

Bonwit manager mixes family, job

By LYNN ORR

At 32, Sherry Nelson is the youngest female store manager in the Bonwit Teller chain.

A 10-year career in the fashion retail world brought the 1964 Farmington High graduate to the executive office in Oakbrook, Ill., an affluent Chicago suburb.

But the decision to leave her former post as assistant store manager at the Somerset Bonwit in Troy happened overnight.

"I jumped at it," Ms. Nelson said. Her former boss, David Ernst, was promoted to New York as the director of stores after a year in the Beverly Hills Bonwit in California. On a routine visit to Somerset, he asked Ms. Nelson if she was ready to make the move to store manager.

"I wanted to go to Oakbrook, and told him to let me know how it there was an opening," she said. The following week she was interviewed, and the upper management team said: "If you can work this out with your husband, you be there tomorrow with a suitcase."

The next day she was on a company jet winging her way to Chicago, leaving her husband to sell their Birmingham home and assume full care of their infant son, Scott.

"THE CAREER move came for Sherry, but she would have gone along if it had come for me," said Gerald Nelson, a former Detroit News reporter. "We've always worked that way."

"It worked well with Jerry's career," Ms. Nelson said. He had been with the News for seven years and thought it was a good opportunity for a change.



As the youngest female store manager in the Bonwit Teller chain, Sherry Nelson says she has learned to make decisions "without wringing your hands over it."

"He already received two job offers here last week," she said with a trace of pride.

The Nelsons share home responsibilities, they explain, although he assumes kitchen detail.

"I could not go home and face the kitchen," she said. "My idea of cooking is jello and chicken pies. Jerry watches my diet. If it wasn't for him, I'd be a junk food junkie."

They also share responsibility for Scott, who recently celebrated his first birthday. Whenever she thinks her job is too much, spending an entire day with Scott convinces her that she belongs in the business world.

Taking care of Scott, visiting friends and getting to know Chicago takes up the little time Ms. Nelson spends away from the store.

"The housework suffers," she said. The dust may settle, but the career doesn't. What started out as a fluke transformed into a steady career climb.

MS. NELSON, then Sherry Hermann, received a bachelor's degree from Michigan State University in 1968. She studied advertising, art, and English literature, and during the advertising program, visited the J. L. Hudson Co. and met with on-campus recruiters before graduation.

She accepted an executive training program position and began a three-year stint as an assistant buyer. A promotion to buyer of ladies coats and suits found her traveling at least one week out of four.

In 1973, after her marriage, she spotted an ad for a position at Bonwit Teller's and was hired as a department manager for juniors. After 2 1/2 years, she was promoted to assistant store manager under David Ernst.

"He knew what he was getting," she said of her promotion.

"I'm extremely conscientious—I work six days a week and work until the job's done." Like many other young women in middle management, she didn't follow the traditional male career style of building foundations for future moves.

"I've honestly enjoyed every job. I never considered them as stepping stones," she said. Having a successful mentor who believed in Ms. Nelson's abilities bears some resemblance to the male team which moves up the company ladder.

Making the transition from working with figures and merchandise to supervising people was easy, she said.

"I work with people a lot of the time. It's our store, not my store," she said. A 16 per cent increase in spring sales inspired personnel.

"Change always stimulates everyone, but I think they appreciate the backing as well," Ms. Nelson said. "When I stand behind them, we get better support from the merchandising organization. That's basically my style. Let's get something accomplished."

The unpleasant task of firing personnel gets easier as you go along, she said.

"It was hard in the beginning to figure out an approach, but it's always justified. People that aren't performing well in their job don't like it basically. And that's what I tell them. They'd obviously be happier somewhere else," she said.

As for the next career move, Ms. Nelson is following a similar path by avoiding looking ahead.

"I'm a novice at being a store manager. It will take a couple of years to know what it's all about."

"Once you get to this level, you're very marketable," she said. "You get used to making a decision without 'wringing your hands over it,'" she said.

"It's the most important thing to remember. When you're the boss, you have to make a decision."

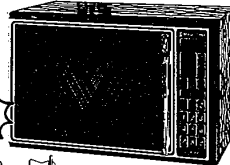
Asked about the possibility of more children, it's easy to see that decision-making comes easily.

"Of course," she said. "I have to have a little girl."

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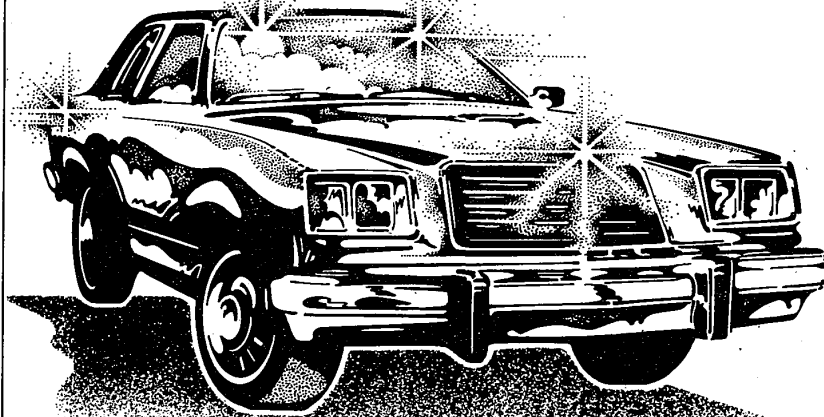
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