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MARVIN TRAUB

The Bloomingdale Interviews

by

Estelle Ellis
Q. ...have chosen you to be "that one person that makes a difference." And the difference is clear, here, in what you have accomplished at Bloomingdale's. What is your perspective? What do you think have been your contributions?

A. A good question to ask out of a clear blue sky....

Q. Especially the 5:00 before Rosh Hashanah.

A. Yes, I was thinking that. I didn't expect we'd have a lengthy discussion.

Well...If you say what is your contribution, again, I think you have to break it down into pieces.

Q. All right.

A. A contribution to Bloomingdale's. A contribution to industry. A contribution to community, and someplace in there is family. And, if you think it appropriate, I would comment about all of them.

Q. All right. Please do.

A. Bloomingdale's I joined in 1950, when we did $65 million, had the basement, had not a great reputation for most anything except maybe a piece of modern furniture.

I held seven jobs in seven years and I think I was certainly part of the team that changed Bloomingdale's from essentially a moderate-to-low priced New York store with a basement, to a worldwide fashion institution.
Q. What was the first job you had?
A. I started as an assistant to the head of the basement. Then hosiery buyer, assistant to the chairman of the planning of the store in Stanford, buyer, executive assistant to the vice president for men's and home furnishings, and then divisional merchandise manager. Seven jobs in seven years.

But anyway, I look back... And then I became Executive Vice President and General Merchandise Manager of Bloomingdale's in 1962. That was 24 years ago. For the past 24 years I've had responsibility for merchandising and sales promotion and like to feel I had a very important part in the change of character that has made Bloomingdale's a billion dollar business that it will be this year. But more important, one, I think that it is known worldwide as an exciting place to shop and a leader of creativity.

I think lots of the concepts that we've done and have been developing and working with individual designers, treating home furnishings as a very important fashion business, and being very innovative and going to fragrance lines; in treating the store as theatre...

Q. When did that concept evolve?
A. The store as theatre? I think that probably started in the '60s. The development of the store as a cultural center with tie-ins with the community. We were a leader in that. So I like to feel that, one, I contributed to the gross development
of Bloomingdale's. And second, I've been part of the changing scene of retailing that...

Q. Does it amuse you right now that everybody sees the future in terms of the specialty store? And that no one can see a future for the department store?

A. Well, I can remember when everybody thought the future was in discount stores. But the future really belongs to the stores that have a clearly defined image and policy, unknown and understood for the organization to have a single customer in mind, a point of view....

So, I guess in one sense I look back and feel I've made contributions to both the industry and to Bloomingdale's. I like to feel I've been and am an active participant in the communities Bloomingdale's is in, in New York--The Metropolitan Museum, Lincoln Center, F.I.T., Parsons, the other business schools and colleges in the city... (?)...

White House... (?)

Q. Well, you've seen the cross (?)... between culture and fashion marketing, which very few people in our industry have even had the cultural quotient to be able to conceptualize.

A. Well, I get a great sense of personal pleasure out of that. I'm active on a worldwide basis. I have friends who are leaders of the fashion industry, of the retail industry, who are in many of the capitals of Europe and Asia. I guess I'm rather pleased with having been honored by the governments...
of France and Italy...

Q. You haven't talked anything about how you see the consumer. Bloomingdale's and the consumer. You talked a few moments ago about the fact that the store needs a focus. But the thing that makes this institution very unique is that people can now... There can be a New Yorker cartoon that articulates the Bloomingdale customer. So that clearly there is a defined customer focus here.

I am interested in knowing your philosophical attitude about serving a consumer, and how you see the consumer constituency that you're building not only in New York, but all over the United States.

A. That's a very, sort of, if you don't mind my saying so, pretentious phrase—philosophical attitude toward consumers. I think stores are in business to serve the needs of their customers, and I guess the Bloomingdale point of view is to recognize that our customer is essentially is someone who has an interest in forward fashion, who enjoys what's new, is involved in changing and at different times would be represented by Saturday's generation in an earlier era, or a new rather elegant street of shops on the fourth floor, or new table top areas on line six. That the consumer is many different things, and that our consumer can enjoy shopping "Armani" and Ralph Lauren down to what we have for "Guess" or "Genera." Bloomingdale's has a broad, festival appeal in all aspects of apparel and the home. But the thing that strikes all of us is that
customers like different things at different times. And they like Bloomingdale's to indicate to them what we think is the next most important trend.

Q. Well, when I used the word philosophical, I meant exactly that. There is an intellectual approach to the targeting of customers, which we have now become very familiar with and we think of it as demographics. But long before anyone even understood demographics, you defined, in one phrase, a psychographic pattern as well as a very special regional shopping pattern. "Saturday generation" was a sociological view of a customer market, and I think this was a very unique contribution and I think you did it again with the next generation, in seeing children that way.

A. I apologize. I guess we have... We probably do intellectualize, but somehow we don't talk about it. I think it is much more our own instinctive reaction to what we see if happening.

Q. But well thought through.

A. Yes, hopefully so.

Q. It's not all instinct, it's well thought through. You have a very sophisticated marketing department.

A. We know... No, we... Our marketing department is really a general merchandise managers... Me, and our sales promotion... We try to think through appropriate themes and directions so that our promotion, for example, for the spring of 1987, about China Seas, is not really casually picked out
but rather based on what we believe are important fashion
directions or trends--bright colors in prints that one as-
sociates which the China seas.
Q. Do you feel this whole program, which you really
initiated, which is to help see a culture and a country and
a culture, and then to bring that up from that country to New
York or Dallas or Boston, or wherever you are; that that is
going to be continued... Will that continue to be a dynamic
way to be in the business of retailing when so many people are
so well traveled and they are less... And they're more educated
about what those countries are all about?
A. Well, we think it's important, because we think
even if people may travel to the South China Seas, to India
or to the other countries we've worked with, that our merchants
and fashion people will find products that they may not have
seen on their travels; and the fact that we can travel makes
it all the more interesting, to see what Bloomingdale's will
develop for them.
Q. And your development starts with textiles and goes
right through to the end product.
A. Our development really starts with our approach to
each of the different areas of the business. The apparel
area, textiles, home furnishings, accessories...
Q. Well, let's move on. You said that in addition to
Bloomingdale's and the community, there were other areas you
felt you had made a very unique contribution.
A. I think I talked about Bloomingdale's, the industry. I talked a little bit about that, in terms of the industry, but we didn't establish...

Q. Let's talk a little bit about the industry. How do you perceive the industry? Domestically, before you talk about the globe.

A. I see...Certainly, I get great satisfaction today from looking at some of the designers I and Bloomingdale's started with at a very early stage their careers. Be it a Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Perry Ellis and his organization, domestically. Or Donna Karan, who's grown enormously. It wasn't too many years ago that I introduced Donna to the Queen of England, when she came to Bloomingdale's in 1976. And I see many of the people who are worldwide stars who have gone from an early beginning at Bloomingdale's, and we've clearly been part of the development of their careers.

There's a whole group of younger people, be it the "(?) de Ladinis," the Ellen Tracys and the "Angio Devines." People who are growing in different areas.

I think home furnishings...We've also worked with talented people. Most recently, R.J. Spectre...on a European, international basis. We were the first store to have boutiques. One of the first with everyone from "Misoni" to "Sonya Rykiel," "Manuel Ungarro," and we had a very successful growth with them. I first met Georgio Armani when he was just starting. We have an opportunity, when we believe in somebody,
to back them and help make them grow. I think our input in
the creative design field, in terms of Julian Tomchin,
Barbara D'Arcy, in home furnishings. Furniture manufacturers.
This has domestic significance.
Q. I also think that what you've done in the field
of communications has been a breakthrough.
A. Yes, I do, and I should certainly comment on
that: Gordon Cooke, John Jay, "Barry" (?) . . . . . .
newspaper advertising . . . television . . . the development
of our catalogue...
Q. "Sighs and Whispers" is a collector's edition,
did you know that?
A. Oh, I know that. That was done in 1976, with
"Yves Bordin."
Q. And who would have taken a chance on him.
A. Uh huh.
Q. I loved seeing the shopping bags mounted on the
escalators as I was coming in. That's wonderful.
A. It's become an international status symbol. I
love the story that people getting on and off the airports
in Rome or Paris, carry matched luggage and two Blooming-
dale shopping bags.
Q. Love it.
A. Uh huh. So I think...
Q. It has something to do with the people you've been
recruiting. Let's talk a little bit about that.
What has been...All right...All right...If you make the difference, then you're choosing people who are going to make a difference. What are the particular...What's the criteria...?

A. I think what's made the difference has been a combination of me and a very talented organization we've had over the years. Bloomingdale's has been built by strong teams of people. In the mid-1960s, when I was a GMM, Bloomingdale's had an organization of Howard Goldfeder, Al Jacobs, Max Simon, Dick Hauser, Ronnie Ruskin, Arnold Aronson...all of whom I trained a good deal of their competition. And certainly more recently, coming from us, have been "Matt Serra..." I'm probably leaving out any number of people.... . . (?

Q. But they've all been in retailing. They haven't come from other fields. The reason I'm asking you to pursue you this a little bit is that there is this perception that retailing doesn't attract the most creative people.

A. Well, I like to think that Bloomingdale's does. And many of the heads of stores all over the country came out (?) . . . . So I do think we've contributed a substantial amount of talent.

Q. It's a little bit like Conde Nast training their people in the magazine field. They really have been training for the most creative leadership in the industry.

A. Clearly. On behalf of other publishers, I won't comment.
Q. Well, everybody from Jerry (?) ... It was a training ground, and as a matter of fact I have often wondered why they didn't do this type of thing. Some of the great people... Apart from the fact that the photographers and the artists and the illustrators and the writers (?) ...

I'd like to talk a little bit, if you would, about the synergy ..., because a lot of these people have gone on. Even though Bloomingdale's has been a role model for a department store, and a lot of these people have had those positions, they haven't done what they started to do. So there has to be something else... There's a synergistic relationship. There's ...

A. Well, I think Bloomingdale's has, really, an abundance of talent that helps. The interaction among the very talented group that we have, with Kal Ruttenstein, Julian Tomchil, working and representing our fashion offices and working with Barbara Bass and Lester Gribetz and Dennis Garro and Carl Levine and Norman Axelrod, "Darris" Johansson--they all work together very well. They work with Barbara D'Arcy in the store design area...

Q. That was another breakthrough, that you used her...

A. Yes. Well, Barbara headed up the model rooms and handled the furniture. A Gordon Cooke and a John Jay and a "Barry Marchichow," who heads up our direct marketing. We do have a very high level of (?) .... We respect each other. It really helps to make things happen.
Q. Want to talk about the family?
A. Sure. I would certainly, looking back at the contribution, be very proud, starting with Lee, who is truly wonderful. She's been a great support to be while doing some marvelous things for the world of dance, for Martha Graham. She chaired the board for many years, the national corporate fund for dance. She's run her own business, which she did for several years. And raising a family--our three children, all of whom went to Harvard, as I did, although I didn't..(?) And, of course, it produced two retailers and a journalist.

Q. I didn't realize that. What are they doing?
A. Well, Andy is a merchandise administrator at Macy's. Peggy is a buyer of hosiery and bodywear at Bloomingdale's. Her job is a job I held some 30 years ago. And Jimmy has written two books: "India and Our Times," and he's published very frequently by the Times, Esquire, Saturday Review, New York Magazine and others. And he is to keep Lee company so she doesn't have only retailers to talk to in the house.

Q. Tell me something about what you would...If you were...Talk about the unique people who have "made a difference." I'm not talking about the people who are around here, but the people who are out in the world of culture, as well as the world of design. Who have they been, for you? Who have been the people who have made the difference; whom you've looked to who have been role models for you.
A. Well, first I would start with two people whom I worked with at the store. I was very fortunate to be trained very much by Jed Davidson, who was a good merchant in his day, who took a personal interest in my career. And then by Harold Krensky. And both of these gentlemen were outstanding retailers.

Outside of Bloomingdale's, I was fortunate enough that Stanley Marcus was a close friend of Dad's. I've known him over the years...

Q. Was your Dad a retailer?
A. My mother was a retailer. My father was executive vice president of Lillian Krantz. So, I grew up in an atmosphere....

Q. I didn't know that. And what was your mother doing?
A. My mother was the fashion director at Bonwit Teller. She really ran the first specialized shopping service.

Q. Has this been written about? I don't remember seeing this.
A. It's bee...The Times had a feature here a while back called "My Son the President." She took care of...

Q. The New York Times?
A. Yes. And then...My mother really had a marvelous career, in terms of doing clothes for a great many Broadway shows, television--for the Ed Sullivan show...She also selected the wardrobe for Mrs. Eisenhower, Mrs. Kennedy, Ladybird Johnson...
Q. She's alive?
A. No, she passed away a few years back.
Q. I was going to ask to interview her.
A. And she had a great following, and people still talk to me about my mother, and I know Walter Hoving and Mildred "Custin" and Bill Klein. They all thought very highly of her.

So, I guess I came by my interest in retailing quite honestly.

Q. I was going to say. It's not just genetic.
A. No. People outside Bloomingdale's who've had influence...

Q. Well, as you just got through saying, you've met people all over the world. So, I mean, who...
A. Well, I'm, in an orderly fashion, going back a step, in terms of my own education... I had marvelous tutoring as an undergraduate who worked with me on my thesis, Charles Charrington, a great professor of manufacturing at the business school (?) . . . who were important early influences on me. I always admired very much...

Q. How did they influence you?
A. How did they influence me? Simply in terms of challenging me as I was educated, learned.

Q. You majored in what?
A. I majored, as an undergraduate, in government at Harvard College and did a thesis on government regulations
of industry. And in Harvard business school I guess my field was retailing. "General Doria" (?) was simply a great teacher. In terms of inspiring me in retailing, I would certainly list (?) . . . I had an opportunity to know people like Adam Gimbel and "Hector Espinoza" (?) . .

Q. Oh, God, now you've touched a man who...
A. Yeah, those were all...
Q. ...who walked me through his store.
A. Sure. Those were all friends of my Dad's. I got to know them when I was very young and admired what they did as retailers. That sort of led me into my career.
Q. Was Stanley a mentor?
A. Not really. I...
Q. Did you have a professional mentor?
A. What?
Q. Did you have a professional mentor?
A. If there was anyone it would have been Jed Davidson. I had people I admired enormously without ever really knowing them at all well. Wendell Wilkie, or Jack Kennedy.
Q. Important touchstones in your life.
A. Yes. I just simply...What they've done...It's hard to say, though, that there's been anyone who's been an important influence on my life and career other than possibly Lee.
Q. Who are some of the most exciting people you've known, who have been breakthrough people?
A. Well...
Q. That you could match your breakthrough thoughts about this business with? Who are they? And with whom did you have that kind of...?
A. I think probably, if I look back, the person who's both paralleled mine and whom I was quite close to over the years...I would put Leonard Lauder (?) high on the list.
Q. Really?
A. Leonard and I started fairly close (?). Ralph Lauren I've felt rather close to over the years. I admire what he's achieved and I still have a close relationship with him. Calvin Klein I think is certainly one of the key figures in my era. Bill Blass and, of course, the European designers...
Q. The arts?
A. In the arts, of course I respect Martha Graham in particular. I feel very...
Q. Is Lee close to Her?
A. Yes, Lee is very close to her. Lee chaired her board for many years. But more than that, I think Martha's one of our age and I'm privileged to be a good friend of hers. Zubin Mehta and Beverly Sills, two other good friends whom I respect enormously. It's a long ranging subject...
Q. Which of the countries that you have been involved in, in terms of bringing them here, did you feel you got the most out of personally?
A. Well, we've had a very close tie to India since
1966. A kind of family, on a personal basis, having close friends. I'm also a total Francofile. In spite of any of the problems of France, I just have a great affection for that country and what it stands for. Italy I also feel very close to. Our children have spent a great deal of time in France and Italy. China was a marvelous experience. I particularly enjoyed getting to China before it was overrun with tourists. We have very close Chinese friends.

Q. This is the 100th year for Bloomingdale's.
A. No, it's the 100th year for the 59th Street.
Q. 59th Street.
A. We opened in...
Q. Because you had your birthday before. Because you had the "Janus," that wonderful "Janus."
A. Yes. That was in 18...Bloomingdale's was founded at 56th and Third in 1872.
Q. Right.

......... Where now? Where now?
A. Where now? Ah...
Q. How much more time do we have? You set it.
A. Five minutes.
Q. All right. Let's talk about where now. For you personally.
A. For me personally? I continue to get enormous satisfaction out of my career, my involvement with the community. It's marvelous to have a grandchild whom I enjoy
very much. Our family is still very close. We spend many weekends together. We go skiing at our ski house in Utah. I'm pleased with the fact that I can get around pretty well. I continue to enjoy the travel that goes with the job. And all the innovation and creativity that goes with Bloom-ingdale's.

Q. Talk a little bit about F.I.T. What do you think this college can be in terms of one-world fashion?

A. Well, F.I.T. is one of the things I can remember from my first board meetings. I guess that was probably close to 15 years ago, it being a very different institution than it is today. When it was regarded (or at least I felt it was) as essentially a New York institution rather than somehow being a worldwide leader of fashion, education that it is.

One of our close friends, Ambassador and Mrs. "Rabb" in Italy, are very close to the top of F.I.T. and have watched the development of the Florence branch of F.I.T. with great interest. I've watched the worldwide designers be honored at F.I.T. I think that...

Q. Did you get to see the Balenciaga exhibit?

A. No, I was away. I think that with the growing professionalism in the various fields of fashion--design, retailing--I think F.I.T. is going to have certainly a more growing influence in these areas over the coming decades than in the past, and I think the quality has changed very much for the better. . (interruption) . .
Q. Just finish talking about the school. I just want a little bit more of your vision of the future of the school. Vis a vis one world fashion. This is really where I want to take it...

A. Well, I think the great thing about our store I think is that we regard fashion, be it women's apparel, men's, children's, or the home, on a world wide basis. We look at the world as a source of ideas, design and inspiration for us. We work very closely with our suppliers in this country. We are part of a continuing influence in world fashion. Bloomingdale's will be opening its first midwestern store in Chicago in 1988. Our influence through the United States I believe will continue to grow, particularly with the development of our stores in Florida and in Chicago. We seem to be in an era where there is greater consolidation and fewer surviving stores or-store groups. Bloomingdale's strength continues and hopefully we will continue to be an important influence, maybe of greater importance in the coming years, both in fashion and fashion leadership, and also in setting the standard for which stores can be in our own communities.

Q. As this relates to F.I.T., educating for this kind of sophisticated industry and this kind of what we think is major changes. It's going to be critical that they do become more and more of that universal, providing not only the beginner but also recharging those that have been here for a while who need to go back to school.
A. We will continue to look into F.I.T. as a source of talent and ideas. I'm rather pleased with both the number of F.I.T. graduates who are successful Bloomingdale executives and the number of our people, past and present, who are now actively involved on the F.I.T. faculty who are working in the school.

Q. Who do I talk to get a record of how many people are from F.I.T.?

A. Well, Margaret Hofbeck, who's just become vice president for personnel. She will be pleased to... I see the careers as people have promoted their educational background.

Q. That's right.

A. You know what I'm thinking about... At the school right now, Mike (?) who is teaching there; Ida Shalina (?) who is teaching there, Lester Gribeta is working for the school. And I think if I scratched around I'd find a few more.

Q. Have you seen this campaign that they've been doing? I'm looking for the other one which I think is even more exciting...

A. This one I've seen.

Q. Okay. Happy New Year.

A. Thank you. You caught me off guard with this. I hope I handled it very well.

Q. You did very well. I may want to come back to you...
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