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BARBARA BASS

The Bloomingdale Interviews
by Estelle Ellis

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BARBARA BASS
Interviewed by Estelle Ellis

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Q. Okay, Barbara.

A. Barbara Bass, Executive Vice President, ready-to-wear and fashion accessories.

Q. Tell us a little bit about yourself, Barbara. What's your career passage to Bloomingdale's?

A. I was at Burdine's and then went to Macy's California, and then here about...I guess it must be around six or seven years ago. And...

Q. What brought you here?

A. Actually Marvin did. At the time, I was...I was getting married and, obviously, I had...Being from Macy's, I was considering going to Macy's, obviously, and at the same time, during his corporate phase, Marvin called and had an idea to have a certain job relating to...Someone to interact between the store line and the merchandise organization. A new job for Bloomingdale's.

Q. Explain that a little bit. You know, when you say...

A. It was the Russell Stravitz job--half the stores--but, truthfully, it was less...I shouldn't say-powerful or important at that point in time, you know...

Q. When you say "the Russell Stravitz job," again you're talking in shorthand.

A. The liaison between the store line and the merchandise organizations.

Q. And that's what he does?

A. Yes.

Q. But...He had this in mind for you to do, in terms of ready-to-wear?

A. No, in terms of the whole store.

Q. The whole store. Well, then, how is it different from what Stravitz is doing...

A. Stravitz is all the stores--the store managers basically report to him. When the job was first started... Actually nobody reported to me, which is always an interesting position to be in. And I worked real closely with Marvin and, you know, suggested things for the stores to do to improve their business, etc. It was a great way to enter the company.

Q. How many stores were there then?

A. I had...I don't remember how many there were. I only had five or six stores, this was like a test job. To see if it could work out.

Q. How did he define the job that interested you?

A. Well, actually he didn't. Actually, six months later they asked me to write a job description.

Q. All right. How did you describe it?

A. Well, just as I have said: It was working with the store line, working with the merchandise organization, meaning him, mainly, to find out what the overall direction of the different divisions had to be, from the point of view of the merchandise organization, and, actually, working with Lester Gribetz and "Jack Schultz," who were VPs at the time.

And then, translating that for the stores, to be sure they were thinking in terms of what was important and also working out whether the shops would help their business or.. Whatever it was to help improve their business. It was an interesting job.

But I came here, rather than to Macy's, because Marvin is the most incredible interviewer ever. He really is. It's amazing. I mean, it really is amazing. I cannot imagine any people saying no to him. He truly is outstanding at that. And I was thinking about why. He really listens. He is truly interested about anything you have to say, because...As much I think because he can learn and use, perhaps, whatever he finds out. And I don't mean that in a negative way, but it makes you feel important, and, as opposed to anybody else I might have spoken to in any other organization. It made a big difference because (a), it wasn't really the job I was interested in, and...

Q. Particularly if it didn't have shape.

A. Well, that didn't even concern me. It was coming to a new organization. Obviously, getting married for the first time, moving back to New York from California and...Whatever. It was all, like, a lot new, and...Plus, you know, I had never wanted a branch type of experience. You know...Raised in the merchandise organization, it's kind of tough to tear yourself apart and say you want to do something in the store line. There is no direct P&L responsibility. I had a problem with

that. So, anyway, it worked out. It was probably the best way to enter a store, and also to get to know everybody in every area of the store.

Q. You came to know the people internally here, but you also came to know the people at the stores.

A. Right. And it was great working with Marvin. . . I mean, it really was the best kind of experience to have.

Q. How much interaction did you have on that?

A. A lot, because we went to the stores a lot together. You know, I'd meet with him at least once a week about different things. And certainly...It was...Obviously it was a hell of a lot of interaction.

Q. Give me some sense of walking a store with him. What it's like.

A. Well, first of all, it would be to his steps, I would be two to one. I mean, I would have to be running to keep up with him, because my legs aren't as long and I don't move as fast.

Q. It's not just mental, it's also physical?

A. Oh, yes. It's also physical. So...I mean Stravitz can keep up, he's built just like him--tall. So, it was interesting. But he really, you know, he always takes the time to talk to all the people and...Sales people and managers and he does ask them really interesting questions, and also...You know...Thought provoking kinds of questions. So...You know...

It's really a great experience to do that with him.

Q. What about trips? Have you taken trips with him?

A. Now I do, a lot. To Europe.

Q. All right. Tell me a little bit about that. How has it struck you? How do you go to Europe with him? What does it represent?

A. Well, it was mostly the designer market, at that point in time, and...

Q. And why did he need you to walk the market with him there?

A. Well, it was my job.

Q. Your job was to cover the...

A. That was one of the divisions I had. He's great at negotiating. He's a very visible person, which I think is important at Bloomingdale's. Bloomingdale's is almost to stores what Xerox is to photostats. I mean, it really is, when you get right down to it. You can't read a book where they talk about department stores, in New York City, generally it's Bloomingdale's. You know, the movies--"Splash" or "Moscow on the Hudson"--so it's really an interesting...

Q. Phenomenon.

A. Yes. It really is. It's almost generic. So...
What else would you like to know?

Q. Well...The man. You've given me some sense of a few of the things that you think separate him...To paraphrase...

A. He's really...I mean, I think he does care about the

people under him, because I know his direct reports, and when, you know, if there's ever a problem, he'll find... I mean, a physical problem...I know, my husband had some... It turned out to be nothing, but he arranged for him to meet with a doctor right away, and all this kind of stuff. And..He really is...I mean, he's really an incredible man. He is.

Q. What, from your point of view, separates him or differentiates him from other executives that you've...

A. His energy level, and his intelligence. I mean, he's very creative, you know. So....And he really enjoys...I mean, he is Bloomingdale's, for heaven's sake. He is so...And, truthfully, he probably couldn't do it without his wife, because she is there every step of the way. Every step of the way.

Q. That's an interesting role model for an executive... Because from my point of view it is.

A. We watch the two of them. They're like newlyweds. I mean, I don't mean that...I mean, they absolutely adore one another. They do. And it's...And it's (a) unusual...

Q. In retailing.

A. For anything..

Q. I have met a lot of wives of honchos in retail, and these women are always sort of lost, you know, in terms of their husband's lives.

A. But she helps him and he helps...I mean, I think it's as great a relationship as you could ever have. He's real

fortunate.

Q. I saw a picture of the two of them. He was getting some kind of honor at Stonehille College, and there she was, with him; he was getting his cap and gown and she was standing next to him.

A. And he's proud of her when she...She's President, you know, of Martha Graham, and he's proud as can be of her. I mean, it's really remarkable. We should all be so lucky, you know? So, you know, after that many years. It's very unusual.

Q. I love it. I love it. It's a role model for the people working here; the couples who are working here. Because, you know, one of the things that comes through...You know... You know, you've said his energy level, and that's been repeated...But also the intensity with which he works, which is not just a question of a physical thing but also a question of hours spent and so on. And retailing is a very time consuming profession.

A. It sure is.

Q. So, how do you fit your personal life into this time consuming kettle.

A. If your family enjoys it and believes in you, obviously it's doable. If not, I'm sure everybody winds up divorced or they stay together for the kids, or that kind of thing. The two of them are amazing.

Q. Do you feel, therefore, that they are a role model

for some of the couples in the store? I mean, thinking about...

A. I wouldn't say role model...

Q. Well, I'm just wondering about that. Because, you know, if you work...You know, every company has a culture, and if at the head of the company you've got someone who is really not the kind of man we just discussed, and the wife is lost, or the husband is lost, that...That really has an influence on younger people in the company.

A. Well, I do think a lot of...I mean, they're great friends and they're on an equal level, and I do think in most relationships that you view there is a little bit of chauvinistic behavior on the part of the man, and they aren't necessarily on equal level. And I think what makes theirs work is that Marvin is definitely not chauvinistic, which is very atypical of somebody his age. He really is, you know. Obviously I wouldn't be here if he were.

Q. So that also...We haven't talked about this. As a man, in a relationship with you as a woman executive. Let's talk about that a little bit. Because that...I think that's interesting.

A. It is very different. I mean, in the Macy's corporation, obviously, you can't say that. That could never happen. Never.

Q. Never.

A. Never. No, it just couldn't happen.

Q. Women don't rise to the top...

A. Well...I mean...Finkelstein put somebody he didn't love out to pasture (telephone interruption)...

Q. But you see, I don't think these things are accidents. Did you know this, though, when you were interviewed? That this was going to be one of the pluses of being here? Did you sense that?

A. Well, I wouldn't have come here otherwise, because they loved me at Macy's. It wasn't like...It was just a sense of...I mean, I had a similar relationship with, you know, the guy I worked with at Macy's California, as well. And I'm very instinctive about people and what works with me and what doesn't work with me. So, I had a sense that it would definitely work. Just...You know...And I didn't feel it was that big a gamble, obviously.

But he is really a remarkable man. He really is.

Q. So he made it easy for...Or, has he? In a sense, set a tone for men in this organization, vis a vis women?

A. He would...Well...I mean, he would never come out and say, "You hire a female." I mean, I don't think so. But you know...The fact that women come to power in an organization in itself pretty much sets the mood, doesn't it?

Q. Uh huh.

A. So...As opposed to Macy's organization, where a Finkelstein is extremely chauvinistic, and therefore those underneath him are all chauvinistic. Quite frankly I could (and I did) hire a lot of their terrific females because they

knew they weren't moving anywhere.

Q. Uh huh. Uh huh...Uh huh.

A. So..I think that in itself sets the tone. And, truthfully, it's great for recruiting people, you know?

Q. In a field where the only people who still have a fire in their belly for retailing may be women.

A. Uh huh. Yeah...I don't know about that, you know, but I do know that I was always amazed when all we got was mostly all female buyers and somehow the men always rose to the top. Which is kind of interesting.

Q. Interesting.

A. Yes. But...No, everybody is a product of his environment, and fortunately Marvin is very...I think he's pragmatic. That's why. He doesn't care--male or female--whoever can do the job, and I think that's easy to take. You know what I mean?

Q. Uh huh.

A. If you're not as good, that's one thing. But he is extremely pragmatic, so...

Q. He also has a daughter he's a mentor to in terms of retailing.

A. And his wife.

Q. And his wife. And that has to spill over. And this also has to be one of the things that makes a difference in this man. You're the first person who's been able to articulate that for me, because, primarily, I've only spoken to men up until now. So, I'm surely glad I talked to you. And we wouldn't

have been on this track if it hadn't been for that.

A. But it's really important, because he is very unusual. And I think it's very unique, and it's truly a feather in his cap. I mean, it really is.

Q. Tell me a little bit about...Can you remember any of the anecdotes? Any of the incidents, where he worked with groups of women or women designers, and where you saw this positive value coming through?

A. No. Because he doesn't...There's no difference between working with men and with women. I think that in itself is the difference. Some men, there is a difference.

Q. You see the difference.

A. There is a difference. There is a noticeable difference, when they are in the environment of all women. But there's no difference with him. There isn't. Which is how I like it.

Q. I think that's marvelous. So you really have equal time, you're saying. It's all equal time.

A. Uh huh. Uh huh.

Q. In the...What is it, six years you said you've been here?

A. Yes.

Q. In the six years, what have been the high points for you? In your relationship to, number one working with him, as well as to seeing the development of Bloomingdale's?

A. High points...Well, you know, the high points are obviously when things are going very well. I don't even know

what you mean by that, to be honest with you.

Q. Well...Things happened, from the time that you came, that shaped the growth of the operation, and you participated in it. What do you remember as the most interesting parts of this passage, in six years? In six years, what have you really seen happen? The world has changed, retailing has changed, department stores have been eaten up. Bloomingdale's has continued on a path. What have been the high points? For you? What stands out for you?

A. Probably just shaping the direction of the business in the future, and that doesn't happen like overnight. That's, you know...There have been times when the store's gotten off track and then immediately back on it. I think that's the most interesting thing. And probably....Probably it's most interesting to watch him react to the ups or downs of the business.

Q. Well, let's talk about that a little bit. Because that's where you really separate...the men...from the giants.

A. Uh huh. I mean, Marvin's really a great leader, and, you know, there have been difficult times and there have been times when you might think certain businesses, for the short run, aren't right, because they're not making as much money as they are somewhere else. But he is definitely not what.. shortsighted. He's definitely a much more long range thinker, which is, I think, also unusual, in a business that gives a report card every day...

Q. I was going to say, does it make you nervous in the

service?

A. No, as long as it's all discussed up front; that this is the strategy and everybody agrees, and until you get from point A to Z, there could be a few rough times till it evolves to be what you want it to be. You know...I think that's also a big positive for him. I mean, I think I have learned as much working for him...It's been a great experience, it really is, and we don't always agree. I have to tell you that.

Q. I heard something wonderful the other day. I don't know who I should be crediting with this, but someone said, "If you have two people in the same business and they both agree, you've got one too many."

A. Uh huh. Yes. But...

Q. All right. Let's talk about that. Because I've heard a lot....Along with all the things that you've said that really reiterate what I've heard from lots of people--from his energy level to the tremendously high expectations of himself that he passes on to others--has been this thing that no matter what you have evolved, you just know in the end that he knows. That he has seen it a certain way, so while you may have your own ideas and you may come to the desk with an agenda, in the end, it's his agenda. Now...How do you see that?

A. Well, that hasn't always happened in my case.

Q. It hasn't happened.

A. As I say, we don't always agree, Marvin and I. We

really don't. And I think as...But, you know, if push comes to shove, if you can't convince the guy you work for, and you do work for him, so...So there's always that. But, I ...But you learn to argue with somebody who's very opinionated. And I'm opinionated as well. But...

Q. And he knows that.

A. Sure does. But the...Listen, he still promoted me, all along the way. So...But with him, you just don't have a public argument. I mean, you just don't do it, in front of a crowd of people. And as long as the door's closed you can have any kind of discussion you want.

Q. He's persuadable?

A. Right. But, you see...And I think there's a lot of powerful people...You have an open, public argument, you're not gonna win. I mean, there's no way, because then it's a face issue, as well. So, I think it's a question of learning how to deal with whomever you have to deal with.

Q. Now, the pressure of the time which he seems to put on everyone, merely because he has a greater endurance than most: This has not been a problem for you?

A. Well, you know what I have found? People can push you if you are able to be pushed. I've always found that. And they tend to do that...You give a little and then they push further and further and further. And my marriage is A-number one important to me, as important as my career, and Marvin and I have had that discussion, and to be honest with you, it has

not been a problem. You know. If I wish to work at home rather than here, and if I want to come in on Sunday (which I frequently do, rather than Saturday, because Saturday everybody is here...Or because I don't want to be seen. Whatever. I don't care about that.), the job has to get done and I can work better without a lot of people interrupting me. So there's that. And with Marvin, that's all fine. I mean, there has never been a problem. Never. You know? I mean, I don't even know what to say about that. Yeah, he pushes everybody as far as he can. No question about it. But...

Q. Let's talk a little bit about Bloomingdale's as a department store, as you see it, at a time where so many people feel the department store's time has come and gone. Do you feel that this is something that...

A. You know, people say that...

Q. ...you can factor into your...

A. You know, everybody says that. But then I was reading some magazine article (I don't know which one; "Stores," or some such thing), where they surveyed all these people and how many people's first priority of where they would shop was specialty stores or, you know, whatever, and department stores is by and large the largest percentage of people. So...Everybody says that, and I think that's (?)

But department stores? As long as they keep evolving and changing, I don't think it's an issue. You know, I don't. As long as they have an identity.

Q. And clearly Bloomingdale's has an identity. How do you see your consumer...The consumers that you...Well, who do you have in focus?

A. We have an upscale...

Q. You, not we. Who do you have as a customer?

A. Well...We...We have an upscale, educated consumer.

Q. Okay.

A. Generally a young thinking consumer, not necessarily young in age. You know? And that is, even though we do have traditionally addressed customers, we are the first store for a trend to happen in, and we are the first store for a trend to die in. It could drop dead with us on Monday, and it's flying somewhere else, you know. But you can bet your bottom dollar that it's going to die there.

Q. That's an interesting observation.

A. But it's true. Boy, I'll tell you. It is true, and it's honest and true. This is the third company I have been with and I can tell you it's true.

Q. That's interesting. Are the cycles for change coming faster? For the new?

A. Are they coming faster?

Q. The trends that you're talking about. The signals that say...

A. The population is like getting really older, so the changes are less, maybe, dramatic. You know. They're...

Q. It's a more stable market?

A. It is a more stable market. I mean, there's nuances--different shapes in silhouettes or, you know, silver is hot or this...

Q. Less hot.

A. Less all of a sudden going to mini-skirts. Less of that kind of thing.

Q. Less of the bizarre.

A. Well, yes, because we're all getting older. I mean, I'm a baby-boomer, and it's most of us around. So, I think it's kind of interesting, what's happening. And when you look at the people, even the designers, that do exceptionally well, they do have a point of view and it doesn't change all the time necessarily, and people...You know, we have a (?) "Donna Parent" or a Calvin. I mean, it's refined. There are nuances of change, but it doesn't shock people from one season to the next.

Q. Do you do much recruiting? Are you involved in the recruitment process?

A. No, I'm only involved with recruitment under my own jurisdiction.

Q. Well, let's talk about that amount. What's the most persuasive thing you can say to get young people to want to be part of retailing to begin with, and to be part of Bloomingdale's, secondarily?

A. Well, I do very little recruiting at the opening level. I'm talking about hiring people for under my immediate

pyramid, divisional or buyer level. Beyond that I have not, in the last year or so...

Q. You never go out to the Harvards to say why you should have a career here.

A. People do, and at times they interview for a Harvard or a Smith or somebody like that. I'm generally traveling. But I...

Q. What would you tell people about why they should want retailing as a career?

A. That it is the fastest way, like, to run your own business with somebody else's money. I mean, where else can you, at three years, four years after you get into the business, basically run your own business, which it is. You know--the buyer is in charge of advertising, everything. Everything. I mean, there isn't anything else, if you were to go into insurance or banking, or whatever, for that to happen.

Q. That's a very interesting angle.

A. It happens to be true. That's why I did it, for sure.

Q. It's the answer I give to what you learn if you apprentice on magazines. It's the fastest way to learn the total industry--all industries--in one place. You learn it in one year. You're confronted with every industry that that magazine is eager to connect with.

A. Absolutely. And if you're truly entrepreneurial, you know it. You know if you're gonna make it or not. You

should be able to know it. And certainly your supervisors do, real early on, because the great ones are the ones that are ...that make you feel creative, and entrepreneurial too. So...

Q. Is there more room for creativity in retailing do you think, today?

A. I don't think enough of it is rewarded, unfortunately. But I do think that the very successful retailers are the creative ones. I mean, they can't...You've got to stay one step ahead of everyone and the customers. I mean, the customer wants to see something different all the time.

Q. Do you know much about F.I.T.? Have you ever been down there?

A. No, I haven't.

Q. Would you come and join me for lunch sometime? I'd like you to know Shirley Goodman.

A. Yes, sure.

Q. And I think you should before this whole thing.... We should all come to know why this institution is an organization that has his support and why it's a critical thing to know more about you and involve you. Would you like too?

A. Yes, Very much.

Q. Thanks a lot. Was it painless?

A. Yeah, painless.

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