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CARL LEVINE

The Bloomingdale Interviews
by Estelle Ellis
Q. Carl Levine...This is Carl Levine, who's going to talk to us about himself and his relationship in his career of what we now find ourselves (interruption in tape) .. to Bloomingdale's. And then the work he has done with Marvin at Bloomingdale's.

A. I started with Bloomingdale's in the mid-'50s, coming from a family business which specialized in home furnishings. And I had become intrigued by Bloomingdale's on market visits to New York City. I sensed, even as far back as the mid-'50s, that something was happening, especially in home furnishings, at Bloomingdale's.

Q. What was your family business?

A. They were a small, junior department store in northern New Jersey and Rockland County, New York, and I felt I wanted to try for something larger. Bloomingdale's, at that time, had model rooms. It had unusual, contemporary furniture. And...

Q. Barbara was working on those rooms then?

A. Not at the time. It was a lady by the name of Henriette Granville, for whom Barbara worked. And when I let my family know that I wanted to go on and try New York City and the department store life, I applied at Bloomingdale's and gratefully I was accepted. And it took me about three months to get into the home furnishings department where I started as an assistant buyer in furniture. Which was somewhat of a
step back from what I was doing with the family, but I realized that it probably would be a good investment.

Q. Who was the president of the store at that time?
A. At that time, Mr. "Shoate" Sr. was the president and Mr. Davidson was the chairman. And Mr. Traub at that time was a divisional merchandise manager for furniture. And so from the mid-'50s through this date, I've been working closely with him.

Q. It's interesting to know how many of the people are now in the executive ranks with him, and worked with him intimately over the years. As he moved up, you moved up.
A. That's correct. And I had a background in furniture. Not only having grown up in a family business, but having studied furniture and crafts and design at school.

Q. Where did you go?
A. I studied at Syracuse University and I studied at one of the New York design schools in the evenings.

Q. Which one?
A. The New York School of Interior Design. Where I learned the history of style. I thought that was very beneficial. Sorry I can't say it was F.I.T.

Q. No, I was just interested. My daughter teaches there now.
A. She does?

Q. She gives certain courses there.
A. Well, for me, who wanted basic elements, it was very good. And I still recommend it to this day, that some of my young executives learn of the parallels between history and style in home furnishings.

And at that time, Bloomingdale's was not recognized by domestic vendors as being the kind of store that we would like to sell. We literally had to beg the better vendors to sell us. Macy's and Altman's and Lord & Taylor were already established as quality fashion leaders, but not Bloomingdale's. And Mr. Davidson...

Q. In the home field? That's interesting, because it was a strong home store when Frank Case was here.

A. Well, that was a little later.

Q. Was it?

A. We had trouble. We had trouble...I don't know if I want to be on record with this, but we had trouble having Baker sell us, having Paul Silver sell us...

Q. You're saying it wasn't accepted as a...

A. Having Baccarat sell us. And Mr. Davidson, who was very astute, and with whom Mr. Traub worked very closely, said if we're not going to get it here, let's make it ourselves in Europe. So very early in my tenure (which was mid- to later '50s) I found myself traveling to Europe with Mr. Traub. Subsequently, when Barbara D'Arcy moved up to be the head of the fashion office, the three of us traveled throughout Europe, developing, finding and bringing in unusual, authentic home
furnishings, particularly in furniture. And that was a great, golden era for us, in the late '50s and early '60s, when Barbara's signature on the model room became evident; when our whole new look in authentic reproductions started to "make" us, and we were getting more of the better, affluent customer, at that period. We became so recognized and so respected by the home furnishings industry, that soon the manufacturers who would not sell us in the early to mid-'50s came begging for us to visit their showrooms and buy their products.

Q. So your own product development worked. Which, as we now know and has been rightfully designated as what sets the store apart, became the generator for all the attention you got from the major brands.

A. I would say so. We became recognized. We even led the way in certain furniture classifications and in certain styling. For example, even the best of the American furniture manufacturers would not put an antique patina on their merchandise, even though line for line they were replicating or reproducing 18th century design. It was spanking new and finished. When we brought in the French and Italian reproductions, with the heavy patina finish, they followed suit. There were also items like "essengeres" and "garridons," which had never been in the commercial market, which we brought in, and they later, in the late '60s and early '70s, became some of the strongest classifications of Grand Rapids and High Point, North Carolina. So, we eventually became the (?) . . and I hope we're retaining
that stature... (blip in tape)

... He was tireless, energetic, very disciplined—something that I need to learn, needed to learn. How to use my time effectively. He was the man who taught me how to cross t's and dot i's. He's very detail oriented, which is more important than most people recognize.

Q. Everybody ad libs.

A. That's right. Integrity, high standards and principles, and, with all of these plus many that I haven't mentioned—characteristics such as these—it's no wonder that he's the chairman of the outstanding department store in the country. And certainly those young executives who follow his mode of operating and adapt his high standards will also do well.

Q. Well, from what I have heard from you, and from others, he's clearly the quintessential role model for what has made the store unique. You either has the metabolism that he has or you don't stay, you don't want to stay, you can't stay—you don't survive. It's really a question of the sifting process, I would assume.

A. Yes. And for those of us who are determined and ambitious, he calendars us. I mean, not all of us like to attend an 8:00 meeting where we have to...

Q. 7:45.

A. Correct.

Q. 7:15.
A. Right. And not all of us used to like to be working at manufacturers in Milan at 8-9:00 in the evening, sometimes until midnight. But Barbara D'Arcy and I endured that, and our accomplishments show it.

Q. What does it do to your personal life?
A. It's tough on your personal life.

Q. It's interesting...This is what I was trying to say...Because we're now talking about professional standards that have really been the central...It's very unusual in our business world, where there's so much laid back and ad libbed performance, but...From a personal point of view, what does this do in terms of recruiting young people, who don't...Who come from another generation?

A. Well, they just don't want to do it, and we're not getting the tireless executives that we had 20 years ago. We're getting bright executives, we're getting executives who are willing to work, up to a point. Well, even today, I have...I have let up a bit on my schedule. I used to think it was correct to work six days a week. Prior to that, I saw my father do that in a small business, and I just felt guilty if I didn't go in the extra day, which I wasn't required to do. But, of late, I have realized that maybe life is short and I would like to have a life beyond Bloomingdale's. So I'm taking more free time. But I'm able to compensate, because of all my experience. Perhaps I couldn't have done that in the earlier days.

In the meantime, Bloomingdale's is still a challenge
in retailing it because our competitors have gotten better. Years ago they didn't take Bloomingdale's seriously. They didn't realize that all of our great style and trendiness and the look of our merchandise we were really doing great volume and making great profits. Some of the others, who were highly promotional, learned that this was the better type of business. And witness those who shall remain nameless, how well they're copying us these days. Right down to their advertising.

Q. What you did was what Tom Hoving identified a long time ago, that good design was good business. Good taste is good business, and forward thinking is good business. And I think all of that is clear in what is the mandate for your people here.

I'd be very appreciative of any anecdotal reflections that you can give me on the path that you've walked with Mr. Traub; that remain for you...That remain for you...

A. Well, I don't know if I can tell you a specific anecdote. He was always marvelous to travel with, although he was highly disciplined and perhaps worked me a little harder than I wanted to be worked. But socially he was great fun; always wanted to go to the best restaurants around Europe and the best nightclubs, after the work day was finished, and thoroughly enjoyed life. So I respected him for that. His day did not end, even though it ended late, when work ended. He was ready to go on. Sometimes at 12:00 or 1:00 AM in Paris, I
was knocked out and I would go back to the hotel and he was going to Russian cabaret to hear a little balalaika. So I admire him. He can do with less sleep and rest than I could.

Q. What do you think produces this drive? Is this all genetic, or is there something else there?
A. Oh, it's determination. Marvin, I feel, wants to excel and he does everything to do that. It's habit, how many hours of sleep you have, and I'm sure if I got in the habit of having four hours of sleep instead of seven I would be the same. But I'm not inclined to.

Q. Well, they say as you mature you need less.
A. Yes, well I'm not sure how true that is...Although he's very serious and professional, he has a marvelous sense of humor.

Q. I was going to say, talk to me about him as a man.
A. There were times we could not stop laughing in Europe. Even though we considered ourselves sophisticated New Yorkers, back there in the late '50s and early '60s. There was a little sudden custom or more of the country that would provoke our laughter; we'd find a foreign culture, especially in those days, funny. Amusing. It was always a help, on an intense business trip, to be able to lie back and laugh.

And D'Arcy and he and I were a good trio for that.

I respected his way of handling his family throughout the years...

Q. I was going to say, was that a role model?
A. ...while keeping such an intense schedule. He has a marvelous relationship with his wife, Lee. She's a good partner, in the sense that she travels with him when she's inclined to do it, and she's perfectly independent and liberated to have her own life when she chooses not to travel on trips that she's done before, which are redundant.

He has a marvelous family life with his children. I know he spends some time with them, regardless of how late in the evening, or what it does to his weekend. The children are very important to him and he has a great respect and admiration for them, that is reciprocated by them. So I admire him for that.

I think he's straight as an arrow when it comes to his relationship with his wife, and I find that very admirable, in this day in age.

Q. Interesting. Because what they're now saying is what they always said about measuring the quality of time as being more important than the quantity of time; you're saying that he is as competent in terms of designing his personal life as he is in his professional life.

A. Well, he jokes about it. He once made the remark to a newspaper...Somebody asked him how can his wife keep up with him, and he said if she can't she should have married a dentist that she went with back in the '40s. But he doesn't mean it; it's truly a love affair between the two of them, and I can see it to this day. So...He has been able to keep
up with it and do it very well. And you're perfectly right: He may spend less time with them, but there is quality in his relationship with his family.

Q. Were you in Europe when he got the French award?
A. No, I didn't go over.

Q. Tell me a little bit about what it is you feel he represents in terms of these country promotions; what you feel he brings to it.
A. Well...He has the knack and the intellect to get right to the core of things. His timing is perfect. When we did China, it was just the right time. There was enough merchandise to bring out. And politically it was the right thing to do, in 1980. So he has an instinct, or a nose for that. Sometimes we help him decide on a country, but he's very good at dealing with the top levels of the government and the commercial world, in getting what we need, which is support for advertising and promotion. He's a true diplomat when it comes to that.

Q. I was going to say, by now, doesn't every country open its arms when they hear that you're coming?
A. Yes, even if they don't have enough merchandise for us, they want to know why we can't do a show, and we have to explain that we need the merchandise content first. But...

He also is very fair. In other words, if he feels that a group of buyers have gone over to a country and ignored certain classifications that the country's proud of, he insists that we try some of it, and while it won't be as profitable
as what our instincts tell us, he says at least it gives us a more well rounded representations when we're talking about that country. And he's just as concerned about the cultural side as he is about the merchandise side, even though we're in a business where we are here to do business and make profits. But he wants to show two sides—the commercial and the cultural side of any country.

Q. How does he see, do you think, or how does he do, when you reflect on this question? Do you think he sees the Bloomingdale customer, not just in New York, but now that you've stretched yourselves...What is the profile of that Bloomingdale customer, as you think he has set the stage for. Do you understand for whom you are developing products?

A. Well, over the years, the Bloomingdale customer has become a broader one, as we've gone into branches. When I started here, Mr. Davidson told us that we're a neighborhood store and we're dealing with the upper East Side, affluent, sophisticated customer. And we still are. We can still quality better than any other department store.

Q. They're living in Tribeca now, I have news for you.

A. Right. And on Central Park West. And some of them are in New Canaan, and some of them are on Long Island. But in certain communities—Philadelphia and Washington—you have more conservative customers. You have customers who aren't Size 8. They're Size 14 and they want good-looking, quality clothes. So we've geared some of our departments for that.
Our furniture department in the Washington area is more traditional than it is in New York. On the other hand, in Florida it's more contemporary than it is in New York. It was the Philadelphia market that put us into the large sized women's clothing, because there were more larger women for some reason in Philadelphia. So, we've gotten a broader (and I don't mean larger in size!), a broader customer...

But still, the younger merchants should not forget that we're still quality and style, regardless of what we're doing. If we're doing traditional, it should be Baker. And we should be on the top and middle of the line for all of the products here.

Q. The thing that I find interesting is that as...You know...It was difficult but a lot easier when there was a flagship store and then there were some branches, within riding distance for a buyer. You now are, really, a chain. You are a department store chain.
A. Right.
Q. How do you transplant this Bloomingdale point of view, keeping within the context of this regional character of this area; this sense of place that...for which you must always be responsible. I mean, bring the Bloomingdale....
A. Well, between him and the central key merchants--probably the ones you're interviewing--we initially merchandise the stores, we set them up, we send them the new season's merchandise, and gradually the executives in those various remote
areas learn what we're all about, if they didn't know when they started with us. So we're responsible for it. We certainly take their advice. When we opened in Florida, we reviewed traditional furniture, and my people there very quickly said they had a very contemporary market, and we revised the products. But it's up to us central people--key central people--to merchandise the remote areas properly.

Q. But the fact is, wherever you go, there is a Bloomingdale constituency.

A. That's right. And there's a Bloomingdale image and a Bloomingdale look. And even though we might shift to the right or the left, depending on the market, it's still Bloomingdale's; there's still that aura.

Q. How much contact do the people in the areas below the executive level have with Marvin?

A. Well... You mean on the junior executive level?

Q. Uh huh.

A. Probably not enough. They know of him. Once in a while, when he has time, he'll have breakfast with some young executives. My buyers have a lunch or a breakfast with him a couple of times a year. But in running a chain of this size, and a billion dollar business, it's hard for him to get to know all of them. He will go out of his way, when he's walking through the store, to say hello and try to remember first names. But below the buyer level it's very difficult.

Q. All right. Since you yourself sought an education
to qualify you for this career direction, knowing what you know about retailing today, knowing what Bloomingdale's reach is for its people, what kind of education do you need to prepare you for what you talk about as quality, creative retailing?

A. Well, obviously a college education is going to polish any potential executive. But I would think that an education, a general education at one of the design schools, would be most helpful. And I have found that in my own case, as well as some executives in my area, that I have recommended it to. Knowing the history of fashion and style, learning a little bit about designers is an enormous help. When you go into the market you know more than your supplier, when you go to Europe you know if you're talking about a Louis XVI style when it's supposed to be a IVth. It's tremendously helpful, and I'm not sure that the younger people put a lot of emphasis on this in this high tech computer age.

Q. I was going to say: Isn't this a contradiction in terms of what you're also looking for, which are the MBAs?

A. Yes. But an MBA can also learn a little bit about the fine arts.

Q. How do they learn it?

A. In school. I mean, there are still electives in school, and they can still do it. When I was taking a business course at Syracuse for my bachelor's degree, I still took some design courses as electives, and they helped.

Q. What are the best design schools, from your point
of view, in terms of your...
A. I have been so away from it, but from what I hear, of what's going on in home furnishings, it's your school, it's...
Q. Have you been to our school? The interior design program?
A. I have hired people from it.
Q. Good people?
A. Sure.
Q. What do you think... What special... You hired them from F.I.T., and you've also hired them from where else?
A. Parsons.
Q. Parsons and where else?
A. Rhode Island School of Design, Philadelphia...
Q. Philadelphia Arts.
Yes. Yes... Is there a difference in the F.I.T. student?
A. No... I think it depends on the person. I'd like to be able to tell you that there's something special about F.I.T....
Q. No... I'm not... You know... I don't represent F.I.T. in those terms.
A. I just think it depends on the person. I interviewed a student the other day... She had something herself; there was something in there, in the genes. And then F.I.T. has refined it for her.
Q. You haven't been involved with curriculum development down there. I think that you should be.
A. Well, let me know if I can be of help.
Q. I will.
A. When I'm working less hours here, I can do something there.
Q. That would be nice.
A. Anyway... Is that enough for you?
Q. I think it is... Unless there's something...
A. Well, call me...
Q. ... unless there's something you think I haven't asked you about.
A. I think I covered him pretty well. If I think of any anecdote...
Q. If you think of anything that is a rich reflection of...
A. Okay. I'll call you. Do you have a card?
Q. Take my number... No, I don't carry a card.
A. Okay. Then I'll put it on here.
Q. Will you? Estelle Ellis...(Gies contact info)
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