

A Practical Artist, Unmatched Friend

Mary Black devotes decades to making words beautiful, readable for cattlemen.

by Miranda Reiman, senior associate editor

Mary Black dedicated 36 years to Angus Media, but if you don't know her name, she's OK with that.

"It seems like this hoopla is a bit odd, because I like to say I started at this position and I'm ending at that same position," says the editorial artist with a laugh. "I was just happy to be doing what I was doing."

She's telling the truth the way she sees it, because that's who Mary is.

"She's as genuine as they come. What you see is what you get, and that's one of the things that endears you to her," says Shauna Hermel, editor of the *Angus Beef Bulletin*®, longtime friend and coworker.

At the end of December, Black turned in her keycard and signed out of her Mac one last time. She retired as a longtime *Angus Journal* and current *Angus Beef Bulletin* graphic designer, but her presence around the office will be long lasting.

A friend to all

To understand Mary Black's influence, you'd have to see it the way everyone else sees it.

"Mary has a godly aura around her that when you are in her presence, you feel loved and cared for. She doesn't realize what a beautiful soul she truly has," says Jaime Albers, who took over the design of the *Angus Journal* from Black when the editorial teams for the breeder and commercial-facing publications divided in 2018. "If there was anyone



that would drop everything to help, it's her."

That includes the cattlemen who better enjoyed articles because of Black's layout talents, but it certainly starts with the people she saw each day at 3201 Frederick.

To some, Black was their "work mom" making Saint Joseph feel welcoming to new employees or summer interns



often hundreds of miles from home. She's knitted countless blankets for new babies and sent sympathy cards when they were needed most. There's a package of cinnamon popcorn left at a desk, or a quick head poked in an office just to check in.

A once slightly homesick Megan Silveira remembers Mary and her husband, Aaron, befriending her during a Lenten Bible study. It was the early months after the new employee moved to Missouri to take on the role of assistant editor.

"Afterwards, Mary joked about me likely not wanting to sit next to what felt like my grandmother at church; but she's a female figure in my life that I would be proud to sit next to at any place, any time," Silveira says. "I'm blessed to have Mary in my corner, at work and in my personal life."

To others, Mary is the voice of reason. She's a breake-time walking buddy, a steady lunch companion (12:30 sharp each day), or an honest advisor.

"Mary's my go-to person when I have a question," Hermel says, in a tone suggesting the void will be hard to fill. "She's that person, that friend, who is going to tell you when you step out of line, and she's going to be there to praise you when she sees you did something that no one else saw,

and that means a lot."

To everyone in the Angus Media office, Mary Black is a friend.

Make it simple

Her dedication to people played a role in making Black such an astute designer, too.

"One thing I always noticed when I was doing web and ads is that the articles in the magazine just looked clean and readable and drew you in to the articles, and Mary cared about that," says Christy Benigno, former Angus employee who transitioned to editorial and worked alongside Black for a number of years. "It looked good, and it drew you in, and you really couldn't tell why."

The mark of a good designer is often how little a reader thinks about their work, Benigno says.

"You can't make it hard for them to get the words and the content in their brain," Black confirms. "I wanted things to make sense, a table to be readable, a picture to always have a cutline. There were just basic structural things — and something may look pretty, but if it doesn't make sense or isn't readable, what's the use in it?"

That style rubbed off on those she worked around, including Benigno, while sharing the same cubicle.

"Every now and then we would just



In the 1994 Herd Reference Edition part of the editorial team posed for the "postcards from Angus America" theme. From left, are Jerilyn (Johnson) Houghton, Mary Black and Betty Wilczenski.

push our chairs back and then we'd be side by side talking about editorial stuff," Benigno says. "We had a good working relationship. We balanced each other out well."

She often sent layouts to Black for a second opinion. Years after Benigno moved on to another association, she'd still hear her mentor's voice in her head, full of advice to put into practice.

From chemistry to artistry

For the steadfastness of the career, some might assume it was the culmination of a childhood dream to design national magazines. Rather, it's the product of a path that is part

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“whatever it takes to get the job done,” and part gratefulness for a workplace that always felt like family, Black says.

Her family roots go back to Wathena, Kan., where Black was fifth in a set of six kids born in an 11-year span to parents who had to work hard to get by. They didn’t have extra in the Shalz household — not even indoor plumbing until she was 9 — but they had a faith enough to get them through.

“I’m cradle Catholic, though I fell out of the cradle for a lot of years. It’s still the best thing my parents ever did for me,” Black says, noting she attended parochial school until sixth grade and then graduated from Wathena High School in 1975. She was the first of her siblings to go to college.

Her denomination and residency

qualified Black for a special grant to attend Saint Mary College in Leavenworth, where she started out in chemistry. Black changed majors four times before “a kindly nun” named Sister Rebecca suggested her class called Creative Life, Black recalls. From then on it was drawing, painting, sculpting and designing.

When Black had her senior exhibition in 1979, family members bought pieces, but no one predicted exactly how she’d make a living with her art degree.

Her first job brought Aaron Black into her life, and the pair married in 1981. Forty-one years later, she and Aaron still live in that 1906, two-story wood-frame house where they raised their son, Michael, and rode out the ups and downs of life.



Aaron and Mary met at her first job, married and four decades later still share their first (and only) house, which they bought for \$28,000.

Help wanted

A small, black-and-white classified ad called for a “paste-up artist.” It was the kind of post that goes by unnoticed unless you’re an artist in need of an art-related job, which Black was.

Michael was born six weeks early, and extended



Black says her work family is part of her family, and that’s been one of her favorite parts.

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and yet believe it's "*simply doing my job*," that is Black's legacy.

maternity leave wasn't something that guaranteed a job to come back to. Black had been hand cutting decals for a custom printing company and then had a brief stint at a T-shirt printing shop, but it was enough to secure an interview with Cheryl Oxley at Angus Productions Inc.

"She took me in on a whim, I think, because I knew how to cut Amberlith®, and that's the way magazine production was then — you needed to be able to use an X-Acto® knife and cut and paste," Black says.

She was hired for \$3.50 an hour and made the basement office space — often thick with cigarette smoke and a bustle of workers — her second home.

The need to meet deadlines hasn't changed, but how they're met has. Late nights spent cutting and pasting pages have given way to desktop publishing and Adobe programs. Physically mailing corrections to the printer was old school compared to an internet connection.

When Black was promoted to editorial artist, she became a self-taught wonder woman, Hermel says.

"Mary may be resistant to change, but once faced with it, she embraced it and has figured out how to master it," she says. Three redesigns in one year, publishing to the web, adding audio — the evidence agrees she's as adaptable as they come.

From 1986 to 2018, Black laid out 384 *Angus Journals* and worked under just three editors — Jim

Cotton, Jerilyn Johnson (now Houghton) and Shauna Hermel — in that time.

"She probably covered more ground in terms of technology and advancement than anybody in the office," Hermel says.

Yet, of all the changes that have come and gone in Black's career, the one she hopes people take note of is the way she's reignited her relationship with God. For years, life was often a party; and when it wasn't, she coped the same way. Low moments, she says now, were clearly when grace held life together.

Then her mom died at 97 years old, snapping Black into a realization: "I wanted to be a little old church lady like my mom."

She went all in. Today, Black attends daily mass, helps with Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) classes and is involved in several church ministries. Completing the whole-family transformation, Aaron was baptized in 2019.


"I hope others see God is in my life at least more in the last few years," Black says.

People see the joy, the peace she approaches daily tasks with and the genuine desire to help, Hermel says. "She just reaches out with love to so many people right now."



To be one of the most influential forces in an office, and yet believe it's "simply doing my job," that is Black's legacy.

"I came in and did the work and enjoyed the work, and I just feel so blessed that it's all worked out this way," Black says simply.

And a chorus of employees past and present all say, "Amen." 

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