News
Obituary



Sr. Jean Dolores Schmidt, the Loyola University men's basketball chaplain and school celebrity, sits for a portrait in The Joseph J. Gentile Arena, on Monday, Jan. 23, 2023, in Chicago. (AP photo/Jessie Wardarski, file)

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Sr. Jean Dolores Schmidt, the chaplain for the men's basketball team at Loyola Chicago who became a beloved international celebrity during the school's fairy-tale run to the Final Four of the NCAA Tournament in 2018, has died, the university announced Thursday night. She was 106.

Health issues caused Sr. Jean to step down from her role with the university in August, though the school said she remained as an adviser in the final months of her life.

"In many roles at Loyola over the course of more than 60 years, Sr. Jean was an invaluable source of wisdom and grace for generations of students, faculty, and staff," Loyola President Mark Reed said.

"While we feel grief and a sense of loss, there is great joy in her legacy," Reed said. "Her presence was a profound blessing for our entire community and her spirit abides in thousands of lives. In her honor, we can aspire to share with others the love and compassion Sr. Jean shared with us."

Sr. Jean — born Dolores Bertha Schmidt on August 21, 1919, then taking the name Sr. Jean Dolores in 1937 — became one of the most talked-about personalities during that 2018 NCAA Tournament. She did countless interviews and even was celebrated with a bobblehead in her likeness.

She published a memoir in 2023, "Wake Up with Purpose! What I've Learned in My First 100 Years," sharing lessons she'd learned throughout her life and offering spiritual advice.

The basketball teams at Loyola already had learned many of those lessons. And when that run in 2018 ended with a 69-57 loss to Michigan in the national semifinals, players received immediate consolation from their biggest fan.

"Sr. Jean just said it was a great season," forward Aundre Jackson said after the loss. "She was so happy to be on this run with us and we should keep our heads high and be happy with what we accomplished."

The players on that team, some of them 80 years younger than Sr. Jean, made no secret of what she meant to them, to the program and to the university. And she was not just there to be there, either. The Ramblers insisted she was a real part of their success.

"Sr. Jean, she has meant so much to me personally and obviously the team," Loyola's Donte Ingram said after hitting one of the biggest shots in school history, a 3-pointer that lifted the team past Miami 64-62 in the first round of the 2018 tournament.

"She is there before every game. She's saying a prayer before every game. After the game, she sends a general email to the team. And then at the end of the email, it'll be individualized: 'Hey, Donte, you did this, you rebounded well tonight. Even though they were out there to get you, you still came through for the team.' She's just so special, her spirit. She's just so bright, and she means so much to the city of Chicago and Loyola obviously and the team."

Sr. Jean's news conference at that NCAA Tournament, she was told, had more journalists than Tom Brady drew at the Super Bowl. Her likeness appeared on everything from socks to a Lego statue at her gallery in Loyola's art museum. She saw the attention as a holy opportunity to tell her story and share what she's learned.

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"I love life so much and enjoy being with young people," Sr. Jean told The Associated Press in 2023. "They're the ones who keep me going because they bring such joy into my life — and they keep you updated on what's happening in their world."

Loyola, which helped break down racial barriers by winning the 1963 national championship with four Black starters, had not played in the tournament since a Sweet 16 loss to Georgetown in 1985. But with a then-98-year-old nun providing a spiritual lift, the Ramblers captured the nation's imagination.

"Prayers definitely mean a little bit extra when she prays for us," Loyola guard Clayton Custer said during the tournament.

Sr. Jean lived in the dorms on and off beginning in 1978, helping her maintain a strong relationship with the students. It was not unusual for her to sit with them in the student center during lunch, getting to know them and offer guidance. She led prayer groups in residence halls and established a program to connect students with residents at a retirement community.

Born in San Francisco in 1919, Sr. Jean grew up in a devoutly Catholic family. She witnessed the impact of the Great Depression, World War II and the building of the Golden Gate Bridge, which she recalls crossing on foot when it opened in 1937.

Her religious calling, she said, came at the age of 8. She was in third grade when she met a kind, joyful teacher who belonged to the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Brimming with admiration, she would pray every day: "Dear God, help me understand what I should do, but please tell me I should become a BVM sister," she recounted in her memoir.

"I guess God listened to me on that one," she wrote.

She followed her calling to the order's motherhouse in Dubuque, Iowa, where she made her vows. She went on to teach at Catholic schools in Chicago and Southern California, where she also coached girls' basketball, before she ended at Mundelein College — on the Chicago lakefront — in the 1960s. The school became affiliated with Loyola in 1991, and Sr. Jean was hired to help students with the transition.

In 1994, she was asked to help student basketball players boost their grades — "the booster shooter" she called herself, and later that year she was named chaplain of the men's basketball team. The role, she wrote in her memoir, became "the most transformational and transcendent position" of her life.

"Sports are very important because they help develop life skills," she said. "And during those life skills, you're also talking about faith and purpose."

Her celebrity continued to grow and her life continued to be celebrated in her final years. At 100, Sr. Jean received an Apostolic Blessing from Pope Francis. On her 103rd birthday, Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker was among the political officials dedicating the day in her honor. On her 105th birthday, Sr. Jean received a proclamation from President Joe Biden — who had sent her flowers on at least one previous occasion.

Biden's message, in part, told Sr. Jean, "You have shown us all that yours is a life well lived."

The university said Sr. Jean is survived by her sister-in-law, Jeanne Tidwell, and her niece, Jan Schmidt.