

Urban Legend

A Tribute to Tom Glisson

May 20, 1945 – September 20 2011

By Don Browne

“He was a rarity at Citi Trends,” said George Bellino, retired President and CMO, when talking about his good friend and Senior Men’s Buyer, Tom Glisson, who was a driving force behind the company’s rapid success during the first half of the last decade. “He really understood the men’s business. He understood fashion and he understood closeouts. But most importantly, Tom understood the customer.”

While any buyer worth a stitch should know their customer, one of the great enigmas in the off-price fashion trade was how a Caucasian, middle-class southern gentleman named Tom Glisson could have such an eye for styles that appealed to the urban African-American male.

“He really understood the African-American customer base inherently,” claims Allison Seferian, retired Citi Trends Vice President of Kids & Branded Merchandising. “So much so that, if you’d never met him in person, you would have thought he was African-American.”

As Bellino, Seferian and countless other co-workers and vendors could attest, Thomas Herman Glisson of Savannah, Georgia was the authority on the subject of men’s and boy’s urban fashion. They even have the balance sheets to prove it. Since his passing last September 20th, the accolades and testimonials from so many friends in the trade shed some light on why Tom was so enormously successful in this category. Indeed, one could argue that the common character traits and business practices

“Tom Glisson was a true people person. His business dinners were more like ‘Model UNs’ because of all the different people from different walks of life.”

cited by these contemporaries – who will also tell you that each was his very good friend – appear to be Tom Glisson’s “open” trade secrets.

FIRST, THERE WAS THE SIZE OF TOM’S HEART

“Tom’s heart was crazy big,” exclaims Allison. “At his funeral, it came out time and again how kind-hearted he was. There was one account of how somebody stole from his store (that he owned on Savannah’s historic Broughton Street during the ‘70s and ‘80s). They caught the guy, and Tom had him set up a layaway arrangement instead of pressing charges.”

“Calling him a southern gentleman wouldn’t be enough for him,” said Lance Kessler of Manufacturers Exchange in New York. “He was a very special person. He was an usher at my wedding. He came to my son’s briss. What started as a business relationship morphed into a very close personal friendship that

spanned twenty years.”

According to Kessler, if you gave Tom Glisson the time of day, you would profit from his kindness, as well as his fashion knowledge. Steal Deal is a prime example of a company that benefited from Tom’s counsel.

“He had a big part in our success,” said Ebby Davood of Steal Deal. “We ‘stalked’ him for three OFFPRICE Shows. When he finally came to our booth, Tom gave us ideas on how to pack the products correctly, what sizes to emphasize (or not overlap), and what to source. We then put an order together and the goods sold. After that, we became the booth where he spent the most time. We made a lot of money together.”

Tom Glisson was a true people person. His business dinners were more like ‘Model UNs’ because of all the different people he would invite to join him. He connected with so many different people from different walks of life. It was perhaps his biggest asset that he was open to so many different perspectives and ideas, as well as a chance to share some jokes.

SPEAKING OF JOKES, TOM’S DRY SENSE OF HUMOR WAS HIS NEXT GREAT ASSET

“He had a hair-trigger sense of humor, the quickest of almost anyone I’ve ever met,” claims Jon Devorkin, Vice President / Divisional Manager at Citi Trends. “He made a funny joke and not at anyone’s expense. He saw the humor in everything and had a gift for putting that humor into words.”

According to Ebby Davood, “He used to say that ‘Some of the ugliest, best-selling merchandise comes from Steal Deal!’ The joke actually made other buyers feel more at ease about trying our urban styles.”

And that something was another one of Tom’s unique gifts – the rare ability of mixing business with humor.

“We opened the day talking about something funny,” said Barry Womack, who was Tom’s Assistant Buyer from 2003-‘10. “We made everyone around us laugh from the stuff we talked about – it made it easy to come to work every morning.”

Barry, who’s African-American, adds that they would share and exchange a lot of politically incorrect jokes. “We told people we were Bacardi and Coke. He said if I were any shorter, I’d be Diet Coke. We had a lot of fun, but if I goofed up on the job and he needed to correct me, he was always very respectful and business-like.”

After suffering a stroke in 2001, Tom tapped into his sense of humor to bounce back and continue producing great results for Citi Trends.

“We were in New York one time on business,” recalls Allison Seferien, “He has bells palsy and I had a bad back. We were having the worst time trying to cross the street on a windy day, Tom looks at me and says, ‘you know, I can’t talk the talk, and you can’t walk the walk!’”

Allison adds that Tom was shy about complements, and whenever he was acknowledged for his great work, “He would go into the Elvis impression, ‘Thank you, thank you very much.’ It always made people laugh.”

It would appear that Tom Glisson performed the Elvis impression several times in his life, as his peers, managers and subordinates alike were openly appreciative of his help, his ideas and his guidance on several occasions. This is yet another great character trait that made Tom Glisson



an urban legend – he loved to teach.

According to George Bellino, Tom really developed Su-Lin Timberman during their time together at Citi Trends. Now living in China as a Vice President of Merchandising, Childrens Wear at LF Asia, Timberman agrees with Bellino’s assessment. “Tom never tried to school me on how things should be because we spoke the same language. We both shared the same passion for knowing our customer and passing on the knowledge.”

“Tom was the best teacher I NEVER had,” explains Barry Womack. “I just paid attention and picked up a lot from him. He was such an innovator in the urban market. He saw a lot of things that other people didn’t see.”

According to Barry, Tom had a lot of quotes and tips that were easy to remember and invaluable from a

training standpoint. One such quote was “never move faster than your guy. We have the easiest job buying off price. We don’t have to be clairvoyant, we just have to pay attention.”

His other tips: “The customer’s taste levels changes daily,” and “If you like the product, buy it all so that no other retailers have it.”

Because of this philosophy, both Jon Devorkin and Barry Womack saw Tom put together the biggest deals they’d ever seen.

“Once Tom taught me all of this, my job became very easy,” Barry concludes. “He taught me how to handle people in the market and in life in general. He always gave me a lot of positive reinforcement. I wouldn’t be able to do what I’m able to do today if it wasn’t for Tom.”

Tom Glisson’s tutelage was not just reserved for the Citi Trends buyers.

“Tom was everyone’s best consultant without being on their payroll,” Womack claims. This is arguably one of his greatest lessons for buying urban, or just buying in general: Always take care of your vendors.

“Nobody took care of vendors better than Tom Glisson,” states Jon Devorkin. “When Tom would negotiate for product, he would get a little bit more than he needed off the price, and then say to the vendor, ‘you gave me a dollar back, so I’m going to give you 10 cents back because I only need 90 cents.’ He gave back because he knew that being a good buyer was being the first call from the vendor (when new product arrived. So Tom and I playing ‘good cop – bad cop’ very often would land some deals so big they would make a quarter if not the whole season.”

“Your biggest ally is going to be your vendors,” was another quote/tip that Barry remembers from Glisson. “These guys want to make customers and not just sales. If you’re not quite sure of an item, buy it anyway, because if it doesn’t sell, you learned something. He was open to testing.”

“He used to guide us in what he was looking for and what kind of price he needed so that you could go out and find the right deals,” said Ebby Davood. “He gave (my brother) Michael and me a lot of encouragement over the years, especially during the down times. Tom kept us grounded. He helped us with a lot of design issues so that we could determine what was definitely going to sell. Tom was one of the most knowledgeable guys out there.”

Tom had a big heart. He had a very dry sense of humor. And he was very generous with sharing his knowledge, and taking care of his vendors. Arguably, these are great traits for any merchandising professional. But what was it that made him an “urban legend?” Interestingly enough, those close to him would contend that it was his deep Savannah roots that made him a big hit in the showrooms of New York and Los Angeles.

LIFE IN SAVANNAH

Thomas Herman Glisson was born in Savannah on May 20, 1945. The son of Herman W. and Gladys Glisson, Tom had one brother, and both were both adopted. He was a graduate of Savannah High School, where he played basketball. After graduation, Tom went to work on Broughton Street, where Savannah shopped before the emergence of malls. It would be the start of a brilliant and lifelong career in the fashion industry.

After cutting his teeth with different retailers, Tom opened Brothers and Sisters, the first unisex clothing store in Savannah.

“When Brothers and Sisters came out in the 70s, it was really advanced for that time,” explains Allison Seferian. “He brought hip to Savannah. He had the thing. People went to his stores to see what was happening.”

Tom joined Allied Department Stores in the 1980’s, which was a part of Variety Wholesalers at the time. From the early days at Allied, through the acquisition and conversion to Citi Trends in 1999, Tom tapped into his experience with the African-American market to be a driving force for the men’s urban category.

“Tom had a big heart. He had a very dry sense of humor. And he was very generous with sharing his knowledge, and taking care of his vendors.”

“He had a lot of African American friends in Savannah,” says Ebby Davood. “He grew up in that culture. It came as second nature to him. There were those deals that most guys wouldn’t touch with a 10-foot pole, but Tom and I knew they would sell in the urban market.”

“In the early days of Citi Trends, the original distribution center and office was in Savannah,” recalls George Bellino. “He would go to the back 2-3 times each day to ask the (mostly African-American) employees there what they thought about the merchandise.”

“He knew every worker’s name in our distribution center and he would greet every worker by name,” said Jon Devorkin. “That helped get his merchandise to the stores.”

According to many of his friends, Tom Glisson did not have much of a family life. His brother was killed while serving in the war in Vietnam, and both of his parents died while he was still a young man. He was married and divorced twice (though he maintained good relationships with both exes), and is survived by his two sons, Miles and Cody. As someone who was adopted at birth, and suffered his share of family tragedies, Tom’s heart went out to everyone, especially those who felt disenfranchised from mainstream America. Hence, in the multi-cultural world of off-price, there were a countless number of colleagues and vendors whom Tom Glisson referred to as family.

THE GENIUS OF TOM GLISSON

Working closely with his large extended family, Tom employed his extraordinary design, creative and merchandising talents to do amazing things for Citi Trends. And just about everyone felt like each was his partner along the way – the Dean Martin to his Jerry Lewis. Indeed, Tom treated each one like a partner.

“I was great at the reports. Tom was great at the merchandising,” said Jon Devorkin. “We had a great run together.”

“I feel like we became the perfect team. We knew how to incorporate our teamwork into the market,” said Barry Womack, who really admired Tom’s talent for re-designing existing merchandise. “He knew what people wore and what they were willing to pay for it. He didn’t realize how talented he was.”

“Citi Trends would never have happened without Tom,” asserts Allison Seferian. “He had that loyal

customer base. He had boys and men's, and I had girls and ladies. A lot of my success came from following Tom's lead. He was a lead merchant in the company."

"I was classically trained at Macy's (executive training), where you look at your numbers, and your runs," explains Allison. "This was funny to Tom, because he was constantly doing something new. He was so intuitive about his case assortment and his hook-ups. He was the creator of Red Ape. Before he had his stroke, he was a really good artist. And after his stroke, he learned to use his left hand. He could still draw."

"Tom believed in the path of least resistance," said Barry. "Forget about the spreadsheets' he would say. And he had the wall full of plaques to show for his approach. Tom won at least two awards from Citi Trends each year, including 'Fastest Turn' (2-3 years in a row), 'Best Off Price Buy' and 'Buyer of the Year.' His biggest competition was the Infants/Toddlers (which was headed by a buyer that he mentored – Su Lin Timberman)."

Shortly after Jon Devorkin joined the company in 2001, a vendor approached them with an opportunity to buy 1000 dozen jeans in the Citi Trends styles. "The problem was they had no labels other than a small fabric content on the inside (which also had the size). He could sell it to us at an absurdly low price. So Tom came up with a brilliant idea: take the price ticket and put the size on it (in large print). Then, 'blow up' an enlarged ticket into a sign for the rack that read '\$9.99 Jeans – look for your size on this price tag.' The jeans blew out! The vendors said afterward you could never continue this program at this price. Over the next couple years, the program developed into hundreds of thousands of units from a fluke of an item thanks to Tom's marketing ideas."

"Tom saw the smallest detail in

everything and knew how to put a label on it," said Lance Kessler of Manufacturers Exchange. "He had a very good eye."

MR. RED APE

Speaking of labels, perhaps the greatest example of Tom's design and merchandising genius was the Red Ape brand that he developed for Citi Trends. The store wanted a margin builder that really talked to their

The result of Tom Glisson's hard work and vision was a multi-million dollar line that was very profitable. "It was so successful that most customers thought it was an independent brand, and not a private label for Citi Trends," assets Jon Devorkin.

customer. When he learned about two high end Japanese urban wear brands, Red Monkey and Bathing Ape, Tom decided to combine the two to create a brand for customers who were behind the curve, and at their price points.

"He came up with the idea in my showroom," said Lance Kessler. "He wrote it on a napkin. I think I still have that napkin."

"We wanted to come up with a Citi Trends own brand, and he designed the label," remembers Allison Seferian. "He put the whole thing together and the customers responded to it. In fact, Red Ape looked a lot better than many of the established brands."

The result of Tom Glisson's hard work and vision was a multi-million dollar line that was very profitable. "It was so successful that most customers thought it was an independent brand, and not a private label for Citi Trends," asserts Jon Devorkin.

THE URBAN LEGEND LIVES

Tom Glisson will be remembered for his wit, talents and wonderful personality. He loved to travel, and he loved music (his nickname was Major Tom from David Bowie). He was loved by so many in the trade. His annual Christmas parties that he hosted at his house were well attended by buyers and vendors who would fly in from all over the country – even without appointments. Jon Devorkin described these pilgrimages from the vendor base as "great shows of affection."

Finally, there was one other best practice that made Tom Glisson a success – he never missed an OFFPRICE Show. Even after he had his stroke in 2001, he was at every show in his red cart.

"When we were at the OFFPRICE Show, we'd sit down at a booth and write our orders," Barry Womack explains. "As soon as Tom left, other retailers would come in to the same booth and ask 'What did Glisson buy?'"

Don Browne is the former Marketing Director and Editor/Publisher for OFFPRICE (2006 – 2011).