The Oral History Library

of

The Fashion Institute of Technology

LESTER GRIEBETZ

The Bloomingdale Interviews

by Estelle Ellis
Q. ...and then as it interacts with Marvin, and then talk about your relationship with him and the things you think singularize the man, or the human being, as a professional.

A. Ah...I've been working....I started at Bloomingdale's in 1953 and Marvin Traub was my first boss, and has remained so ever since I worked at the store.

Q. What were you both doing? What was his job?

A. He was then an assistant to Frank Chase, who was one of our senior vice presidents.

Q. And you?

A. And I was a trainee, and I worked for Marvin from almost my initial experience at Bloomingdale's until I became the personnel manager at Bloomingdale's. I then left him for a couple of years and then rejoined him in the merchandising capacity. And to say that he's an exciting person to work for would be the understatement of the century. He's a challenging man, he's a charitable man, he's a very demanding man. And his standards are those that one has to reach for. Because they're not average standards, they're standards that are impeccably high and one as to strive to reach them and it keeps you hopping, but it keeps you excited and motivated, and that's probably why the store is "like no other store in the world." It's all-consuming.
It's not a job, it's a career, and unless you're willing to put that kind of time in, you can't meet his standard. So, it has its tremendous reward in that it's very exciting, adventurous, and it gives you a high that you probably couldn't attain anywhere else and that's why I'm here.

Having left the organization to do something else (I went into real estate and then into insurance), I quickly returned to re-experience...

Q. To retail. Now, that's interesting. Because to go ...Retailing still has this dreadful profile for so many young people.

A. Well, I think it does have a dreadful profile because of the demands on the individual. There are a lot of jobs you can work a lot less hard at and probably get as much financial reward, maybe even greater. But, if the financial reward is not the ultimate and if the job is the ultimate, I don't think you could find a job as varied as this, because it is totally entrepreneurial. Whether advertising or promotion or creation or marketing...If you're in sales supporting systems...

Q. Only if you have that kind of multi-faceted personality, and if you are relating to someone at the top who sees this.

A. I think the young people who join Bloomingdale's experience that almost from the outset. They are thrown into the vibrancy of this company, it's...Unless you're totally insensitive, you're bound to experience. I have trainees who have worked for me who bow out almost immediately because they
can't keep the pace. But those who thrive on it know almost immediately and rise to stardom, and some of the people that I've hired are already senior vice presidents and doing exceptionally well.

Q. Do you feel it happens here faster?
A. Oh, yes. It doesn't happen at all, or it happens faster. Yes.

Q. In other words, the climate nurtures it.
A. Yes.

Q. Tell me a little bit about the jobs that paralleled Marvin's as you moved up.
A. My jobs, from the training squad to assignment with Marvin as his assistant. We worked for Frank Chase...

Q. In home furnishings.
A. In home furnishings, yes.

Q. You've remained in home furnishings?
A. Yes.

Q. Is that also...As I understand it, there has been lots of patterns broken, and one is that people would move from area to area.
A. They still do. I have cosmetics and I had the food division...Luggage, stationery--these are kind of exception departments to the rule--cosmetics and home don't necessarily go together. But if Marvin feels you've got the talent or the interest or the motivation in order to be successful in other areas, he'll give you the chance.
Q. What were the milestones for you?
A. Well, the milestones at Bloomingdale's basically were the training department, to systems and research, to the personnel manager of the store, training director of the store, to a vice presidency in merchandising and a senior vice presidency and an executive vice presidency.

Q. I know of very few personnel people who move into those areas, do you agree?
A. I think you're right. I think personnel has not been a traditional leg up.

Q. I don't know of anyone outside you. You're the first I've met.
A. I'm unique. In many ways.

Q. Well, you work for a unique man.
A. There is no question he's a unique man.

Q. When I talked about milestones for you, I really meant in terms of the concept of the store. What have been the great breakaway, the great breakthrough merchandising concepts?
A. The store has had an extraordinary evolution. When I remember first...My sisters went to Hunter College, and it was a store to buy sheets in and that was all. If you needed something...They never bought fashion clothes here. And when Jed Davidson and Jim Shote Sr. were in charge of the store, Marvin was then a rub buyer or a hosiery buyer, and it was obvious that his reputation was going to bring him to the
fore and it did. He rose extremely rapidly and with him the store had its evolution through Jed Davidson, who brought a fashioness to the store. And then the El came down and...

Q. "Krensky" was part of that wasn't he?
A. Absolutely. One of the forerunners of the fashion business.

Q. He and Maggie deMille.
A. Right. That's correct. Things out of the past. And Larry, Larry "Loughlin" who was the chairman and operating officer. All these men helped make Bloomingdale's the store that it is today. However, since Marvin has taken over I think that it has sort of leaped ahead, as opposed to grown and had its normal evolution. There was a definite direction that Jed Davidson was taking it. You could see it happening, you could feel it happening. Major appliances were discontinued and pianos were discontinued and more fashion floor merchandise was brought into the store. The celebration of country events made us very special. Education and travel became a gospel as opposed to something stores play at. We were...

Q. Education for the people...?
A. For the people. Our education. School...

Q. School exposure.
A. Absolutely. Barbara D'Arcy was a prime example of a woman to bring authenticity to the furniture division. We got a reputation for the right style, authentically reproduced. And you could see the investment being made, those people that
he believed...I mean, Davidson, Loughlin, Krensky and Traub, believed (?) . . . what they thought it was going to be. And it was (?) . . And we're not perfect. We're all striving to get better. But there is no store that's equal to this store.

Q. Then Traub, you say, gave it the quantum leap... What did he bring to it?
A. I think his adventurous spirit. He's a gambler. He gambles on people, he gambles on merchandise, he gambles on designers. And if you have a good idea, he'll never say no. "Try it," is his attitude. The willingness to say "try it" is what most chief executive officers don't do. They are so conservative.

Q. To me the clarification is, bring a new idea to a retailer and he'll be mesmerized, and then he'll say, "Who did it?"
A. If you're first, that's the thing, as opposed to "is it an also ran." And we are never challenged if somebody has done it. When we launch a fragrance and it's ours exclusively, we bring the house down for the vendor because (?) and that's what intrigues Mr. Traub, you see. He wants to be first on the block. Because his nature is to be a leader. To be first.

Q. Now, you were involved with the breakthrough concepts of (?) . . . as well as food operation.
A. Yes.
Q. Talk to that point.
A. The food department at Bloomingdale's historically has been a forerunner of the gourmet shops around the world in its line of merchandise. There's a gentleman named Mr. Simon who started it all by traveling to Europe and bringing back foods that were not available in America, and then it had its evolution under Bob "Gumpert," (?) who was a protoge of Mr. Simon's, and we leaped ahead with not only America being the source of marvelous, unadulterated, unpreserved, natural foods, with our shows, whether it be New Orleans, whether it be Seattle, or Portland, Oregon, or in New York. We are always on the lookout for people who are doing special things on a natural basis for food. We have traveled the world over in France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Germany, and have the best of small purveyors of food, the small packages of food, putting things under our own label. Because the names are not important to the American public, it's the quality.

Q. Could you just (only because we're pressed for time in my doing this, I wouldn't interrupt you), but I'm curious: What is in the perspective of how you see people today? In other words, the changes that are going on here are in response to a changing marketplace. Would you talk a little bit about what you and Marvin--You alone, Marvin as a leader--see as this changing marketplace.
A. Well, I think that I try to project myself into the position of being the typical Bloomingdale customer. Certainly
in an income bracket which is better than moderate. Wanting to be unique in my selection of merchandise. We don't cater and we cannot cater to an audience which is looking for mundane, the mass distributed. What makes Bloomingdale's home furnishings division and the food division and the cosmetic division special is that we offer to the customer who wants something special for themselves the opportunity to buy it here, and hopefully we can support it with trained, experienced professionals...

Q. Now, that was always conceived of as something that could operate in a New York marketplace. But you've now transplanted this attitude about the consumer to Dallas...
A. Right.

Q. You're going to do it in Chicago. You've done it in Philadelphia, a very conservative marketplace.
A. Yes.

Q. Does this, in your point of view, represent a major national change in the psyche of people?
A. I think that there are so many transplanted New Yorkers, and there are people who live in these territories who think like New Yorkers. And I might be somewhat chauvinistic about being a New Yorker myself, but if we go into a new territory and we don't bring Bloomingdale's-New York, there's no reason for us to be there.

Q. That's important.
A. And I think if we don't deliver New York to Dallas or New York to Boca, then we have failed. What we try to do
in these outlying territories is to take a little package of New York and deliver it to the women and to the men and to the grownups or teenagers, or whoever shops our stores, the feeling that they're going to be first on the block with something marvelous and something they can take great pleasure in. It might just be a lipstick. It might just be the newest piece of ceramic or just a tie or a blouse or shirt. But they'll be proud to wear it, to use it, to experience it, to enjoy it. If we don't do that for them, then we're really not filling a need, because there are millions of stores out there, and I think where we're most successful is when we keep the standards, as we do in New York City, in the regions that we go into.

Q. Do you also identify what is unique in terms of sense of place, in those regions?
A. Oh, of course. Because the Boca customer is not the Philadelphia customer. And the buyers are now first learning what turns the Southern market on, as opposed to the conservative or adult units. And...

Q. How do you balance that?
A. We have a general philosophy of delivering Bloomingdale's and its consultants to the stores. And if Florida... If the color palette is a little bit more pastel in Florida, we will address that and can on an exception basis. But, we don't stray from the New York assortment in the branch stores. By virtue of the fact that if we do, we still haven't delivered what the customer has expected. And it's very (?)...
When Marv comes back from the trips in Europe and writes a multi-store order, and my job is to make sure what they buy in their special collections is thoroughly distributed to every store. Now, if it fails in the store, we can bring it back to New York. But more than likely, it will...

Q. I was going to say, what is your experience with...
A. It's pervasive. It's general, especially...

Q. It is out there...
A. It's absolutely out there.

Q. And you've identified your constituency of customers wherever they live.
A. Oh, yes.

Q. And this is a head set. This is... What? A culture level?
A. It's a training and a culture level to the buyer.

Q. But I'm talking about the consumer. Can you identify the consumer as above average in terms of cultural exposure? Taste level? How would you define...?
A. I think that they're... I think from our point of view, the customer who searches for Bloomingdale's is better educated, more affluent, much more inventive and much more adventursome about themselves. They are not your average customer that you will find shopping some of our competitors.

Q. And yet, it's a mass market.
A. Oh, yes. We do a very big business in these...

Q. So, then, what are you saying? Are you saying that today the average market is extraordinary? That the ordinary
is extraordinary.

A. I think the average consumer is, to some stores, is accepted as an average consumer. We look for that spark in the consumer that takes them out of the ordinary. And if we deliver, they respond.

Q. And you are saying that there are numbers out there that we've never had historically.

A. Absolutely. Absolutely. You can see it when you open the store; the excitement that we have coming into a territory would lend credibility; that fact that they are waiting for us. We have opening days that are staggering. And the fun and the excitement that we bring to a community, and it is theatrical in a sense...

Q. It is theatre.

A. Absolutely. And if you don't provide the theatre (and I'm talking about displays and the environment and the people and the merchandise as a total package), then we have failed. But we are able to deliver that.

Q. Talk a little bit about Marvin the man.

A. Marvin the man? I guess if you were to use just a few words...Extremely high standards, very demanding of himself and very demanding of the people who work for him...Very adventursome, very enlightened, extraordinarily charitable. That's one of the things that I think most people don't...

Q. How do you use that word, "charitable?"

A. He will make himself available to so many institutions.
Who, because of him, are able to raise funds, whether it be the American Foundation for AIDS research, F.I.T., or the Denver hospital or the UJA or dozens and dozens of organizations--Harvard University, his alma mater--The man is never indigent at giving himself at these functions. He's exhausted at times, but he will make himself available for fund raising, because he feels it's a responsibility. I have often heard him say that he feels that he's blessed in that through him we can raise these kinds of funds. And that's what it's all about, because the government's sure is not giving it to these private institutions.

I remember when one of our buyers died of AIDS, I said to him, "You know we really should do something." He said, "You're absolutely right," and he threw his weight behind it and over half a million dollars was raised at the Javits Center, and that's a disease that has a great deal of negative words...

Q. I'm going to watch a program tonight...Do you watch that new program, L.A...What's the name? It's a new program now on CBS, it's on L.A. law. They're doing a thing on a young man who has AIDS, and has a legal problem. You might be interested if you're home.

A. Yes. But that's...I'm just giving you, in concise form, he is a very giving man. As he is a demanding man. And I think it's a marvelous sort of chemistry that you can sort of both give and take and give and it works.

Q. Well, he's a role model for everything he wants you
to be.

A. I mean, if I didn't feel that, I wouldn't be here.

Q. He's a role model. He obviously started as a role model for the things he wants you to be.

A. Absolutely.

Q. Because anyone who calls meetings, as he's called them, at 7:35 in the morning...

A. Oh, yes. Well, we are all insomniacs just to keep up with him!

Q. I think that's marvelous.

The milestones for you that you identify with him, here at Bloomingdale's: Tick them off. What have they been?

A. I think bringing Bloomingdale's into a position of fashion, for both ready-to-wear and home; the innovation at Bloomingdale's where you have an extraordinarily exciting main floor...I think the total trading up of our assortments to...We are proud of the exclusivities and the efforts we give our customers. And the fact that Bloomingdale's is really like no other store in the world and he's made it such through his energy. There is no other store...

I think what I love is when I go into a small manufacturing facility Citta de Costellos, in Italy, and they don't speak English and they don't know much about anything except when you say you're from Bloomingdale's and the smiles come out and the twinkle in the eyes, and they say, "Bloomingdale's."
Q. Do you remember that New Yorker cartoon with it in China, with the smokestacks?
A. Yes. I mean, it's extraordinary, and it's really due to his personality and his drive and his contracts with governments that no other store principal does--China, France, Italy...
Q. I was going to say, wouldn't you make those milestones? Those events which have been not just a travel promotion but, rather, a cultural...
A. A cultural phenomenon. Oh, absolutely. He would never do a country without a cultural angle to it.
Q. The fact that the Queen of England came.
A. Oh, yes. A very exciting experience.
Q. I'm talking about milestones like that. Can you recall...
A. Well, the Queen of England is not the only royalty to come. See, we're sort of accepting royalty on a regular basis these days. She was a milestone because she's the Queen of England, but we've had lots of queens and lots of princes and they shop here on a regular basis. The entire ambassadorial staffs of the United Nations are here on a regular basis. I think that he has had a service orientation--at his service, at your service--(?). . . . . the striving to give the customer something...
Q. What is (?). . .
A. Our international shopping center.
Q. I don't know anything about it.
A. It's run by a lady called Joan "Cuomo," that he initiated, for foreign customers who don't speak the language that you service and shop with and (?) . . . . shops with them during the day. It's a marvelous service, it does a lot of business.
Q. I don't believe I've seen any advertising for it.
A. They do a good job of it.
Q. And that should be...Particularly with your reputation as an international store.
A. We have to do a better job of it, you're right.
Q. (?) corner . . . . (?) . . and the gift registry and (?) registry. . . (?) People want to be cared for and given that extra service. And they get it there. That's rather well known, the registry.
Q. Yes. Well, it started with the bridal registry and now it's the spouse's registry, and now it's my own birthday registry.
A. That's right.
Q. I don't want to take any more of your time. I feel very...
A. If I didn't have a problem I'd spend more time with you, but...
Q. I've enjoyed this. It's been very helpful. And I may come back to you...send you some things that I....
. . . And the store design..
A. Well, we have a few stores... And this is another milestone as far as Marvin is concerned, he authorizes us to have somewhere around 12-15 creative people on our staff, who work with the buyers. They train them, nurture them along, to make them understand what makes something special, and help design them, because the buyer is young and inexperienced, can't go into a market and design something with the manufacturer. But his staff was trained by him, graduates of Parsons and F.I.T. and Long Island School of Design. They're fledglings, but under his administration they learn. And they are our support team. And when you're looking for the best, and I have worked with Julian because he was a designer—a Coty award winner—I told Marvin I thought he was one of the people he should go after, although he'd never worked for a store. And Marvin didn't know whether he'd be receptive to coming to Bloomingdale's, but having worked with him at (he was design director there, he felt that he had the qualities that would motivate his people, motivate our buyers, and act as a partner to our buying team. And Julian left Wamsutta to come to Bloomingdale's, and Marvin (?)... was the one who convinced him, because I felt that... He was intrigued but sort of a reluctant debutante at the time. And Marvin through his eight behind him, and got him. And he is the best in the business. There's no question that he's extraordinary. And that gives us credibility, that the people in our industry respect him. Now Julian crosses over lines, in domestics and
housewares and furniture and cosmetics, and it's a great combination. Even food. So...His knowledge of fabrics is instrumental in parallel...

Q. He's a creative director, really.
A. He's our creative director.
Q. You don't give him that title, but he is a creative director.
A. Well, he's a senior vice president of the store...
Q. Well, senior vice presidents everybody knows. Creative directors people don't know. . . (?) retailers making an investment.
A. We're one of the few stores who would make a creative director a senior vice president.
Q. That is incredible. He's on a pper level...
A. Absolutely. He's on the board. And you don't find creative people on boards, Barbara D'Arcy's on our board.
Q. Now that again is a breakthrough...To choose her to do...to design a store; the store plan or the store...Was never anyone who came out of..
A. Well, one of my most thrilling experiences was working with Barbara, because Barbara worked for me—for a short period of time, for a few years, and it's not easy to use the word genius loosely. Barbara is a design genius. And if anything can turn you on, it's the quality of this woman. The detail that she goes through, the knowledge...She was one of the people that Mr. Davidson made an investment in and it paid
off. She lived in France for six months, studying, touring and learning. That's all you had to do, was just absorb the knowledge and the history and the culture. And she's so knowledgeable and she's so helpful to us because our reputation as a leader in the furniture business comes really through her and Carl Levine, and Carl Levine, who is the vice president, senior vice president in furniture, have maintained, throughout these...for 30 years, a leadership in the furniture business. There's nobody in the furniture business, in rugs or design today, that is equal to Bloomingdale's. Thirty years they've been together. That's (?) . . .

Q. Now, the equivalent of this in the ready-to-wear area is Ruttenstein?
A. Kal Ruttenstein would be equivalent to Julian Tomchin in the (?) . . .

Q. Well, what is his background?
A. Well, he at one time was president of Bonwit Teller's. I don't know too much about his previous background. I think it...

Q. He doesn't have the same design background that Tomchin has.
A. Well, Tomchin has been trained as a designer. Right through his entire educational career. I'm on the board of F.I.T., and Tomchin is on as well. Through George (?) . . and Tomchin teaches, Tomchin lectures. I will, because we believe that the next fashion design director is among
these young people in school.
Q. Let's just spend two minutes on it. Talk to me about education in this industry.
A. Well, as the industry becomes more complex, the educational background of the individual who's going to become a designer is going to become more demanding. And, unless we start nurturing this talent by giving of ourselves, and they in turn being receptive to receive the history and the discipline that we can give them, then there may be new Julian Tomchins.
Q. Let him finish...on education (people interrupting). We'll be out in a minute....I'll be out in a minute. . . .
You were talking about education....
A. Education. So that....I think one of the reasons that Marvin will lend his name to a school for fund raising is that he believes, as we all believe, that you must invest in the young people. Because without that investment, there will be no future growth...We need them to take the jobs that are occupied right now.
Q. You do teach down there, as part of their planning program and curriculum.
A. Yes.
Q. Are you impressed by their interior design program?
A. I have a relative...
Q. Have you seen their (?) .. laboratory?
A. Yes.
Q. I want very much to have your point of view.
A. Well, George "Leep" (?) is very aggressive, and he's terrific. He gets us on the stick. He also provides jobs for the kids. You know. We have work (?) . . .

Q. How many people do you have on staff that you know are from F.I.T.?

A. Well, at Christmas time we take 12. It depends on how many kids George has available. Because we also have them at the branches.

Q. Are you impressed with the progress the school has made?

A. Well, I know Elizabeth (?) . . interior design course, and . . because I have had a couple of friends who have taken it and I have one friend who's in it right now. And, as anything, it's based on the quality of the instructor. That's the quality of the education. And some of them are outstanding. Outstanding. And I can see by the work assignments that they are very involved.

Q. Have you been involved in the curriculum?

A. Yes. We review that on a regular basis.

Q. Thank you.

A. You're welcome.
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.