



Irene Claire Novak

July 7, 1945 - August 24, 2026

Madison, Wisconsin

Irene Claire Novak died in Madison on August 24, 2026. She was eighty-one. Born there on July 7, 1945, she grew up in a house where Polish was for the kitchen and English was for the street, and she kept both. She became a dining-hall cook because the university was hiring and because she had already learned, at home, that a hot meal is a form of keeping people upright.

She spent twenty-eight years in campus kitchens, first washing hotel pans that never quite came clean, later running a breakfast line that had to catch students who arrived after the count. She kept a second carton of milk for the one who came in late. She seasoned commodity beans as if the warehouse had meant them to taste like something. On the mornings the buses ran late she still opened the steam table.

She married Ellis Novak in 1966. He drove a laundry truck and died in 2004. They raised a daughter and a son in a bungalow with a maple that dropped more work than shade. After Ellis was gone she kept his saucer on the drainboard for a season, then gave it to a granddaughter who liked cereal at odd hours. She sang alto in a choir that rehearsed on Wednesdays whether anyone new showed up or not.

People on her block remember a woman who would freeze extra kolache in coffee cans and leave them on porches after a funeral. She disliked a speech, loved a clean steam table, and could tell you which year the hall switched from square pizza to the round kind the students would actually finish. She died in Madison, in heat she had always said was honest. The line still opens. Someone else will count the milk.

Services

A gathering at her church hall in Madison. Friends may bring a covered dish. A gift to a campus meal fund is

welcome.

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