

Stephanie Zollinger: It's Friday, October 2, 2009. I'm here with Brad Bloom. We're going to talk a little bit about what took place in the Larsen Design Studio in relationship to your job as a sales representative. So Brad, can you give us a little bit of background information? Where you grew up, your background in relationship to schooling?

Brad Bloom: I grew up in Lawrence, Kansas, and attended the University of Kansas, majoring in Textile Design. I was one of six students who studied with Cynthia Schira, Marna Goldstein, and a few others who actually knew Jack just from the weaving circle. My degree was in textiles, specializing in printing. Of course [I also took] weaving classes. My first exposure to Larsen was that during one class Cynthia Shearer brought in examples of Larsen's textiles. We would get memo samples that she would have, and would talk about construction, color, and pattern. That was the first intro to seeing Larsen fabrics.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you know right away you wanted to work for Larsen or did it just kind of evolve?

Brad Bloom: No, it evolved. It was exciting how it happened, looking back at it: going through the process in the textile department, winning a few jobs, or juried shows and getting the opportunity to go to Arrowmont workshops and things like that. I really enjoyed the class but I knew I wasn't good enough to be a textile designer. So, I was trying to figure out how to combine my education with a career. I thought, okay, sales. At the time I was working at a movie theater. I was the projectionist. It was after the second show. The box office girl was an interior design student. We were just chitchatting. I said, "Man, I want to get into sales and it has to be some job out there with fabrics." And she said, "Well, I am working part-time with an interior designer, and there are all these people that come in and see us. I will get a list together for you." So, she compiled about 20 company names and told me to check them out and one, of course, was Larsen. I was like, "Oh, that Larsen guy. Yeah, we get his samples in class." So I had that list. Then, right about that time also, I took an evening class up at the Kansas City Art Institute, with Jason Pollen, who did a fabric for Larsen Studio called Freesia. It was a split silk screen. Anyway, I was taking his evening class.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you know in high school that you were interested in textiles?

Brad Bloom: Actually in grade school. I remember taking my white underwear, my white t-shirts, and getting Rit's dye. I'd get my mother to go buy me Rit's dye and I'd go down and do tie-dye on a bunch of my white clothes and throw them in the washing

machine. I always had this passion for textiles, for fabrics. So it was not too far out of my realm of wanting to get into all this. It's just so fun with all the pieces and how they come together. So Jason, at the Kansas City Art Institute for one of our classes, has the Larsen rep come in from St. Louis. She did a big presentation of the Larsen Collection at that time. Again, I really had no idea who he was or what it was all about. But she came in and presented and right then it just sort of clicked. <Snaps fingers> It's like, "Ah, that's what I want to do. That would be perfect for me." I could use my education and my love of people in sales. I went back and took that list that I got from my co-worker at the movie theater. I had graduated that semester. I sent out 20 resumes to all these different companies; one being Larsen. Shortly after that, I get a phone call from Stephen Reichert, who at that time was a national sales manager. They said, "From your resume we're actually interested in talking to you."

Stephanie Zollinger: Were you applying for a rep job? Were you applying for a design position?

Brad Bloom: No, I was doing sales because I knew I didn't want to do design. So, he contacted me. We chitchatted on the phone. He said, "I'm going to have my St. Louis rep contact you. You guys can get together for dinner." Basically, that was because she was so close to the area and working Kansas City. She, without me knowing it, was really interviewing me to see if it was worth his time to go to the next step. At that time I was driving a motorcycle. I had to borrow a car to come into Kansas City. I had to borrow a suit to come in. I met Carol Fugita in Kansas City, and we hit it off immediately. We just had so much fun. I was in my 20s and talking to her. Then she contacted Stephen and said, "Yeah, I think you guys should talk to him. He'd be good." So I talked to Stephen on the phone and he said, "I'd like you to talk to our showroom manager in Boston. We have an inside sales position that we're looking to fill." I said, "All right. Fine." I get on the phone and talk to Laurie Store and we chitchatted. That went well and she said, "Yeah, he seems good and friendly. I think it's okay to go to the next step." They sort of lollygagged around setting up an interview so I told them, "Look, I'm going to be in New York. Let's set up a time." I got an interview. What was interesting in that whole process, I also got a callback from Gretchen Bellinger. She was interested in talking to me. So I got to New York and had both of these interviews set up. With Stephen Reichert at Larsen, once they saw me in person, they started thinking, "Well, we also have this whole territory in Ohio that we are looking for an outside rep [to take over]. And I, keep in mind, had really no sales experience in the industry, and they were looking at me for the showroom position in Boston. But, once we met in person in a meeting, Jim Jereb and Stephen Reichert said, "We were thinking of you for an inside sales position, but we think maybe you're the perfect person to do this outside sales in Ohio. It's a much bigger position, and we would like to make you an offer." Gretchen Bellinger had made me an offer also, so I got the choice of going back and forth. Long story short, I took the position doing outside sales based out of Cincinnati,

Ohio. I moved from Lawrence, Kansas, there. It was my first time leaving the city and going to work for Larsen. It was just like you are pinching yourself. You can't believe all this is happening.

Stephanie Zollinger: How exciting!

Brad Bloom: Oh, it was unbelievable. The territory for me was Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.

Stephanie Zollinger: Was this doing the fabrics or the carpets?

Brad Bloom: It was doing all of it.

Stephanie Zollinger: The whole Larsen line?

Brad Bloom: It was doing the whole Larsen line plus about six other companies; we were a multishowroom. I lived in Cincinnati. My direct showroom that supported me was the Chicago Showroom. My first boss was Ellie Karanauskas. She was the showroom manager. I couldn't have gotten paired up with anyone better than Ellie. She was like the queen bee salesperson for the company, and everyone worshipped her and loved her. She was so much fun. I was really fortunate in that regard. So, I sold Larsen textiles, carpet, and furniture.

Stephanie Zollinger: Nice.

Brad Bloom: Yeah, it was pretty incredible.

Stephanie Zollinger: Tell us your first memories with this job in relationship to Larsen. What were the innovative fabrics that you were trying to produce? What was the reaction of the designers?

Brad Bloom: At that time, it was 1988. I was at Larsen '88 to '98. I went through a full ten-year span and went up until the very end when Cowtan & Tout bought Larsen. So I got to see it in full swing. It was unbelievable. One of my best first memories of Larsen was going to a sales conference in New York at the showroom. We all got together: all the salespeople and all corporate people and Jack would do his big trunk show. He would present the new collection to everyone. The showroom was

unbelievable. It was just an amazing space. They had all these display samples and people were dressed up and cocktails going. It was just something I had never ever experienced in my life growing up in the Midwest. My first sales conference was Jack coming in, in Jack way, in his typical Jack dress. And the way he walks and talks.

Stephanie Zollinger: In his fedora hat?

Brad Bloom: In his fedora hat and some natural clothing on. He got up there and we're all standing in the back. He just had such a command of people and crowd. Everyone would just get really quiet and he'd walk up. The first collection had a fabric in it called Caravaggio. It was a beautiful jacquard-woven fabric; probably five different color ways. I'll never forget just standing in the back, and he threw that fabric out and everyone just gasped. It was like, "Oh, my god!" And the whispers and people applauding and just going crazy. It was incredible. It was amazing. The fun part was getting charged up at that level, in a sales conference meeting, and then you go back home to your territory, all of us salespeople around the country. Then we open up the little UPS boxes that we receive, and we start pulling out these samples again. We build up our road line. We price them and we get them all rotated in our presentation sequence. Then we take that out and go on the road and start presenting to the designers and try to take just a hint of that power that Larsen had in presenting it to get designers as excited as we were about the product.

Stephanie Zollinger: He packaged up this little trunk show for you, and it was that show that you would take on the road?

Brad Bloom: Basically. Jack would have his rotation of how he presented it in his trunk show. Then the sales managers would put it together in the best sequence for us to take out. Then we would get it and then we would edit it for our style of presenting or how our designers liked looking at fabrics. We would show an entire collection. Then I got smart after a few years and I started sending in the classics, other designs that weren't in the new collection, showing how it all worked together to help the designers see the whole scope of what the Larsen package was.

Stephanie Zollinger: You could kind of help coordinate.

Brad Bloom: Exactly. One of the fun parts of the job is working with the fabrics and creating schemes in rooms and sharing that feeling and inspiration with the designers.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you have any contact with the mills overseas? Did you ever have to work directly with the carpet mills since you represented Larsen Carpets?

Brad Bloom: Not in the designing process. That was all done from the design studio. Those of us in the sales end wouldn't have any contact with any of the fabric mills. However, with Larsen Carpet, I did win a couple of carpet trips to go over to Langenthal, Switzerland, toured around and saw their factory. One time I was invited with four people to New York to a little meeting about how to better distribute Larsen Carpets, but nothing on the design ends.

Stephanie Zollinger: They were all woven carpets, which is a little harder to sell than the tufted.

Brad Bloom: Exactly. They were expensive. They were Wilton carpets, the majority of them; the Larsen designs Quadrangle and Fantasy and the Heirloom. A lot of them Mark Pollack had designed and Jack and the Studio. They were at that time \$125.00 - \$150.00 a square foot. They were super expensive. We would have to go out and promote that to designers; sell that really high, high-end product. But, once the designers saw the quality and the colors and the pattern, and, once we helped them understand how you best use a carpet like that, it worked. It's not necessarily wall-to-wall, but maybe you just do a small six-by-nine or a nine-by-twelve area rug. It helped them not be so intimidated about it. You are just patient and you just keep seeding that whole process and eventually it takes off. My little territory did quite well in carpets. One good thing for me was that The Limited clothing company was in Columbus, Ohio. We had sisals and coirs that were part of our collection from the Larsen Carpet Division and I was able to get Abercrombie and Fitch to use one of our sisal leather-bound area rugs as a standard product in a number of their retail stores. It was just a rollout over a number of years. Then the lingerie division called Cacique did Heirloom carpet. We did a custom color of that and that was a fun process because the designers at The Limited had gathered their little color carpet palms and they were selecting the custom colors that they wanted. We wove it, they got it installed, and it didn't look good. They were really frustrated and they didn't know what to do. They called me and I'm still young and learning, so I called the studio and I said, "I need some help. Can we get someone out here to help them select the colors?" Within a couple of days they got back to me and they said, "Absolutely. We're gonna send Lisa Scull." So Lisa came with me and we went to The Limited. She saw the installation site, the lighting and the space and all that. Within just a few minutes, she was able to take out her little palms and pull together the right colors, then go back and have the carpet woven. She nailed it right away. It was just incredible the whole dynamic and depth of the design studio. How everyone just seemed to work so well together from my end. They knew it was a good account. They were right there to support me and help me.

Stephanie Zollinger: Talking about the sisals, Larsen rejuvenated the market for some of those natural fibers.

Brad Bloom: Absolutely. We were right at the beginning of bringing those back into the marketplace. We had to educate quite a few of the designers. Let them know about the material and the use and all that. It was always fun to be at the forefront of design and offering fibers and just different types of product that hadn't been seen before.

Stephanie Zollinger: Most of the carpets and fabrics ended up in commercial installations?

Brad Bloom: Commercial and residential. One of the great things about the Larsen Fabrics was that everyone could use them. We were in people's homes. We were in corporate offices. We were in retail stores such as The Limited. We were sold in hospitality, hotels. The offering of what we had was very diverse and needed in all types of installations.

Stephanie Zollinger: Talk about the Larsen Furniture line. Ben Baldwin was one of the designer pieces that you sold?

Brad Bloom: Ben Baldwin—

Stephanie Zollinger: Ernst Dettinger

Brad Bloom: Yes, exactly. There were a lot of big name designers and then there were some young ones also. Blake Tovin was one towards the end who had designed some pieces. It was the same as the carpet and the fabrics. They were high-end. They were incredibly well-designed and great quality and loved by everyone. It was just finding the right installation for those pieces.

Stephanie Zollinger: We hear so much about the Larsen fabrics, but we don't hear quite as much as the Larsen Carpets and then not near enough of the furniture. Is it because people didn't buy it in the mass quantities that they did the fabrics?

Brad Bloom: Exactly.

Stephanie Zollinger: Why was it a harder sell?

Brad Bloom: It was a harder sell because you had to sit in the pieces and feel them. That could only be done if you were near a showroom. You have so much other territory that's out there where you're just selling out of your trunk, and it's hard to sell from a tear sheet a piece of furniture. It is something that you are spending thousands and thousands of dollars on. You had to learn how to be a good salesperson to sell from a tear sheet and a small wood sample in your hand. Fabrics were always the easiest to sell because you could see them and touch them. People just understood them better. It was the main product of the Larsen family of designs.

Stephanie Zollinger: What were some of the best sellers in terms of fabric during your ten-year term with Larsen?

Brad Bloom: So many. Delineation was a great one. Square Root. A favorite of mine was a drapery fabric called Eclipse which was this phenomenal sun barrier, thermal insulating fabric. It was a fabric I first saw installed at Jack's house, LongHouse, during a sales meeting. They had just introduced it. We were all there in a group. Jack gathered us and said, "Look up high. I want to show you Eclipse installed." It was this double height space, and it was a skylight that he had fabricated or had someone fabricate this roller shade. We're all standing there and it was in the heat of August, about noontime, so the sun was straight up above. We look up and it was closed. He pushed a button and it mechanically rolled back and all of a sudden you just felt the heat and saw the light come through. So you saw how this fabric really, really worked. We were all, "Oh my gosh. Incredible. That's amazing." I'll never forget that. I go home and I thought, "Oh my God, that fabric's amazing. I am going to take that out with me every time. I'm going to show it till people are sick of it. If it's good for Jack, it'd be great for everyone else." So, for the next five-plus years I took that fabric Eclipse on every single appointment, showed it to every single designer I saw, for that full stretch of time, to where I would just burn that fabric in their mind. Eclipse, \$52.00, this wide.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did they react the same way you did?

Brad Bloom: They reacted so well. I would get them so hyped. I would say, "This is a perfect material for art collectors when you don't want the light coming in. You want it to be filtered. If you have big windows and you don't want all the heat or cold to come in." So over the time, because I showed that for so many years, I ended up selling hundreds and hundreds of yards of it because my designers just got to know it as well as I did. That all came from seeing it that first time in Larsen's home.

Stephanie Zollinger: What an impression it made on you, and it filtered out to your clientele.

Brad Bloom: Exactly. That's what the whole game was about.

Stephanie Zollinger: Theatrics.

Brad Bloom: Absolutely. It was coming from Larsen. If it didn't come from him, it came from everyone else like Ellie and Stephen Reichert and everyone else connected at Larsen. It was the most amazing group of people in that there were so many of us that had a fibers background or an appreciation of the arts or home furnishing materials and it was, now looking back, this special group of people.

Stephanie Zollinger: Is it the chemistry of the people that everyone kind of stayed around for so long? That's kind of unusual. Most people in the design industry hop around.

Brad Bloom: Very unusual. Exactly. Yeah, it was just that. We all loved one another. We loved the product. We loved the excitement. Everything about it. Even now, I just look back and there are so many incredible, special moments being part of that Larsen family. Only I was one of the short-lived ones at ten years, but it was such an amazing opportunity for me to have that as my first job in this industry.

Stephanie Zollinger: I see you've made some notes.

Brad Bloom: Yes. Just other Jack moments. One was our White Party, which was the sales conference that was out at his house, LongHouse. We all got a memo from the marketing department. Michael Brandt was the one who sent it out. We were instructed that we could only wear white to this sales meeting. There's probably like 60 of us. I'm going, "Oh my God. What a pain in the neck. I don't have white." I had to go out and buy something. "Why is this?" We're all chitchatting. We thought maybe there's a big press shoot and they want everyone to wear white. Maybe this, maybe that. No one had any ideas so we all get on this big bus. We're going out to the LongHouse in the Hamptons and the bus broke down. We had to go out and someone had to fix the engine. We're all standing out there in white. Everyone's thinking, "Oh my God, it's a nurses' convention." We were just having all these fun stories. So, anyway, we get to Jack's house and he comes out and greets us at the door; of course, in white and black. He had to be just a little different. He had some black scarf on. We get in there. We're still not clear why we're all wearing white. He has us all standing around. We're all holding these drinks. He welcomed us. He finally said, in Jack's way, "You're all wondering why you're wearing white. Well, the reason is what you're holding." We all sort of look around, and we're holding these big, fishbowl types of blue cocktails. He wanted the

blue cocktails to be the only color in the room. So that was a fun memory to think back on. One great Jack moment for me was when I had set up for him to be a lecturer at the museum in Toledo. We had done appointments in Cincinnati. We got in the car and drove the three hours up to Toledo. While in the car, I'm like, "Oh my God, I have to spend three hours with Jack in the car." I was so nervous. I didn't know what we'd talk about. He ended up making me feel so at ease and it was just so comfortable being with him. At that point, he told me that, "Good design was not always about expensive materials but a balance of inexpensive and expensive materials." As a salesperson, I'm thinking, "What are you talking about? All I want to do is sell expensive materials. It's more money in my pocket and it's bigger sales." I sort of look at him and said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "It's like a woman. If she's dressed in all expensive materials like a fur, a diamond, and a silk, she starts to look cheap. But if she's dressed with just a combination of subtle things, some not expensive and one beautiful piece, that stands out more." He used that as an example. Then he used food. He goes, "For instance, I'll ask you what you had for dinner last night. You're going to remember the entrée. You're not going to remember the rice and couscous and all that. The same with home furnishing. If you use all expensive materials, nothing stands out to be special. If you add a cotton dock sofa, the cotton dock is inexpensive but add beautiful silk pillows on the sofa, the silk pillows are what stands out and are luxurious." I always thought that was incredible and still, today, I use that example when I work with others. I had taken Jack to The Limited, which was my biggest account. He flew in. I had yards and yards of fabric shipped in. I had him show ZR. I had him show Larsen Carpet. I had him show Larsen Furniture and then just tons of Larsen Fabrics. I had so much sent in, it was actually overkill, but he never ever gave me grief for that. He just decided on the spot we would make it a two-part presentation. We would show to all The Limited designers one part of it. We would take a lunch break and then we'd come back and he would show the rest. He was magnificent. He was the best showman of all of us. He just would get up there and show the product. It just blew everyone away.

Stephanie Zollinger: They were all back at part two I would imagine.

Brad Bloom: Absolutely. Yeah. Everyone was just sitting on the edge of their seat waiting for him to talk. When we were there getting ready to go in, we had pulled off into this little convenience store on the outskirts of the whole Limited compound and Jack had stopped. He's out having a cigarette. We're just chitchatting and looking at the whole Limited compound and not really thinking much about it. We did The Limited presentation, and every trip Jack would do a trip report. He'd write up a report on what happened on the trip and his opinion on what went well and what didn't go bad, and in that report he wrote about the five flying buttresses, buildings of The Limited and their gray color. I'm going, "What's he talking about?" The next time I was there, I went to that same spot and I looked. You can see all the five different buildings and I could then

see what he saw, but, in that short time that we were standing there that he was having a cigarette, he took all that information in and just saw everything.

Stephanie Zollinger: He's very observant.

Brad Bloom: Very observant. It was just in the smallest ways. That was another great lesson for me. Stop and really look and pay attention. He had just done that so effortlessly. Another time I had him come into Cincinnati and he did appointments with me. We were going out to residential and corporate accounts. We had started our day and done our first appointment and he decided after that first call that he wanted a certain fabric, and it wasn't in the grouping of fabrics that we had. So he called back--that was before email and fax and Blackberries- -he called back to the design studio and he had them send a yard sample of a fabric on the next flight that went out from New York to Cincinnati. I was just blown away that he had just picked up the phone and that they could even do that. They just hopped and they got it right there. That sample arrived at the end of that day so we had it the full next day for him to show and sell. And that was the same trip also, I had set him up to do a big presentation at the museum in Cincinnati. I realized that Jack was a big ticket for me, so I would get him to come into work with me as much as possible.

Stephanie Zollinger: You could sell more that way.

Brad Bloom: Absolutely. I could sell more. I could get people hyped about the mystique of Jack and everything.

Stephanie Zollinger: You ended up with quite a wonderful relationship with him.

Brad Bloom: Yeah. I had an amazing opportunity to get to spend more time with him, I think, than a lot of sales people. One, in that I sought him out and he seemed to enjoy spending time with me, and we sort of got our dog-and-pony show done well. So it worked out well.

Stephanie Zollinger: Did you ever bounce back ideas with him having this textile background?

Brad Bloom: No, I didn't. I knew that they were the best at what they did. I was vocal about product that I needed to sell, not necessarily with him but with my direct managers.

Stephanie Zollinger: If you saw more of one particular weave selling, could you relate back that, "You might want to focus on such and such?"

Brad Bloom: Right. This is a good seller for me. Can we get more of this in the line? These colors are good. Whether that information got back to the design studio or not, I never knew. But we always were encouraged to have a voice and to share our thoughts with those that were managing us.

Stephanie Zollinger: Is there anything else you'd like to share?

Brad Bloom: Is there anything else on there?

Stephanie Zollinger: I have one question we didn't quite cover. You're fresh out of school and handed a large territory. Did they have a training program? How did you learn to go out and sell?

Brad Bloom: The training program was, looking back, not structured, but it happened at every point of just being involved with Larsen. With every new collection, after Jack would do his trunk show, we then got together afterwards in a small group. Karen Tokar, who was head of the Customer Service Division, would go through each individual fabric and talk specifically about yarns and weave structures and what the fabrics would be best used for or what we couldn't use them for. We were constantly educated on the fibers and the construction. Then, it was our job to take that information out and educate the designers. I, at the very beginning, spent an entire two weeks in the Chicago showroom training with Ellie. Ellie in the showroom would just have me shadow her and follow her around to see how she worked with designers. It was just people like Ellie and Karen Tokar and all these others that you just observed and you watched. You would just pick up so much knowledge.

Stephanie Zollinger: Was the territory you took over new to Larsen or had there been someone there before?

Brad Bloom: There had been a woman, Allison Applegate, who had had the territory before and she left to go work for Designtex, and then they offered me the position. I was their guinea pig and, in compensation, they said they would give me the territory if I would do it for straight commission. They wanted to go across the country with all the sales reps with that pay structure, but I would be the first. I said, "Sure. Fine. Why not? I'm a poor kid out of college anyway." I took the job doing it just straight commission. When I took it at the beginning, 1988, it was doing about \$180,000.00, a little under

\$200,000.00 a year. When I left ten years later I had brought the territory up to a million—two. We grew it quite successfully, selling all the different Larsen brands and other products. So it turned out in the end to be quite beneficial for me with that compensation package.

Stephanie Zollinger: In conclusion, do you have any other memorable experiences? I know talking to other former Larsen employees that all the parties were—

Brad Bloom: The holiday parties, the NeoCon parties, oh—the market parties were unbelievable. Going to Jack’s house in the Hamptons and going to his apartment in New York; it’s what you live for. It was amazing fun.

Stephanie Zollinger: Any of the holiday parties stand out?

Brad Bloom: I didn’t go to any of the holiday parties because I didn’t live in New York, so that was pretty much for the New York employees. Mine were all the market shows and then just the sales conferences.

Stephanie Zollinger: Looking back at all the innovative things that Larsen has done, in your mind, what of his innovations stands out? What would you tell other designers in terms of his significance to textile history?

Brad Bloom: His importance is just keeping so many different, unusual fabrics out there before anyone else had thought of doing them. The Doria Collection; all the beautiful wools from Colombia; the innovative weaves that came out of the mills in Switzerland; the linens from Belgium, just—it was a wide range of textiles from wovens and then all the prints that came from Paul Gedeohn and others that were there. No one else in any other companies were doing them. Or, if they did, it quickly followed what Larsen did.

Stephanie Zollinger: Why did he succeed when a lot of other people at that time did not?

Brad Bloom: I think he survived, one, because Jack had the vision and the passion for it, but I also think it was just all the people that were working with him and behind the scenes. Jack was the great front-end person that went out and promoted him and the product. But there were so many talented people that worked in the studios over all the

years. Then, he had an amazing dedicated team of sales people and operations people who kept the company going as long as it did.

Stephanie Zollinger: Towards the end, did he actually design any of the fabrics that were coming out the last five or ten years?

Brad Bloom: I think not as much, obviously, as he had done before because you had new guest creators coming in like Lori Weitzner and, of course, she had followed Mark Pollack and Lisa Scull. There was Michael Koch who was young, working in the studio. You had Herman Yu who was there. She's now in Seattle. He had a number of talented, creative people in the studio. Towards the end, that main player was Lori Weitzner as far as I can remember.

Stephanie Zollinger: Thank you so much.

Brad Bloom: Perfect. Thank you.

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