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Daniella Vitale Speaks at Breakfast With the Boss

By SHARON EDELSON

Daniella Vitale wrapped gifts, sold shoes, waited tables and sold cosmetics before she started on her career trajectory.

Still, the chief operating officer and senior executive vice president of Barneys New York said those jobs helped shape her career. “It may not be your first choice or second choice for a job. It may not be your dream opportunity, but somewhere in there are contacts that you need and experiences that you need to help you in the long run. Looking back on all those very unglamorous jobs, I learned something or met someone that helped me or mentored me along the way.”

Vitale was speaking to a group of interns who came to Barneys headquarters on Wednesday for a Breakfast With the Boss. It’s organized by the YMA Fashion Scholarship Fund, a national nonprofit organization made up of influential members of the fashion community. YMA grants scholarships to talented students and facilitates internships, mentorships and career programs. Last year, the YMA Fashion Scholarship Fund awarded about \$1 million in scholarships and placed close to 100 interns in the fashion industry. This summer, 72 interns have been placed at a variety of companies, from Ross Stores to the Gap to Miu Miu.

“In school, I started as an assistant buyer of moderate dresses,” Vitale said. “I knew I wanted to get into the luxury sector.” Vitale in 1989 joined Ferragamo, merchandising men’s shoes and accessories. It wasn’t her dream job. “It was a very numbers-oriented position. It was inventory control. They hardly paid me and I worked hard. Ferragamo ultimately became a vendor here at Barneys,” she said, underscoring the importance of relationships.

“Try to find someone within every organization, some type of sponsor, who can help and guide you along the way,” she told the interns. “You’re all in the beginning stage of your careers.”

Besides sharing her experiences and insights, Vitale talked business. “Barneys was always a place to cultivate brands,” she said. “Now for the first time in the history of the company, we have no debt thanks to [Barneys chairman] Richard Perry. We have a clean balance sheet. We’re able to invest in stores. When I came to the company we were absolutely broke. You had to be creative. What Barneys needs is to strengthen its [mission] of cultivating brands.”

Barneys’ Web site has grown and will produce more volume than the Beverly Hills store, Vitale said. “Technology is a huge investment for us. We have a new digital concierge in our Beverly Hills store.”

The conversion of the Co-op stores to Barneys units has been going well. She said converting the stores was the right decision. “People didn’t understand the segmentation,” she said. “In the end, they’re all Barneys and we’ve updated and invested in them.”

When Vitale joined Giorgio Armani in 1994, she realized that “being part of that design-influenced world was a once in a lifetime opportunity,” she said. The designer was at the peak of his career.” After five years, Vitale felt

the company was becoming too centralized so she left to join Gucci as vice president of wholesale. Vitale in 2006 was named chief executive officer of the Americas. She always knew when it was time to leave a job and in the summer of 2010, she departed Gucci. Mark Lee, president and ceo of Gucci, and Vitale's boss, had just been named ceo of Barneys and he wanted Vitale to join him. "I really wanted to run my own organization," she said. "I really didn't want to go in as number two." Still, Lee and Vitale continued to talk about Barneys and in November, Vitale came on board.

"All my experience really set me up for this job," she said.

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