



Ellen Mitchell, 86, covered all of Long Island for WCBS/880 AM from 1980 to 1995. In August, the station switched from an all-news to an all-sports format.

# The 'voice of Long Island'

Ellen Mitchell recalls some of the highlights of her reporting days with WCBS/880 AM

BY LIZA N. BURBY  
Special to Newsday

**W**hen WCBS/880 AM had the final signoff of its all-news radio format in August, among the disappointed fans was the station's former "voice of Long Island."

Ellen Mitchell, 86, was the station's Long Island reporter from 1980 to 1995. She covered some of the area's most headline-grabbing stories, including the "Long Island Lolita" Amy Fisher case, the murder of Kelly Ann Tynes in 1989 and the Long Island Rail Road mass shooting in 1993. She had her own signature signoff: "On Long Island, this is Ellen

Mitchell."

Mitchell, who now divides her time between Huntington and her home of 32 years in Orient, said she has nearly 1,000 6-by-9-inch steno pads she filled with notes as she crisscrossed Long Island as a freelance reporter for two decades. She was such a local staple that then-Gov. Mario Cuomo once called during her family's dinner to ask if she

would join his public relations staff; she said she declined the offer.

"She was a trailblazer for many of the other women who came after her because she broke into a field at a time where there weren't many women doing what she was doing," said her oldest child, Elisa McDonagh, 61, a retired physician in Centerport. "She ended up following a passion

that she enjoyed and was a role model for other women and for her daughters to follow the path that brings you joy."

## CAREER PATH

In fact, Mitchell, whose maiden name is Mayer, said she "desperately wanted to be an architect," but her parents said that's not what women do.

See MITCHELL on E16



# LI news? 'Ellen covered it'

MITCHELL from E15

When she graduated from Freeport High School in 1956, she compromised and went to college to become an art teacher. It didn't go well.

"I hated teaching with a vengeance," Mitchell said of her two years at her high school alma mater.

By then she was married to Paul Mitchell, a physician. She said she happily gave up teaching and settled into married life and parenting their three children. But Mitchell, who now has eight grandchildren and a great-grandchild on the way, said that by the time her youngest was ready for elementary school in 1975, she was bored.

That child was Gail Mitchell, now 53 and an art conservator living in Brooklyn. She remembers her mother telling a story about being invited to play cards with other housewives in their Melville neighborhood. "She said that they were talking about a chandelier for an hour, and she had to excuse herself. I think that she just needed to be active in a different way than perhaps other local moms needed to."

## 'I CAN TALK BETTER THAN SHE CAN'

Ellen Mitchell recalled the moment things changed for her. "This was in the era when women were primarily in the kitchen, and I heard a woman's voice giving the local news. And I said, 'I can talk better than she can.'"

So she headed over to radio station WGSM, which was then based in Huntington. "I said to them, 'I know nothing about reporting. I know nothing really about being a writer, but I have a big mouth, so I'd like to help out in your radio news department.'"

She said she added the magic phrase that sealed her employment: "And I'll do it for free."

In her five years there, she said she covered the Nassau and Suffolk legislatures, local government meetings and homicides. Occasionally she'd send Long Island stories to WNEW in New York City. Then she heard that WCBS/880 was looking for someone to cover the area. Mitchell started there in February 1980 as a freelance on-air reporter covering breaking



Ellen Mitchell, below, won awards, including for her reporting on a fatal 1983 fireworks explosion and the crash of Avianca Flight 52.



RANDEE DADDONA

events, government, politics, crime, courts and human interest, primarily on Long Island and occasionally in New York City.

## STARTING WITH A QUIP

Mitchell said that she never forgot the advice a male WGSM reporter told her: The most important part of every story was its introduction,

known as the lede. "He said, Ellen, if you learn anything here, it's grab whoever is listening to you with the lede; the rest of it is gravy."

And so, witty quips became her signature opening lines. She learned on the job how to be a journalist, getting to know the detectives and the chiefs of police so she could get quotes and leads on stories. She car-

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— Former Newsday reporter  
Irving Long

ried a tape recorder and a microphone, and through either a payphone or, occasionally, a random homeowner's phone, would send her reports to WCBS.

Every day was exciting, Mitchell said. She recalled filling in for the city desk and covering a hostage situation. She went into a phone booth on the deserted street to do a

live report a short distance from the action.

"I'm in the middle of the report and the anchor all of a sudden breaks in and says, 'Ellen, get the hell out of the phone booth. You're in the line of fire. The cops just called.'"

She added with relish, "That was good radio."

She said she was among the first on the scene when Fisher was brought into Nassau County police headquarters after shooting the wife of her boyfriend, Joey Buttafuoco, and soon found herself getting to know Buttafuoco and his family. The LIRR killer, Colin Ferguson, called her from jail offering her an exclusive interview to be done on air — which she said the station turned down. Mitchell said she was disappointed because she thought it would have gotten a lot of radio listeners.

## MINEOLA PRESSROOM

Her headquarters was the Mineola pressroom in the





NEWSDAY / DICK YARWOOD

Mitchell, above left in background, looks on as Victoria Tinyes and John Golub, of Valley Stream, confront each other during a break from a hearing on harassment charges filed against Golub. His son was convicted of killing Kelly Ann Tinyes.



ELLEN MITCHELL



RANDEE DADDONA

Ellen Mitchell at WGSM radio, left, where she worked before moving to WCBS in 1980 on a freelance basis. Above, some of the reporter's notebooks at her home in Orient.

Nassau County Courthouse, along with reporters from media outlets including Newsday, Channel 11, News 12, the Daily News, The Associated Press, the New York Post and UPI.

"We were a very close-knit group. Everybody on Long Island: the police departments in Suffolk and Nassau, the executives, officers, politicians,

detectives, PR people for companies would call us all the time, stop in and talk to us," she said. "It was really a clearinghouse of information."

It was the place to be, agreed Vicki Metz, of Bayville, the assignment editor for Channel 7 "Eyewitness News" from 1987 to 2009. "You knew you really made it if you were working in that room. There

really was a camaraderie . . . I loved working there."

#### COLLEAGUES REMEMBER

Also in the pressroom was Irving Long, 85, of Rockingham, North Carolina, a Newsday reporter covering politics. "Ellen was the No. 1 radio reporter in my opinion . . . She was tough. She was competitive. She was hard to beat.

She's a great human being, not just a great reporter," he said.

Another Newsday reporter and longtime friend, Shirley Perlman, 86, said Mitchell was called "the CBS voice of Long Island because the range of what she reported on was amazing. Most reporters are specialized in one area — for me it was covering courts in Mineola — but whatever happened on Long Island, Ellen covered it."

Perlman, who retired from Newsday in 2003 and now lives in Bondville, Vermont, said that though they were competitors, they met at 5:30 every morning before work to run three miles. They still speak nearly every day.

Mitchell's husband, Paul — who died in 2022 — had a busy schedule with his Plainview medical practice, so for much of her radio career she juggled her reporting around her kids' schedules. All three said they have pleasant memories of her career.

McDonagh, a mother of four, said it was always thrilling to hear her mother's name on the radio. "Whether it was in the eye of the hurricane or she was interviewing someone, I had an idea of where she was, based on where she said she was reporting from."

Her son, Jim Mitchell, 60, of Irvington, New York, remembered riding the press float after one of the Islanders' Stanley Cup victories. But what made an indelible impression was going to the courthouse with his mother, in particular the day in 1982 when five men were arraigned for a rampage at the Seacrest Diner in Old Westbury. "I liked watching the lawyers in court," he said.

While he doesn't remember this, Mitchell said the teen turned to her and said he was going to do that one day. He's now a high-profile criminal defense lawyer at Ballard Spahr LLP who often fields reporters' questions for his clients.

"There weren't too many moms who were doing that sort of a thing back then . . . Now I deal with reporters all the time and it gives you a very different perspective and appreciation for how hard it is," he said.

As the youngest, Gail Mitchell said she spent the most time at work with her mother, often going to the pressroom after school. She got to know what she called "the cast of characters" and remembers a bulletin board

where the reporters would post alternative headlines that could never get published.

A favorite memory was when her mother took her to Teterboro Airport in New Jersey at dawn to fly in the helicopter with WCBS traffic reporter Neal Busch. "I had my camera and got to sit next to him while he reported live," she said. "I still have the photos I took that morning."

#### AWARDS AND A BOOK

Mitchell won several awards for her on-air news coverage, including from the New York State Broadcasting Association for excellence in spot news of the fatal 1983 Grucci fireworks explosion and in 1990 for the crash of Avianca Flight 52 in Cove Neck. But her long run at WCBS ended over a change in her work status.

Mitchell said she was never on staff for the station and was instead paid as a freelancer. She also wrote features for The New York Times and Newsday, and she shared story information with other radio stations. In 1995, she said WCBS asked her to become a staff member, which meant giving up writing for anyone else and the freedom to cover the stories she wanted. So she quit at 57. (In a 1995 Daily News article, a WCBS official declined to comment on the issue.)

Mitchell went on to do publicity for the North Shore Health System for five years and became a regular contributor to Newsday, including writing a weekly column, "Connections," for this section. She also wrote a book related to one of those articles, "Beyond Tears: Living After Losing a Child," about women whose children had died. It was published by St. Martin's Griffin in 2004.

Mitchell officially retired from freelancing about 15 years ago. Of her time as a radio reporter, she said, "I could never do it today. The schedule was insane. I don't have that kind of energy to be that busy and keep going and going."

These days she said she is focused on photography and has almost been persuaded by her children to write a book about her years in the Mineola pressroom. Of the last days of WCBS/880, she said, "I was heartbroken to hear that it had closed. They really knew what they were doing about news, so I will miss that. I think of my time there as the glory days of radio news."