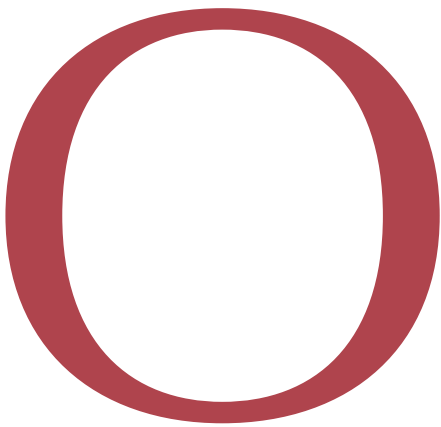


BY WILLIAM R. WILBURN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN BRAGG

# the Joy of Saks

Yes, Fashion Molls, there is life after  
Jacobson's. Just ask veteran  
store manager **Garry Navarre**,  
who's found retail heaven.



One of the ugly secrets of the retail world is that custom-ordered brides' gowns always arrive dangerously close to the wedding day, and there's not much a store can do if they arrive wrong. Garry Navarre knew this when, two days before the wedding of a first-time bride, he learned that the bride's dress had arrived in Indianapolis, but it was ivory instead of white. Another retailer might have apologized or offered to discount the dress, but Navarre isn't another retailer. He had already fielded numerous phone calls from the nervous bride and her father, and he knew that a woman who had waited until her mid-30s to walk down the aisle in white wasn't about to settle for ivory. He started making some phone calls of his own—first to the dressmaker in New York, who said tough luck, then to retailers across the country who carried the same dress. He finally found the right dress, in white, on the West Coast, charged it to his personal credit card, and arranged to have it taken to

rules the east end of The Fashion Mall, first turning Jacobson's into the most successful store in that now-defunct chain, and this month bringing luxury retail back to Indianapolis in the form of Saks Fifth Avenue. For Navarre, who loves Indianapolis, loves fashion and loves retail, reigning over the city's newest and most exclusive department store is heaven.

**I FIRST MET NAVARRE** on a sumptuous May day, when I wanted to be just about anywhere except at The Fashion Mall with a man I imagined as an Armani-suited fashion Nazi. But Navarre is so amiable and normal—no trendy haircut, no flashy suit, not a whiff of arrogance—that it's hard not to like him.

Saks is locating in the former Jacobson's, the upscale department-store chain that abruptly declared bankruptcy and closed all its stores a year ago. When I showed up to meet Navarre, the 120,000-square-foot cavern echoed with the screams and clatter of construction. Workers' shouts skidded off the marble floors. Blue tape, like police chalk drawings, outlined the final resting places of cosmetics counters, jewelry kiosks, shoe departments and designer boutiques. One escalator ascended smoothly to the second floor; its counterpart sat idle, mechanical guts exposed.

Because Jacobson's had invested \$6.5 million in a renovation just 18 months before the store closed, Saks' remodel was more cosmetic than major surgery. Workmen replaced carpet, installed new

only local retailer to carry Prada men's shoes and Jimmy Choo and Manolo Blahnik women's shoes, designer bridal wear, plus the women's clothing lines Tula, Akris, Chloe, Blue Marine, Etro, and Cheap & Chic. Saks will also carry names seen more often in *Vogue* than on the backs of Indy women and men: Caroline Herrera, Escada, St. John, Rena Linge and Armani. "We start where Parisian leaves off," Navarre says of Saks' sister store at the other end of The Fashion Mall. Saks' employees will be expected to know what Parisian offers, Navarre says, "so if we can't serve Mrs. Jones here, we can send her down to Parisian rather than to Castleton."

Saks has also installed numerous extras that are new to Indianapolis. On the first floor, behind drywall shadow-boxes that showcase fine jewelry, is a private viewing room for jewelry customers. In various departments are "living room" areas, places where a weary shopper, a husband or an elderly parent can relax. Each has a sofa, a TV, Internet connection and a refrigerator stocked with sodas and bottled water. On the third floor, local favorite Cafe Patachou is operating a restaurant. The children's department is conveniently located next to the high-end FAO Schwarz toy boutique. And in the southeast corner of 2 is the piece de resistance, The 5th Avenue Club. In May it was a half-finished warren of metal studs, dangling conduit and drywall; now it is elegant suites where a receptionist greets men and women who've come to

## AT THE HIGH END OF THE RETAIL SPECTRUM, THE STORE MANAGER IS MORE COURTIER THAN BEAN-COUNTER.

LAX and flown to the bride's home in Indianapolis. Then he sweet-talked a seamstress into working all night to alter the dress so it was ready for the big day.

Navarre wasn't the store owner or even the salesperson in this transaction; he's just a store manager—the guy who scrapes gum off the carpet, keeps the escalators running and makes sure the cash is safe. But Navarre's personal commitment to the customer, his compulsive inability to let people down, is why he

fixtures, built new walls, installed new lights and painted everything, but with the elevators, escalators, entrances and cosmetics department mostly in the same places, the new store will feel familiar to regular Jacobson's customers.

The merchandise, however, will not be so familiar. Cosmetics lines not offered elsewhere in Indy include Nars, Penhaligan's, Jo Malone and Diane Von Furstenberg. Louis Vuitton, Chanel and Gucci will have their own accessories boutiques in the store. Saks will be the

meet with personal shoppers.

Amid the mess and noise, Navarre remains composed, operating smoothly though he has no office phones and, in fact, has no office. In the store he uses a reception desk because as yet there is no receptionist. Walking through the construction site, pointing out what will go where, his glasses perched on his forehead, he keeps a running mental to-do list. But the real to-do list, a "time and action" plan, is generated, monitored and updated weekly (Continued on page 285)



**GARRY NAVARRE'S TEAM AT SAKS INCLUDES  
FACES FAMILIAR TO INDY'S FASHIONISTAS.**

FROM LEFT: RON MOREHEAD, TONY DICEN,  
DIANE ABDELLAH, CARRIE GINGRICH, LAURA MCGREW,  
NAVARRE, BRIAN HARRELD, KATHY RYBA, DAVID TEPEN, SUZI  
BECK, COLLEEN NEWCOM AND TINA RUSSELL.

by employees in Saks' corporate office. The details of building the new store are largely the responsibility of these planners, because Saks wants to free Navarre to do what he does so well: schmooze people, both those who will be selling for him and those who will be buying from him. Though he knows exactly where all the departments will be, and how many associates he'll need to staff them, it's Saks' team of store planners who carefully evaluate merchandise placement and fixtures based on predicted sales.

As we stroll through the store, Navarre suddenly staggers and swats his leg. He's walked into a two-inch nail jutting from a wrecked stool. It's ripped a gash in his slacks and probably his skin, too, but he simply inspects the damage and calmly says, "I'll have to have my wife bring me another pair of slacks. We have a luncheon downtown at noon." Navarre's wife, Nancy, is used to such crises; in fact, she functions as his unpaid personal assistant. They met in college, and spend their family vacations with the college friend who introduced them. "I wouldn't be able to handle this type of position without the support of my wife and children," Navarre says. He has a son and a daughter, teenagers who attend Lawrence Township schools. "They've made many sacrifices because of my hours and responsibilities, but we have all learned to adjust. I'll leave the store on a Saturday afternoon to catch a soccer game, then come back. We tend to eat out a lot—that's when we catch up on everything. I consider myself extremely blessed."

Listening to Navarre's relentlessly upbeat talk, you quickly conclude that he is either a master of spin or one of the happiest men alive. Spend a bit more time with him, and you begin to suspect he's a bit of both. He says precisely what Saks Corporate would want him to say, but the kicker is, he means it. His interests and opinions just happen to be in confluence with Saks—really. Retailing, what many people consider a career of last resort, is what Navarre loves, especially in the big leagues ruled by Saks, Neiman Marcus, Bloomingdale's, Bergdorf Goodman and Nordstrom. Fashion he loves, too: His favorite suits are Armani and Canali, his favorite shoes, Mezlan and Donald Pliner. He describes his off-duty style as "very casual," but even at home he wears Polo and Burberry.

Navarre has worked in high-end retail all his adult life. A native of Toledo, he attended The Ohio State University and worked during summers and breaks as a sales associate in the Jacobson's Toledo store. After earning a degree in marketing management and research, Navarre stayed on at Jacobson's while he was interviewing for "real" jobs. But when an offer came from a corporate research department, Navarre decided to stay in retail. He rose to sales manager in Toledo and was soon in Jacobson's home office in Jackson, Michigan, first as an assistant buyer, then as a buyer of women's ready-to-wear. "People think being a buyer is glamorous," he recalls. "But you don't just go to New York City and buy pretty things. It's 98 percent paperwork."

When Jacobson's decided to open an Indianapolis store in 1988, Navarre's old boss from Toledo called and asked if he'd relocate to Indy. Navarre calls his move to Indianapolis "the best decision I've made in my entire life. It's a great place to raise a family. We have a lot of great friends here." In Indy, Navarre was Jacobson's assistant store manager, then merchandise manager six years later, then store manager from 1997 until the store closed in 2002. Which begs the question: How is Saks going to make it in this market if Jacobson's couldn't?

On this point, the slightest shadow of irritation crosses Navarre's face. It's clear he's heard the question before and is tired of answering it. "I don't want people to look at the Jacobson's experience and say Saks can't make it here. *This* Jacobson's store made it." Indeed, it was the most profitable, highest-volume store in the Jacobson's chain, and it's why Saks recruited Navarre.

Few people have spent more time analyzing Saks' potential in Indianapolis than Michael P. McCarty, senior VP at Simon Property Group, The Fashion Mall's owner. He says Saks has been interested in the Indy market for 10 years, ever since the retailer considered locating in Circle Centre. A downturn in retail sales at the time kept Saks from opening a store in Circle Centre, but Saks kept an eye on the Indianapolis market. "The Fashion Mall's Jacobson's store was number one or two in the chain the whole time it was here, a point that was not lost on Saks," McCarty says. "Jacobson's performance here simply validated Saks' thinking about this mar-

ket." Indianapolis shoppers—at least, those who patronize The Fashion Mall—are hungry for upscale retail. McCarty says interviews with Fashion Mall shoppers show that more than 50 percent leave town to shop. Of those, more than 80 percent shop in Chicago more than once a year. And of those, half make Saks Fifth Avenue their primary shopping destination.

That may surprise people who aren't hard-core shoppers, but, according to McCarty, "it didn't surprise Saks. They've been watching their credit-card sales from Indianapolis grow. If you can get that outflow to drive to Chicago, imagine what you can do with a store in Indianapolis."

Even Nordstrom won't compete with the new Saks, McCarty says, because in the quest to convince affluent shoppers from Hamilton County to shop downtown, Nordstrom gave up too soon. "Nordstrom had that extremely high-end merchandise for the first six months they were in town, then abandoned it. They stopped bringing the luxury end of their lines here."

Simon's research shows that the downtown customer is not a luxury shopper. Fifty percent of downtown shoppers are tourists and conventioners, and the balance is mostly office workers. "We get people from Terre Haute who come to spend the weekend downtown, but they're not buying Chanel and Gucci," McCarty says.

#### **WHEN JACOBSON'S ANNOUNCED**

it was closing, Neiman Marcus snatched up Navarre to become the merchandise manager at its Northbrook, Illinois store. But just five months after he had moved to Neiman Marcus, Saks signed the lease for The Fashion Mall store and offered Navarre the job as manager; he started March 1. He says he had no idea he'd be returning to Indianapolis so soon because he had walked execs from numerous retailers through the Jacobson's property during the store-closing period, and he didn't know who would wind up occupying the space.

Taking the helm of this Saks is a coup for Navarre, but it's a good deal for Saks, too—and for its customers. Navarre knows the market and the customer, and he is persuasively certain the Indianapolis shopper is ready for the top-of-the-line store Saks plans to deliver.

"This will be a full-line store. It will carry everything: children's, home decor, bridal, ladies' ready-to-wear, men's accessories, everything Saks has to offer," Navarre says. "The Indianapolis customer is very savvy. This is not your typical Midwestern city. Customers here are used to going to Chicago to shop. There is no resistance to price points. They love fashion. They're a great customer, a very loyal customer."

He has a point. One local woman, for whom fashion is a passion and money is no object, says she mourns Jacobson's passing but feels positively giddy about Saks coming to town. "I can't wait for them to open," she says. "When we go to Chicago I stay in a hotel where I can see Saks out the window."

"But," I suggest to her, "don't people enjoy going to Chicago for more than shopping?"

"I suppose, but what about when you really *need* a pair of Jimmy Choo shoes?" she counters.

At the high end of the retail spectrum where Saks operates, the store manager is more courtier than bean-counter, and women like this, women who will pay \$400 to slip into a pair of sexy slippers, already know and love Garry Navarre because they were his customers at Jacobson's. Saks is counting on Navarre's ability to sustain those relationships. Navarre's job is to know the trendsetters of Indianapolis—he calls them "the queen bees"—and make sure they get what they want when they want it.

One satisfied customer is Georgia Buchanan, an active philanthropist and former Jacobson's shopper. "Garry is very friendly, very sincere, very capable, very down to earth," she says. "He's a good ambassador for that type of store. Before Jacobson's closed I went to see him, and even amid the chaos of the closing he stopped to have a conversation with me. No matter how busy he is, if he sees you, it's like he has all the time in the world for you."

Eliz Kraft Meek, retired CEO of the 500 Festival, agrees. "Garry Navarre was a good choice for Saks," she says. "He's already familiar with the market and the fashion mavens. He knows who to align with."

One way to know these women—and their men—is to be active in the charities they and their money support, and Navarre is, personally and professionally.

The store has carefully choreographed special events that will draw in the city's leading ladies: There's a pre-opening, invitation-only charity shopping day on September 9 (to which Navarre has invited 25,000 patrons); followed by the store's public grand opening on the 10th; and Saks' national event, Key to the Cure (September 17-20), a fundraiser backed by Nicole Kidman and Stella McCartney to raise funds for women's reproductive-cancer research.

"People don't realize how social this town is," Navarre says. "It seems like you go home and there is an invitation every week. I'm a real advocate of giving back to the community, and I'm always out there networking. It's a real balancing act."

Navarre's ability to balance everything will face its greatest test in the next few months, when he has to deliver the store Indianapolis wants and the sales Saks demands. "I'm in the middle," he says. "I'm accountable. I'm putting myself on the line with buyers, saying we can sell this and this. I have to prove myself. But we had to do that with Jacobson's. My personal goal for the store is that in 18 months it will jump into the top 10 in the company." That's ambitious: The current biggies include the New York store, of course, plus Beverly Hills, San Francisco, Bal Harbour, Atlanta, Chicago, Miami, Detroit, Houston, Boston and Dallas, all cities known for being wealthier and more fashion-forward than Indianapolis.

Navarre, however, believes that Indianapolis has been underestimated, that people here have the money and the desire for high-end merchandise, and that Saks is the only retailer who recognizes that. "We want to keep our customers in Indianapolis," Navarre says. "They shouldn't have to go to Chicago or New York to get the fashion they want."

Once the store opens, Navarre can step back into the role he knows so well, that of store manager, cheerleader, schmoozer. "I basically provide direction, keep my finger on everything that's happening. The home office relies on its store managers to communicate to them what's selling and what's not, whether we're achieving our sales goals, to make sure the associates are happy, and to make sure the customers are happy."

To learn all that, Navarre will rely on the people working for him. "Probably 75 percent of my time is spent walking the sales floor—usually with my assistant

general manager, the visual manager and/or the department sales managers. Our main focus is to be sure that everyone is being serviced or has been approached. We review placement of merchandise, discuss fast sellers and slow performers, look at cleanliness, inquire about the number of charge accounts opened that day, where sales are trending that day and why. And I discuss these issues not only with the management team, but with the sales associates—that's where you get a lot of your best information. They are right there with the customer in the fitting room, understanding the merchandise, the customers' likes and dislikes."

This interaction with people is what Navarre thrives on. It's the reason he loves retail. "I've had customers call me down to the fitting room to see how an outfit looked on them," he says. "But I'm not a micromanager. The people on the floor really make it happen." People who have worked with Navarre continue to sing his praises; many former Jacobson's employees are clamoring to work with him again. One tells me, "Whatever you write about Garry, it should all be good."

Navarre and his growing staff of assistants and HR specialists spent the last two months of summer in a temporary office just outside the new store, making conference calls about budgets, interviewing applicants to staff the new store and trying to beat the clock as it ticked toward opening day. After all, they've got a multimillion-dollar store (Saks won't release exact figures, but Navarre says "multi-multi-million") and more than 150 people to hire before the opening.

The women who staff the office—all perfectly dressed, coiffed, leggy, attractive—obviously are thrilled about teaming up with Navarre to open the new store, even though the hours and workload are impossible. At the start of each day, they greet each other with war stories from the night before. One woman, who's been interviewing would-be salespeople and making job offers every day and evening, says, "All night I had a Scotch in one hand and a cell phone in the other." Another says, "I didn't eat dinner and I didn't eat breakfast, but at least I can still laugh about it!" Navarre says this—"being surrounded by beautiful women"—is the greatest perk of his job. I ask him about the most demanding part. "Most demanding?" he repeats. "I can't think of one." ■