really have vision, and I think that really exists here.

Q. So this again is what Traub gives you. He gives you....

A. Absolutely.

A. ...that opportunity to see the distance, go the distance, and stay with it.

A. Absolutely.
Q. And that is rare.
   Any anecdotes you want to share with me? Have you ever taken a business trip with him?
A. Sure. Yes. He's come out to California with us, to the magic show a couple of times.
Q. What's it like to travel with him?
A. Also very inspiring, very challenging. Not a moment wasted on anything.
Q. Give me some specifics.
A. Well, he's sitting on a plane and you're having a business meeting for five hours on a plane with him. It's quite stimulating. He's incredibly perceptual. He can sit there and the conversation can go from talking about the tie assortment to talking about what...how we're going to expand the young men's business to what's gonna happen in ...how we're going to change the stock in infants'. He's very broad in his knowledge of everybody's business.
Q. Does he push you to be broad in your knowledge?
A. Absolutely. Sure. That's why I like it, because it's...Again, it's very similar to the way I handle my own people and it's great. It's terrific living in that kind of an atmosphere that's similar to how you conduct yourself.
Q. Are you finding that it's easier to attract people to retailing or do you feel that because Bloomingdale's is so unique that you have the best pool of people to choose from? You know, historically, again, the kind of people you're talking
about in terms of headset, in terms of mission, have not been attracted to retailing. What are you doing about that?
A. It's very difficult to attract them to retailing. Personally, what am I doing? I have gotten into some of the recruiting, and it is difficult. I think I would like to see more people...Get people that are more gifted into the industry, and I think it's difficult for whatever the reasons. I think that the part that helps attract them is the thought of working for Bloomingdale's, the thought of working for retailing, and the glamor of buyer's traveling, is very glamorous, you know, to the student coming up, looking for a career...

Q. They like the idea of traveling.
A. They like the idea for lots of reasons. We don't seem to be attracting the kinds of individuals who do have some of the vision you're talking about. Wherever they're going, there's not enough coming into this industry.

Q. What do you look for?
A. When I interview somebody, what do I look for? I think independence. People that can think on their own, that are quick to respond to questions, that have been...Not have had an easy life in the sense that everything was given to them. And that is not to say whether they come from a rich background or a poor background, but people that are driven. They don't lay back and lot it happen. They're really pursu-
very successful.

I've gotten better at picking up things at interviews, the education...You should have someone with...

Q. Cultural depth.
A. Sure. You do look for it, yes. But sometimes it depends on their particular background.

Q. It's not necessary for you.
A. It's not totally necessary. The think the thirst for a cultural background is much more important than the actual cultural background.

Q. As far as the international networking at this store really encourages, have you had much experience with this?
A. Ah...Yes. A lot of it has to do with developing product. I've made many, many, many trips already for the store.

Q. Have you done any with Marvin at your side?
A. International trips, no.

Q. No.
A. No, we were...We were going to touch base possibly this March in Europe. At this point now, we have not done any foreign trips together.

Q. Tell me a little bit about how he sees the boys' operation. What's his vision for the boys' operations?
A. Boys?

Q. Yes. The young men. Younger than young men. The
whole new generation of children coming up. Has he talked about it much to you? Have you thought about it much?

A. We have a great challenge in terms of the boys' division. We're very, very...That's one of the areas where we're extremely underdeveloped, and we read our penetration vs. the rest of the Federated stores, just knowing that we really haven't grown that business over the years. It is a challenge to increase that penetration, to grow it faster than it's grown in the last three or four years. The whole boys'...I should say boys and girls...The whole kid's business is a great challenge to Bloomingdale's, because in this day in age it's become very difficult to do business because lots of stores are promoting, heavily promoting, the whole kid's business. It's very commodity driven, very price sensitive. We've had a lot of discounters who have surfaced. So it becomes a more difficult business for us to run. We try to do it with some style, develop our own product, try to go after more of the polos, in boys' (we don't have the girls' division any longer), more of the collection people. People who pull merchandise together that sets us apart from the basic humdrum turtleneck shirt or jean. So we do have a desire to change the business. We know that the challenge is much greater in boys' than girls', especially at the lower ages, not so much the teenager.

Q. That's right. That's where the bulge is going to come to.
A. Exactly.
Q. Getting ready for it.
A. We're watching the public sector come through. Infants' and Toddlers' are exploding.
Q. Exactly.
A. I mean, absolutely exploding.
Q. Absolutely.
A. So we're watching it come through and we know it's going to happen, obviously, in a couple of years.
Q. I'd like to conclude on anything that you think you'd like to have me know about what working with Marvin represents to you.
A. Well, as I said, he's incredibly stimulating and his hours are absolutely....If a clock could be invented with a 25 hour day, that's the one he probably should get.
Q. But the interesting thing is it's not just time spent, it's time well spent.
A. Oh, absolutely. It's...It is...Each hour that is spent is really a hour and a half.
Q. It's a quality approach. I just got through sitting this way with Lee Traub, to get a picture of the man as well, as husband and father, and she comes through with the...The thing that's interesting to me is that there's a joyfulness that I haven't found in many people in retailing, who reach his position, in terms of the family participating in that joy. And that's a pretty exciting to observe. Thank you very much.
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