

Kara Snyder 0:00

Hello, and welcome to the podcast, a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host Kara Snyder and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode, we're sitting down with an alum of the College and today we have a chance to talk to Sandy Shelton. Sandy is an alum of the Department of Family Consumer Sciences, and currently serves as regional manager for Barnes and Noble College. Welcome, and thank you for being here. Oh, good morning.

Sandy Shelton 0:29

Thank you for having me. I'm very, very excited to sit down and talk with you today.

Kara Snyder 0:34

This is going to be so fun. Let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose to Illinois State?

Sandy Shelton 0:38

Oh, my gosh, well, it really was based upon what I wanted to study. So I realized early on that I had a real deep interest in fashion merchandising, I was always interested in fashion and different style trends of ad. So you know, I will still say hands down the 80s had the very best trends during that decade, always so fascinating to me. When I started researching schools, I really wanted to find a school that fit everything that I wanted to get out of my four years. And that's how I discovered Illinois State, what a wonderful fashion merchandising program they had. And so that really is what led me to Illinois State and campus. And what a wonderful experience I had. Well, and

Kara Snyder 1:37

I think you're one of the lucky ones to to really find your passion that early on. And I would say some high school students don't realize that fashion can actually be a career. So did you have a mentor? Or how did you realize that you could make a living doing something you love like that?

Sandy Shelton 1:53

It actually started in high school, my senior year of high school, one of my teachers was talking with me and said, You are so involved in fashion. And that is something you really love. Have you looked into fashion merchandising. And that really was what sparked that conversation sparked the kind of investigation into well, what can I do in fashion? And I think a lot of students, I certainly was one of them. Your initial thoughts are I want to be a buyer. I want to fly across the country. And either I want to be a buyer or I want to be a designer. But there are so many facets of fashion and merchandising and retail, and certainly so many opportunities. And it's interesting, I do consider myself fortunate that it is what I knew I wanted to do. It's what I studied, and it's still what I do today. Many people that I have met over the years in retail, they were a history major and landed in fashion merchandising or landed in retail. And the greatest gift and blessing is that, you know, it truly was something I wanted to do and something I was able to do over the last three decades. And certainly what a great experience because there are again, so many areas of opportunity within the retail world.

Kara Snyder 3:20

And so you decided to become a red bird you found your passion. What was your time like on campus? What were you involved with outside of the classroom?

Sandy Shelton 3:30

Oh my gosh, well, many things. I always worked from the Waterson cafeteria to restaurants in town. I was there when Jr's hotel was first built and a part of the very first staff. I was a hostess in their dining room. And then I finally was able to work as a visual merchandiser at Eastland Mall. So Phil, how cool were areas throughout my four years. And then in terms of organizations on campus, the one I was heavily involved in was the fashion merchandising organization. And I love being a part of that association because it connected me closer to my peers, where we would be able to really kind of share what our aspirations were and kind of lean on each other, but also to build deeper connections with faculty to be a part of the conversations when alumni would visit and kind of share their experience. It was really a great opportunity just to really build those relationships. And there are some relationships that I still carry to this day. Doctor and stem was one of my favorite professors while I was a student, and I've literally stayed connected with her for 30 years. So I am just really blessed again just to have had those relationships that really helped laid the foundation, and really helped continue to carry me through these last few years with what I do in the retail industry.

Kara Snyder 5:12

It sounds like you really made the most of your campus experience. When you think back on that time, and you think about everything from working in the Waterson dining center to working on tumors, which still here now called the Chateau big, beautiful castle, and taking part in that student organization, what are some transferable skills that you feel like you gained in that experience that you still carry with you today?

Sandy Shelton 5:39

Oh, my goodness, I would say definitely working with people. And really understanding that there are so many personalities, and the psychology of people is fascinating. And sometimes you can really help make somebody's day great. And then sometimes you have people that just are a little more difficult and challenging. And I think being able to be a part of all of those roles on campus. And having those jobs through my time on campus really helped me understand and prepared me to deal with the public, and to be confident in public speaking, to really understand how to conduct yourself professionally. And certainly, when you're 20 and 21, those skills, you really kind of build over time. But to be able to have that experience, going into the workforce and into the field that I went into really kind of helped prepare me for that.

Kara Snyder 6:44

Which is a perfect transition, because that was my next question for you is tell us about that initial job search. You have this wealth of opportunity and experience on campus, but it can still be kind of scary. Once you have that degree. And you're looking for something full time. What was that like for you?

Sandy Shelton 7:00

Oh, my goodness, Illinois State was wonderful. They held a job fair every year. And my junior year, I attended the job fair, just to really kind of explore the different opportunities out there. And I remember the one thing one of our professors would always say was, if you're going into retail, always pick a company that is most like you. So I kind of was gravitating towards traditional retail versus chain stores. I was really more interested in the department store aspect at that point. And so I went to the job fair, my junior year, and met a recruiter from JC Penney. Now, at that time, JC Penney was a thriving department store in almost every mall across the country. Just a really profitable company, you know, during those times, so I had a great conversation with the recruiter, but I was a junior. So he said, You know what, okay, come back and talk to me next year. And so I waited, and senior year, the job fair came, I attended the job fair, and I was on a hunt. I was looking for that booth. And, sure enough, the same recruiter was back on campus. And I remember this, like it happened yesterday. So I marched right up to him, I reintroduce myself, and I asked him if he remembered me. I said, I spoke with you last year, you told me to come back this year, and here I am. And he actually did remember me. And we had a wonderful conversation, which led to a round of interviews. And I secured my first position in April. So one month before graduation, I had secured my position to begin my career with JC Penney. And I graduated in May and started my job in June of that year. So it was really exciting.

Kara Snyder 9:09

Well, and what I love about that story too, is it speaks to the importance of putting yourself out there, even if you're not sure why, you know, I could see a lot of other juniors might be like, Well, why should I bother going to the job fair, and look how important it was to you and launch of your career. That's so cool.

Sandy Shelton 9:25

Lully and I will say, if not for any other reason, to just get the nerves out. And to be able to speak with recruiters and you know, what is a real interview like, you know, because up until that point, it was just part time jobs in various capacities. Now, it's, I'm graduating and I want to start my career. So really, just to kind of get a feel for what are the recruiters asking and to really build your confidence level up was it's really important. I'm really, really pleased that I had the experience that I had. And it's funny, I still have the job offer letter. They sent me 9090. And it's just, um, it was a great experience. I started there as a Merchandise Manager. It was really two parts. It was managing a department, but it was also buying. At that time, their structure was that they had buyers in their home office. And then they also had buyers in the field. So if you were managing a department in a store, you were the buyer for that particular department. And really, your success was dependent upon the area you were in the department you oversaw and trends played a huge role in how successful you were. So I was there in that role for eight years in various stores. I moved back home started in Chicago. And then ironically, eight months later, a position in Bloomington became available. And so I came back to Bloomington Normal and worked for several years. And then again, fast forward back to the Chicagoland area. But I covered everything from women's to children's to shoes to find and fashion jewelry, lingerie.

And again, just having those different trends over the years played a huge role in how successful my areas were. Do you remember Barney the big purple plush dinosaur? Yes. I was managing the children's department. The year Bernie became so incredibly popular. Oh no. Just from a retail perspective, the amount of merchandising and understanding how much you were selling and how much more you needed to bring in to meet the demand of the consumer was just really a great experience.

Kara Snyder 12:08

Oh, interesting to be able to see that trend impact your work like that. That would be fascinating. So it sounds like you were really lucky if you got to get a lot of experience right away due to JC Penney's model of how they were having you merchandise and also having you do some buying, which is really incredible. Tell us then how did you get from JC Penney to Barnes and Noble What did that look like?

Sandy Shelton 12:33

Oh, gosh, well, I will tell you when I worked at JC Penney, I said I will never leave. I will retire here. I love my job. I love the people. And well Kohl's, which at the time was an up and coming retailer, a recruiter contacted me. I spoke with the recruiter, I went back and I did some research. And at the time, they only had about 200 stores. So I didn't know very much, except that they had anticipated growth. So I declined that first offer. Fast forward a couple more years, I'm now working at JC Penney in the Chicagoland area. And the recruiter calls me again, at this point, they have now gone from 200 to 800 stores. Probably one of the hardest decisions was I'm happy in my career. I love the people I work with the company is thriving. But you know what, I think I'm gonna make this jump and see where this takes me. And I will say it was, again, one of the best things I did, because we went from 800 stores to over 1000 in a very short time. And the experience I was able to get in my time there was you know, I started as an assistant manager, and was able to move into operating my own store. And then from that point, I was able to move from a store manager to a district manager overseeing 12 stores in the Chicagoland area. And again, because the company was growing so much the experience I have now gotten is not only managing a team of managers and a team of stores, but we were building stores. So now I'm able to really dive into learning all about building a store from the ground up. And what all is involved in that and working with the contractors to the design and construction team to building that four walls store and then hiring your team training and developing them to be successful in their roles. It was just a really great experience to be able to do all of that. And I did that for about eight years. And then a recruiter from Barnes and Noble called that's when I really sat back and I said I don't Now, like, what am I going to do with books, you know, I'm all about fashion. And what I realized was the part of the business was Barnes and Noble college. So they are bookstores, on college campuses. And while textbooks are a very large portion of the business, there's a huge portion in clothing and gifts, being able to learn the differences in terms of who your customer is, in every area that I've ever worked in your demographic plays a huge role in the product you have and how successful you are. Our demographic now is your college student. And if you have big game days, what type of apparel is important? What type of accessories are important? And how do you drive that business? I evaluated that and decided, You know what, I'm gonna give this a try. And I have been here for

15 years, covering stores all across the Midwest, from Illinois to Indiana, to Iowa to Wisconsin had a store in Tennessee at one point. So I have been able to not only manage those teams and those bookstores, but really be able to work with each campus, which really has a different feel, depending on where you're located. And again, we continue to grow. So I also help participate in opening new stores, and actually, in November be going to Alaska for 10 days to help open a store in Fairbanks. So really excited about that. Oh, that

Kara Snyder 16:45

sounds super cool. That'll be really fun. So you mentioned how you were interviewing and hiring your team? What do you look for when you're hiring someone? Are there certain qualities that stand out to you in the interview process?

Sandy Shelton 16:59

It does. And I really try to spend time with the individual because I do look for someone that is very enthusiastic. And it really depends on the position that we're looking for. If I'm talking with someone that I am going to hire into a store manager position, I'm looking for somebody that is not just very engaging, and enthusiastic. But someone that really exudes confidence. Somebody that is organized and likes to do things at a fast pace. Because in that role, things are being thrown at you all the time. And being able to really juggle multiple balls is really important. But if I'm talking with someone that will be working in a different role, perhaps a textbook manager, that might be somebody that I'm looking forward to be a little more analytical. So they don't really have to be so bubbly and a cheerleader. But if they are really analytical and really into numbers, and really methodical, then that someone I might be interested in. So it really depends on the role that they're going to fulfill in the team really, truly does balance each other. So we are one is, you know, very high energy. The other isn't, that might be okay, because they will balance each other out. Well, and what

Kara Snyder 18:26

I find so fascinating about this is that it's really coming full circle for you all of those people skills that you developed while you were here in college and being able to read people and read individuals, now it's paying off and you can use those skills to build your team, which is really cool. Oh, absolutely.

Sandy Shelton 18:42

And I am a people person. So I love really just talking with people getting to know them. So I think that certainly has played a large part in just being able to hire and really put the right people in the right place.

Kara Snyder 19:00

That makes perfect sense. And let me tell you, Sandy, one of the reasons I was so excited to talk to you today is that I think your industry is so interesting, you know, the world of retail has changed a lot since your time on campus. It's evolved. When you were a student here, there was no Amazon. So what has that evolution of the retail industry been like for you?

Sandy Shelton 19:22

Oh, my gosh, a lot of change. I would say certainly, as you mentioned, there was no Amazon. And today the evolution of maybe you're not going to the mall like you did during the holidays to shop. I remember early on in my career, the holidays were booming, and it was so exciting to have all of the customers in the store to really what we see now is customers are looking for more convenience. They're either looking to get in and out quickly, or they're shopping online. and certainly online shopping has grown tremendously over the years. And I will also say, if you think back a few years ago to during COVID, COVID really helped us understand a little bit more. Because now, not only are consumers online shopping, then the shift to curbside pickup. So there's all these things that 30 years ago didn't exist. And so you really have to be open and flexible to change, and really shift to where the industry is going. I think one of the saddest things is that you see so many vacancies in the malls, and where once the mall was the only place to shop or a strip mall was the only place to shop. Now we're seeing all of our online competitors really build up what their websites look like, for mobile apps, and how convenient, they're making it for the customer to click a button and have an order the next day. But again, really understanding that that shift, your business really has to shift in that direction in order to remain relevant in the industry. Great point.

Kara Snyder 21:14

And I think it's a testament to your success that you've been open and flexible and willing to learn. And can you talk a little bit about the importance of continuing to learn after you leave campus? You know, I think it's so easy to feel like we get this degree, we've checked a box, and I want our students to know that we still have to take advantage of opportunities presented to us for continued

Sandy Shelton 21:37

learning. Oh, absolutely. I would say one of the many workshops I have attended over the years are various forms of leadership workshops, and public speaking, that really has helped over the years, because again, in this industry, you are dealing with so many personalities, and so many individuals from all walks of life with different backgrounds. And really just understanding who the person is. And really understanding what their leadership style is, I think that's one of the things that has helped so much in the workshops that I have attended is it's not just my leadership style, but it's understanding someone else's leadership style. And if you have two people with opposite leadership styles that might not be as successful as you think. And so you really have to be flexible to understand if you're managing a team and you have a manager who has a completely different style than yours. Well, my management style or my leadership style, I cannot overshadow the other person. So there's a lot of psychology that goes into understanding the different styles and in order to really be successful, and be productive, is just I think the leadership workshops have really helped in that way. How would

Kara Snyder 23:03

you describe your leadership style, I

Sandy Shelton 23:06

would say very interpersonal. I am, as I mentioned, a people person. And so my style is more about working as a team. And understanding that everyone plays a role. And whether I'm in a particular position, and someone might have another position. I need everyone on my team in order to be successful, and to drive our business, just really working as a team unit. And just that interpersonal style between people is really how I like to manage the folks that work with me.

Kara Snyder 23:50

What would you say your favorite part of your job is? Well,

Sandy Shelton 23:54

managing the people really working with my team to help build successful managers. But then also, I would say, not having a typical day. If someone were to say, Well, what's your typical day, every day is different. There's no day that's ever the same. And I like that. I also enjoy problem solving and helping my team be successful in all of those challenges, where you know, one might find it a challenge. I thrive on that. And so those are really some of my favorite parts of the job.

Kara Snyder 24:31

And then on the flip side, I have to ask, what do you consider to be the most challenging thing about your job?

Sandy Shelton 24:36

You know, I think the unexpected things that come up that I can't resolve immediately, or that I can't resolve on my own. I want to be able to remedy the issue and let's move forward and sometimes there are challenges that take more than me, but I'm able to call upon different partners to help I'll resolve the issue. But I think the most challenging is knowing that it's not an immediate resolve. So I think that sometimes brings a little more challenge to my day. That can be

Kara Snyder 25:12

tough. If you're like me, you just desperately want to make that checkmark on the to do list. And sometimes it's just not possible.

Sandy Shelton 25:19

Yeah, exactly. All right, we

Kara Snyder 25:23

are going to finish here with a speed round. So I want you to go with your first instinct on these questions. We'll get to know you're just that much better. All right, Sandy cake or pie? Oh, pie.

Sandy Shelton 25:33

Apple pie. Ala mode.

Kara Snyder 25:37

Oh, nice. I that was a nice touch. I like that. What is your favorite day of the week? Oh,

Sandy Shelton 25:44

my goodness. I think Saturday, really, you know, after the hustle and bustle of the week and being out in the field, just being able to unwind with my family and spend time with them. I just love a Saturday.

Kara Snyder 25:59

I love it. Well, and that brings me to my next question, describe your perfect day off. Oh,

Sandy Shelton 26:04

gosh, gardening. For sure. We have some property. And we love to garden flowers and plants. And this past year, we did a lot of vegetables. And it's work, but it's relaxing. And so I just love to be able to get out and get in the dirt and plant. And it's just so so much fun.

Kara Snyder 26:29

What is the most critical part of your morning routine,

Sandy Shelton 26:32

I really start the morning with my to do list that I made the night before. So when I end my day, I kind of map out the most critical things that are on the plate for, you know, the next day and and so when I start my day, I'm really looking at that. And then really my phone is with me at all times. So constantly checking to see is there anything that has come up from the night before until the morning that might be more immediate need? Or am I working the list that I prepared myself the night before. I really think being able to prioritize, especially in the area that I'm in, there are so many things that are happening and you're juggling so much at one time, being able to prioritize and really compartmentalize things so that you don't get overwhelmed. And you're able to really check things off your list and attack the things that are most critical. And then just kind of work your way down your list.

Kara Snyder 27:37

That makes perfect sense. What are you reading or listening to right now, anything you'd recommend to us?

Sandy Shelton 27:45

You know, I actually just finished reading A Memoir by an author named Michelle's honor. And the title of the book is called crying in H Mart. And I will say it was actually recommended to me by a friend of mine. And she said I read it and I thought of you. So I said well, of course I have to. I have to read this and see what she's talking about. And what a wonderful well written book, you know, the book opens up with her recalling her mother's death. And she is a Korean American young girl. And H mark is a very popular Asian food market. And so she really opens up the book talking about how as she goes through HMR every area of the store reminds her of her mother, and then really kind of tells the story of her relationship to her mother, her

relationship to her culture. And again, just a very well written book that I think really can translate across all cultures. So highly, highly recommend. And I actually will have the opportunity to meet the author next week at a book signing that we are hosting. So I'm really, really excited to be able to speak with her and hear her perspective of writing her book.

Kara Snyder 29:07

Oh, that's gonna be so fun. I'm so excited for you. Alright, Sandy, I ask everybody that comes on the podcast a Von Teese, gondola or pub to cheese balls.

Sandy Shelton 29:17

Oh my gosh, to use gondolas all day long. I absolutely love them. And I will tell you over the years I've been to campus so many times, and I never leave without stopping and picking up at least six. So yeah, they are just absolutely my favorite.

Kara Snyder 29:38

I love that. I love that. All right, one last question for you. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Sandy Shelton 29:47

You know, I would say to enjoy your time on campus, live in the moment and not be in a hurry to finish and start your career, your career will last you a lifetime. But your time on campus is so limited. And just to value every moment and take it all in and build the relationships with your peers, build the relationships with your faculty, I would have never guessed that I would still be connected to some of my faculty today. And really just absorbing all Illinois state has to offer. So often, I think we take for granted what we have. And then we don't realize it until we don't have it anymore. And really just being able to look back on my time at Illinois State. It was such a wonderful experience that I would never trade for anything. And I would hope that any college student that is experiencing Illinois State today makes the most of their time on campus and take every opportunity that is afforded to them, because it really will lay the foundation for everything they do once they leave campus.

Kara Snyder 31:20

That's great advice. Thank you so much, and thanks again for being here. That was Sandy Shelton, regional manager for Barnes and Noble College. Join us next time on the Podcast for more stories from our cast alumni.