News
Appreciation



Jean Blake is pictured in a 1977 photo at the National Catholic Reporter offices in Kansas City, Missouri. (NCR photo/Bill Kenkelen)



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Jean Blake — longtime editorial assistant and one of the great steady presences in the life of the National Catholic Reporter — died Nov. 28 at North Kansas City Hospital following injuries sustained in a fall. She was 97. Jean had fallen in her kitchen on Nov. 16 and was hospitalized for 12 days before her death.

To call Jean merely an "assistant" never came close to the truth. For me — and for generations of NCR staff — she was something far more: the mother hen of the newsroom, the quietly cheerful force who kept us moving forward, gently guiding us back onto the right path whenever stress or complexity threatened to overwhelm us. She was unfailingly patient, endlessly supportive, and always — truly always — good-humored. When the work became heavy or the moment tense, Jean's presence lightened the room.



An undated photo of Jean Blake at the National Catholic Reporter offices in Kansas City, Missouri (NCR photo)

Jean worked at NCR from 1974 until her retirement in 2005, contributing more than three decades of steady service during a period of rapid editorial growth and increasing national influence for the publication. Her reliability, meticulous attention to detail, organizational skill, and calm demeanor made her indispensable during years of staff transitions, financial uncertainty, and the nonstop pressures of managing a national newsroom. The daily operation of NCR simply ran more smoothly because Jean was there — mainly working behind the scenes, never seeking attention, just ensuring that everything was done correctly.

Before I ever arrived at NCR, Jean served as editorial assistant to Arthur Jones during his time as editor. When Arthur later left the paper, and I took over the role in 1980, I inherited Jean along with the editor's desk — easily the best part of the job.



In a 1980 photo, Jean Blake works at the National Catholic Reporter offices in Kansas City, Missouri. (NCR photo/Patty Edmonds)

Arthur once described her perfectly:

> Jean was an upright woman of skill that she kept going from the sheer joy of doing what she was doing. She was perfect. She got it right every time as only a secretary should. She was resourceful, smiling, refined in her own way and not easily shocked. She liked having an Englishman in her office and I liked having her there.

That was Jean: precise without being rigid, gracious without distance, capable without drawing attention to herself. She didn't fluster, didn't overreact, and didn't miss details. If something needed finding — minutes from a board meeting years earlier, a stray document, a long-forgotten phone number — everyone knew the answer: "Ask Jean." And she always knew.

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Over time, Jean became NCR's de facto archivist, carefully preserving correspondence, board records, internal reports, personnel files, and countless documents that together formed the backbone of the paper's institutional memory. Every five years she meticulously organized and labeled boxes that were transferred to the NCR archives at the University of Notre Dame. Because of her patient, methodical care, NCR's documentary heritage was not lost to time or turnover — it was preserved for researchers and future generations.

She also served as the trusted scribe for the NCR Board of Directors during a period when the board was the organization's primary governing engine. Her board minutes, noted for their precision and clarity, documented leadership transitions, financial restructurings, and some of the most consequential decisions in NCR's history, creating a trustworthy record of governance during pivotal years.



Jean Blake is pictured in a 1978 photo at the National Catholic Reporter offices in Kansas City, Missouri. (NCR photo)

Her professionalism was legendary. Upon Jean's retirement in 2005, longtime NCR editor Tom Roberts described her as "One of the most organized, professional, hard-working figures to grace these offices … an archivist at heart who has done more than any other individual to preserve the history of this little enterprise."

Around the newsroom, a simpler summary became routine: "She runs the place."

Outside of NCR, Jean devoted herself to family and to supporting her husband's long career in hospitality management. Born Jean Millicent Lange in 1928 in Camden, New Jersey, she was educated in Catholic schools and later attended Camden Commercial College, where she met Robert J. Blake. They married on May 6, 1950, at St. Joseph's Parish in Camden.

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The couple raised two sons — Christopher ("Chris"), born in 1956, and Charles ("Chuck"), born in 1959 — and were deeply committed to their education, enrolling both boys in private schools. Both sons became engineers; Chris retired in 2020.

Before joining NCR, Jean worked at the medical publishing company Lea & Febiger in the Philadelphia area, then took a break from full-time work to raise her children. The family lived in different communities around Philadelphia before moving to Pittsburgh in 1967 when Bob Blake accepted a hotel management position. During that time, Jean worked part-time at the Carnegie Library. In 1969, the family moved back to New Jersey, settling in Lawrence Township, where Jean worked for the State of New Jersey.



An undated photo of Jean Blake at the National Catholic Reporter offices in Kansas City, Missouri (NCR photo)

In 1973, Bob accepted another position in hospitality management, prompting the family's move to Kansas City. Jean joined NCR the following year — beginning the career through which she would quietly shape NCR's daily operations and long-term memory.

Robert Blake died May 5, 2016, after nearly 66 years of marriage. Jean continued to live independently in her Kansas City townhouse until her death.

She was preceded in death by two sisters, Wanda and Eloise. She is survived by her sons, Chris Blake of St. Louis and Chuck Blake of Woodbury, New Jersey; her grandsons, Douglas, Matthew and Daniel; and her great-grandson, Thomas.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

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