

Green Blog 2.1.12

I read this morning in the New York Times that Joseph Brooks, the former CEO of Lord and Taylor, had died. He was 84. He's the one who took Lord and Taylor and multiplied its number of stores across America. His retailing theatrics were legendary.

In a brief encounter I had with Joseph Brooks back in 1978, soon after I had graduated from college, my life shook and took an important turn.



Joseph Brooks in 1976, showing his Lord and Taylor store designs.

The moment happened at my first cocktail party at Lord and Taylor on Fifth Avenue, where I had just begun work as one of that year's class of young executives learning the retail trade and working in a buyer's office. Of course I thought I was pretty cool: My cohorts and I would soon have a chance to meet Estee Lauder, and already rumors buzzed about impending visits from Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren. Remember this was the time of chi-chi New York—but then, when has New York never been the place of chi-chi? I had already been accepted into Studio 54, but I was scratch poor, lived luckily in a rent-controlled apartment, and deep down I knew I was just passing time rubbing shoulders with these designer folks. But what the heck: meet who you can, and let's see what happens, was my motto.

At the party on Lord and Taylor's tenth floor, I waited my turn in line to meet Mr. Brooks. In my mind, I churned over compliments to say to him about the way the main floor was looking these days. Just a few people away from him, I slid my gum to the rear of my mouth. I fussed with my buttons and tie. I remembered to put my glass of vodka and tonic in my left hand. When I stepped in front of him, I remember I noticed his hair was slicked back, like a mobster's, and his eyes penetrated mine. As I began to utter my prepared compliment, Mr. Brooks leaned forward and spoke first, "Young man," he said, rather loudly. "Take that gum out of your mouth!"

It was many months after that encounter before I fully understood the weight and import of that thunderous moment—those forceful words of his that embarrassed and deflated me. I stayed in that job for about a year, and then took a job with an investment firm with an office fifty floors up at One Penn Plaza, overlooking Madison Square Garden. One very windy day, when I was making calls from my office, I felt the building sway. My business partner told me that the building was designed to sway four degrees in each direction, but I took the shake as a sign. That's when I connected the teetering sensation with the jolt I felt for quite some time after meeting Mr.



One Penn Plaza, NYC

Brooks and receiving his admonishment. That's the moment I awakened and began a different path, one I knew would consist of writing, this same path I envisioned would lead to teaching and working in a school somewhere, figuring out ways to help younger kids, not much younger than I was at the time, to see the world more clearly, so that they too would someday choose to follow a life path with purpose and meaning and authenticity. When I took the elevator down that day and faced the winds for real out on the Manhattan streets, I never again took that elevator back up.

Mr. Brooks, may you rest in peace.

[Check back from time to time to read Mr. E's Green Blog--Mr. Elieff is Head of School at Beth Yeshurun Day School in Houston, a preschool through fifth grade Jewish day school and a member of the Schechter Day School Network.]