

Jan Blaich

Born: September 4, 1932

Death:

Jan Blaich was born in Pittsburg, PA, but early in WWII her father, an engineer who had been commissioned to build a shipyard “in a hurry,” so “LSTs could be constructed for the invasion of Europe,” moved the family to Wilmington, DE. She called her mother “the quintessential housewife” and reflected, “I look back on it, and I do feel that my mother suffered some loss of way back in second place in those years. [My father] had a very active life, and her life was absolutely housewifely stuff. She was a very bright woman and a very energetic person and also a rather ambitious person, very ambitious for her children.”

Jan had three siblings—an older brother and sister and a younger sister by 8 years. She commented that her family was large by Depression era standards. “I can recall that we had very conflicting views about what was going on with the war and about Franklin D. Roosevelt and all the things. We did have wonderful, active dinner conversations,” Jan recalled.

While in high school, Jan was interested in art and “studied for a number of years with Frank Schoonover, who was a contemporary of N. C. Wyeth and was a very well-known painter in [the] Chadd Ford-Brandywine Valley area of Wilmington.” At that time, according to Jan, Schoonover was a very elderly man and took only a few students, and she was “very keenly interested in art and becoming a painter.” However, being an artist was not “practical” enough for her family (e.g., her father wanted her to be an architect), so Jan turned her attention toward journalism. She became an editor of her high school newspaper by having a required “good news story” chosen from among the best entries. “I was lucky to be one of those,” she said.

In high school, Jan was also very active in sports. She played hockey as a fullback and varsity basketball. Furthermore, she sang in the choir, and for 12 years, she studied the piano. “My family [had] quite a musical background; my father had a beautiful tenor voice.”

For college, Jan chose Syracuse University to study journalism. She also knew it had a good school of fine arts and she would be able to minor in art. At the university, Jan met her husband, Robert (Bob), who was an architecture graduate. Because he was “anxious to get married,” Jan “wrapped up [her] academic career in 3 ½ years.”

For the first 2 years of their married life, Jan and Bob lived in Boston. Bob had been hired as one of the first three sales staff for Herman Miller. They were all architects. In 1954, Jan began her

first paying position as an advertising fashion copywriter for a high fashion store. “I didn’t really love it,” she said. The couple’s first son was also born at that time.

Then the family moved to New York City for 4 – 5 years. During that time, Bob was the manager of Herman Miller’s New York showroom and the entire Eastern seacoast. The family actually lived in the suburbs of New Jersey, but Jan “decided [early on that] once a month [she would] go to New York and have a day and meet [her] husband, and [they] would have an evening of music or theater.” In that way, by the time her husband was transferred to the “Mecca” of Herman Miller—Zeeland, MI—“they had a small taste of the metropolitan cultural offerings of New York, and [she] loved New York.” Their second son was also born at that time.

The family first lived on Fultonwood Drive in a contemporary house that had been built by Jim Bronkema and designed by an architect whom they “knew very well in Boston.” Then they bought property that had belonged to Cora Blodgett on Cambridge Blvd. and built very contemporary house “to the horror and shock of everybody in East Grand Rapids.” Their third son was born at that time.

About moving to Grand Rapids, Jan remembered, “I have to say that the cultural shock of coming from the East to Grand Rapids was far greater than the cultural shock I ever experienced when I went to live in Europe. I was really pretty depressed about what I thought was a pretty stodgy, conservative, and rather uninteresting city.” Furthermore, she had “no long history of family friends and acquaintances,” which made the transition more difficult.

Eventually, Jan decided to get out into the community and make some new friends. She first found her college sorority alumni group—Delta Gamma. From there her sorority sisters encouraged her to join the Women’s Committee of the Grand Rapids Art Museum. As a member of that committee, Jan established the Gallery Shop and organized the first “Christmas Show by bringing in a collection of folk art . . . and setting up a special display and sales event before the [holiday].”

The money that was made in the Gallery Shop was used to pay for exhibitions. Those exhibitions were chosen and curated by the committee members. “It was a little hard for the director to deal with very assertive, young women, but it was important to us to have that kind of experience,” said Jan. Jan also joined the Junior League. In collaboration with that organization and the Art Museum, she refurbished the “Art Talks,” one of which was used for 25 years.

Because of her husband’s involvement in a very small organization called the Friends of Art at the Art Museum, Jan became engaged in what was eventually known as the “Arts Council.” For 2 years, the Friends had a small festival behind the Art Museum, which at that time was located at [address needed]. The festival amounted to one big tent and a few “Friends of Art” exhibiting their talent. Then the board put an end to the festival because the tents were “destroying the surface of the parking lot.”

Nevertheless, according to Jan, the short-lived festival had brought all the arts organizations together. But they now had no home for the arts festival. About that time, Jan went to a Junior League conference and learned about “art councils” that were being organized in other cities. “So I thought to myself. Ah ha! That’s what we’ve been talking about. We need to have an arts council in Grand Rapids, so the arts council can be an umbrella organization to sponsor the festival,” said Jan.

Jan’s next step in establishing the Grand Rapids Arts Council was to secure a grant from the Junior League. At first there was resistance among the art organizations because of fear of competition and the unknown. Nevertheless, the council was launched with the publication of an “arts calendar” in *The Grand Rapids Press*. However, according to Jan, the main goal of the council was to resurrect the arts festival. An opportunity to achieve that goal came in 1968 with the dedication of the Calder sculpture, *Le Grand Vitesse*. Unfortunately, it did not happen because, according to Jan, the concrete of the plaza on which the sculpture was displayed was not completed on time. “The concrete was not totally cured, and at the last moment the engineers decided that large numbers of people over a period of time could be dangerous on that plaza,” said Jan. “It broke my heart.”

As it turned out, because the Blaichs went to live in Basel, Switzerland, that next year, 1969 to 1970, Jan’s co-chair, Betty Jo Crosby, made the festival happen that year. “Of course, that’s history. We all know that the Arts Festival . . . has just become a Grand Rapids institution,” concluded Jan.

In addition to participating in the founding of the Arts Council and the Arts Festival, Jan helped to establish the United Fund Drive for the Arts. However, she said, “I think it has not been as successful as we had all hoped, but it certainly did provide some important funding for all the arts organizations in Grand Rapids.” Jan was also involved in the Michigan Council for the Arts and helped to establish about 250 arts councils around the state.

Another challenge for Jan was as the founder and first director of the Women’s Resource Center. She recalled the year in Switzerland as a “good reflecting time” and the feminist movement “entered into my consciousness.” She continued, “The light bulb [went on] and I thought: This is what my life has to be about. I have to start doing some different kinds of things. I need to get back to doing what I have been professionally trained to do. I need to start writing.”

Upon her return home, Jan began writing articles about women who were doing interesting things professionally for *The Grand Rapids Press*. Because of that work, she caught the attention of Estelle Leven, who asked her to join a group of women “to talk about what [they] might do to create a symbiosis between continuing education and other needs that women would have to improve their lives.”

The group determined, according to Jan, “that [its] center should be involved with counseling and information referral.” So the group of women founded the College Consortium, which was “unique” at that time, according to Jan, as it was not tied to one higher education institution. It was an “independent organization” that provided a “broad scope” of services to women then and into the future. “I think that college consortium structure was very, very fortunate for us,” concluded Jan.

Nevertheless, after 2 years of planning, the group’s grant proposal was rejected by the Kellogg Foundation. So the women went back to the drawing board and scaled back to “bare bones, \$28,000 a year for [their] first operating year budget; [still, they] didn’t know where they were going to get it.” That uncertainty failed to deter the women. They determined to open the center in 2 months from the grant rejection. In that time, they secured two-room facilities in the Grand Rapids Community College; they received a \$10,000 grant from the Grand Rapids Foundation; a board of directors was established; by laws were written; and three part-time staff members were hired—a director, a counselor, and an assistant.

As soon as the center was opened, according to Jan, it was a very busy place. In the spirit of the college consortium, “12 college members” volunteered their services, and therefore advisors and perspective students would be meeting in the halls or in the corners of rooms. Yet, there was not only a lack of space, but also inadequate services. “We had advertised and promoted ourselves as being there to help women and to confine ourselves to the comfort of educational counseling just wasn’t enough,” said Jan. “We were a little stunned by the scope of the issues [these women had] . . . . The critical thing about that [consortium program . . . was that [it was] for part-time students of which mature women were defined. . . . There [was no] funding for . . . part-time students [at that time], so this [program] was unique in that respect.”

Jan soon secured a \$100,000 grant from the Ford Motor of Michigan Foundation to be distributed over a 3 year period. It had a twofold mandate: to expand the center’s career and job counseling resources and programs; to help other women’s centers establish similar kinds of resources and programs. During the 1970s, Jan recalled, the Women’s Resource Center received a lot of free publicity. “It . . . seemed that any time during those . . . years . . . that there was some kind of news story about the women’s movement of which there were many articles at that time, the public was extremely interested in them. . . . It was a media event. And every time something would happen, the local TV station or the radio station would call me and ask me what I thought about it,” she said. At that time Jan also became a regular columnist on the OpEd page of *The Grand Rapids Press*. For 4 years, she would submit a column every 10 – 12 days.

After those 4 years, in 1977, Jan left the Women’s Resource Center and established the *West Michigan Magazine*. She said that she “loved doing that [publication because it] combined all [her] interests—business, writing, arts.” Nevertheless, several years later Jan sold the magazine to Channel 35 as she was moving to The Netherlands.

By that time her husband had changed jobs and was then director of design for a huge Dutch electronics company, Phillips. That change precipitated their move to The Netherlands, where Jan soon became the speechwriter for the company's president. "I actually developed the platform from which Europe 1992 [was] developed. . . . I wrote all of those speeches that [the president] gave all over Europe, trying to persuade other industrialists and governments that there needed to be a much closer economic association, which indeed happened," she said.

During that time, Jan traveled a lot and gathered information by visiting with Phillips' people who were stationed in India, Hong Kong, and South America. About her job, Jan pointed out that at that time Phillips employed 400,000 people and not one was a woman. "So for the wife of the director to be running around the corridors, interviewing the top directors for resource materials for my speeches was something that was just. . . . Well, everybody in the company was talking about it," she concluded.

In 1991, the couple returned to America and settled in Aspen, CO, which was closer to their children. Before they had left The Netherlands, however, as part of Bob's retirement party, he was knighted by Queen Beatrix for his contributions to Dutch industry. Back in the states, the couple started a "design, management, and strategy planning consultancy," which, according to Jan, left them plenty of time to ski and play. They had also co-authored two books on design management and product development, and they continued to travel. "We manage, and I did tell my husband right away that not only would I not fix his lunch, I would not be his secretary. We've got those guidelines straightened out, and we're having quite a good time," Jan concluded.

At the end of the interview, Jan said, "I had always determined that I will make periodic visits back to Grand Rapids because I had so many wonderful friends here. It's very important for me to maintain those friendships. I will always feel like this community is really my home." And this community was very fortunate to have Jan Blaich make it her home. She brought her "metropolitan cultural" sensibilities here and raised the city's cultural consciousness in many enduring ways.

#### Other Resources:

March 11, 1976 The Grand Rapids Press column by Jan Blaich discussing the question of whether to save or destroy the downtown Sixth Street bridge.