

Country Living

March 2004

Vol. 46 No. 6



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A legacy of laughter

Memories of Erma Bombeck are very much alive in her native Dayton and elsewhere

By RICH WARREN

Everyone who met her recalls not only her laugh but how much they themselves were laughing whenever she was around.

"She," of course, was Erma Bombeck, the Dayton housewife who became America's queen of comedy with a thrice-weekly column appearing in 700 newspapers, a dozen best-selling books with such colorful titles as *If Life is a Bowl of Cherries*, *What Am I Doing in the Pits?*, and a regular gig on *Good Morning America* where she pulled such stunts as interviewing Zsa Zsa Gabor in bed (Zsa Zsa, not Erma) and going shopping with Phyllis Diller dressed in a nun's habit (Phyllis, not Erma).

Nowadays, nearly eight years after her death from complications from a kidney transplant, Erma's legacy of laughter is still very much alive with the recent appearance of a gift book based on one of her most beloved columns — *Eat Less Cottage Cheese and More Ice Cream: Thoughts on Life from Erma Bombeck* — as well as a conference of humor writers gathering at Erma's beloved alma mater, the University of Dayton (see sidebar).

Memories of Erma also are alive here in the Buckeye State, where Erma made her home until 1971 when she and her husband Bill moved to Paradise — Paradise Valley, Arizona, that is. Erma was so beloved by so many that she truly became a household name. And maybe that's because she herself was rooted in a household of her own and could capture in comic detail on all the daily rigors — and the humor — of being a suburban housewife and

mother. "So many people have told me it was like she was looking at them through their kitchen windows," says Bill Bombeck, Erma's widower. "She knew what their lives were like because she was living it."

Erma's extraordinary life began quite ordinarily in 1927 when she was born Erma Fiste to a hardworking family living on Hedges Street in Dayton. From an early age, Erma began a love affair with the written word. At Christmas-time, she would plead for books, not dolls, and then would read them aloud, taking all the parts as if she were in a play. She was fascinated with popular humorists of the day, including James Thurber and Robert Benchley, so it's not surprising when she reached high school that a column she wrote for the school paper poked fun at the world and people around her.

At age 15, she'd discovered her calling. She marched into the *Dayton Herald*, the city's afternoon newspaper, and announced "I want to work for your paper." She was assigned a job as "copygirl" but got one front-page feature story when she interviewed the visiting Shirley Temple. After graduating from high school, she worked full-time at the

paper to save money for college. She was promoted from copygirl to staff writer, but spent most of her time writing obituaries.

After an unhappy year at Ohio University, Erma came home and enrolled at the University of Dayton, private Catholic college. It was here she found the encouragement she craved for a career as a writer. To

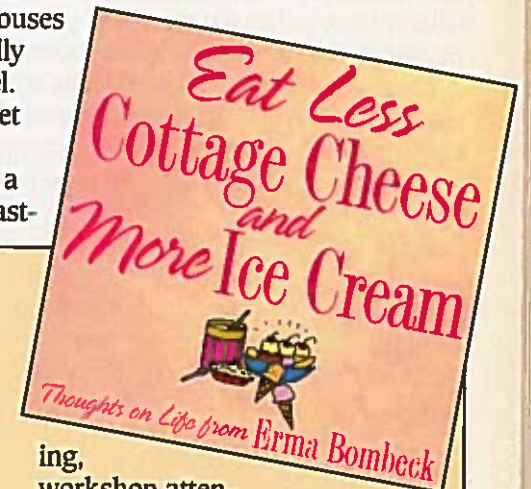
the end of her life, she was fond of telling the story of how she one day ran into Brother Tom Price, who had read some of the articles Erma had written for the school newspaper and who'd asked her to write for the university's magazine. On this day when she accidentally encountered Brother Tom, he turned to her and said the words Erma always claimed would sustain her the rest of her career. "You can write," he said. "You can write."

Erma graduated in 1949 and for a while worked again at the *Dayton Journal-Herald* (the city's two newspapers had merged). She was assigned to the women's section and for the most part found her assignments uninspiring. More inspirational to her was the young man Bill Bombeck, who'd worked as a copyboy while Erma was a copygirl in high school. The two kept in touch while Bill was away during World War II, and after Erma graduated from college in 1949, the two were married.

These were the years that shaped the Erma

Bombeck America came to know and love. She adored her growing family — daughter Betsy and sons Matt and Andy — but found motherhood more of a test than she'd imagined. With never enough hours in the day, Erma found little time for herself and her precious writing. She buried herself in typical housewifely duties of the 1950s, crocheting Santa Claus doorknob covers and decorating dinners with little roses sculpted out of zucchini. It wasn't enough. She craved more.

The Bombecks became suburbanites when they moved to Centerville, just outside of Dayton, and took up residence on Cushwa Drive, then a new development, where the cookie cutter houses were all basically the same model. Across the street lived Phil Donahue, then a Dayton broadcast-



Erma and the write stuff

If you're an aspiring humor writer or if you want to relive some of Erma's magic, the University of Dayton offers several ways to follow in the footsteps of its famous alumna.

First of all, go to humorwriters.org for an electronic explosion of information. There are dozens of links to articles on humor writing, how to get published, author appearances and so on. You literally can spend hours going through the material on this website. What's more, you can register there for a monthly e-mail giving even more new information of interest to all writers. And you can get a special Erma screen saver for your computer and even order Erma's just-released book.

To savor some Erma nostalgia, go to www.ermamuseum.org, where you can read the story of Erma's life (our account here borrowed heavily from this website). You also can see photos of her, read some rare columns of hers, and see and hear audio and video clips of Erma's family and friends, including the moving eulogy by Phil Donahue at Erma's memorial service. There are seven complete episodes of the *Maggie* sitcom that Erma wrote and produced.

Just recently UD added 13 of Erma's *Good Morning America* segments, including ones where Erma discusses picky eaters, tries her hand at the slippery sport of curling, and explains why people think they are younger than they actually are. Erma also tests some of the most innovative, and strange, chairs on the market and laments the revenge of the Thanksgiving turkey.

Every second year, UD hosts the Erma Bombeck Writers Workshop to be held this year from March 25 to 27, but unfortunately this event has been sold out for months and already has a long waiting list. Hundreds of writers from 39 states and Canada will attend this year's event with sessions on how to write for various media and how to break into the business.

According to Tim Bete, director of the workshop and curator of the online museum, UD is following in the footsteps of Erma herself, who was well-known for the encouragement she offered to both beginning and established writers, returning some of the encouragement she felt she got in her years at UD.

Besides improving their writ-

ing, workshop attendees will benefit from the networking and contact with other professionals they will meet there, Bete feels. Bete is himself the writer of a humor column on parenting, which he credits to the workshop's influence, and he feels that over time the workshop will inevitably contribute to the advancement of humor writing across the country.

"It's a competitive field, but people love to laugh — it has great healing power," says Bete. "At this workshop, writers get fired up about their work and make a lot of contacts with other people who can help them. They leave all pumped up and go back to their work with more enthusiasm. We have no doubts that someday, someone who has come here as a beginning writer will reach the national arena."

Persons who want to be notified when registration begins for the next workshop — and who want more information on humor writing in general — can register for the monthly e-mail newsletter at www.humorwriters.org.



(Top to bottom) Erma and her husband, Bill; Erma kissing a llama on a segment of *Good Morning America*; Erma at her typewriter in 1978 (Photos courtesy of the Bombeck family).

er, who became lifelong friends with Erma and delivered a moving eulogy at her funeral. According to Phil, the most fun to be had on Cushwa Drive was at the Bombecks, mostly because of Erma.

The hilarious writing for which Erma is best remembered had its beginnings on Cushwa Drive and in other places in suburban Dayton where the Bombecks made their home. In 1964, Erma walked into the offices of her local paper, the *Kettering-Oakwood Times*, and offered to do a column. Here she honed her trademark style, crafting her work on a typewriter balanced on a plank resting on cinderblocks. Her work eventually was noticed by the editors back at her old stomping grounds, the *Journal-Herald*, and Erma was delighted to return. From there, her rise was meteoric. Three weeks after returning to the *Journal-Herald*, she signed a contract with Newsday, and one year later her column — *At Wit's End* — was appearing in 38 newspapers. Five years later, she was in 500 papers, with hundreds more to come in following years.

But of course, it's not just Erma, the columnist, that we remember. After compiling a couple books of her columns, Erma began composing original book-length material, focusing on the perils of living in the suburbs in *The Grass is Always Greener Over the Septic*

Remembering Erma

For those who knew and loved her, including her family and legions of friends, Erma still is very much a part of their lives. Among them are:

Bill Bombeck

Erma's widower, Bill Bombeck likes to claim his wife "was a great writer of fiction," taking the basic premise of things that happened in their family and "embroidering" upon it. "She had me watching football three times a week," he laughs. "I never watched football." What he calls the "Do it yourself" years in suburban Dayton of trying to make their home look different from the identical ones in their development proved ripe fodder for Erma's satirical wit — her stepfather even walked into one of the neighbor's houses by accident. To differentiate their home, the Bombecks painted their bricks white, much to their neighbors' horror.

Even though Bill claims life with Erma was not the "laugh a minute" many people might think, he has a firm grasp of what made her so funny. "Early on she discovered that if she wrote about herself in a self-deprecating manner, making herself look like a goof up, it appealed to people. Part of what she did was put a spin on things of making herself fail to measure up." But that was only part of Erma's magic, Bill recognizes. Never meanspirited, Erma's suburban satire also touched on contemporary issues, while at the same time she remained the unpretentious "small town" wife, mother and friend of many. Bill is very proud that the eminent Alistair Cooke, host of *Masterpiece Theatre*, puts Erma's humor in its own

Tank and the thankless tasks of new motherhood in *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression*. As hilarious and quick-witted in person as she was in her writing, Erma became a hit on the lecture circuit and even a television star due to her 11-year stint on *Good Morning America*.

She also entered the political arena when President Carter appointed her to the National Advisory Committee for Women. Erma campaigned tirelessly for the Equal Rights Amendment, largely because of her belief that the contributions of women caring for their families should be considered equal to those working in a regular job. The defeat of the ERA was one of Erma's biggest disappointments. Another was the cancellation of the television situation comedy, *Maggie*, which Erma wrote and produced, basing it on the life of a slightly crazed mother and family in — where else? — Dayton, Ohio. Erma put her all into this program, but it was canceled after only eight episodes.

Erma was adored as much for her humor as for her wisdom and compassionate spirit. One of her final books was a testament to the courage with which she faced her own death. It addressed a topic that was far from funny — children with cancer. When she spent time with these children at a special camp, she heard laughter and realized the kids just wanted to live as

special category in his collection of biographical sketches, *Memories of the Great and the Good*.

Bill says the reason Erma accomplished so much is that she was a human dynamo, "working very, very hard, running a household as well as doing her writing." His major disappointment is that she never wrote her own autobiography. He thinks she'd intended to get around to it eventually but saw it as something to do when her career was coming to an end. "She was 69 when she died and still working hard. She wasn't ready to hang it up."

Bill still lives in Arizona, where the Bombecks moved in 1971 and is still very active in many Erma related projects, including the Erma Bombeck Organ Donor Awareness project. Even though Erma is buried in Dayton's Woodland Cemetery, her grave is marked with a huge rock Bill had brought there from Arizona (See our story on page 20). He laughs at the trouble involved in transporting it, including the discovery that the rock was on their neighbor's property, not theirs.

Bill says he still hears Erma's voice from time to time. He wasn't sure she'd have approved of the collection of her best-loved columns, *Forever Erma*, that was published after her death, until he authorized all the proceeds should go to charity. And he remembers how he once sat down at her typewriter, started to type, and it broke. "I think she was trying to tell me something," he laughs.

normal lives as possible, viewing their illness as an unwelcome visitor. Erma saw the kids playing pranks with each other, while at the same time facing their condition with incredible bravery. The book she wrote on her experience, *I Want To Grow Hair, I Want To Grow Up, I Want To Go to Boise* (based on one boy's three wishes), touched readers' hearts, making them both laugh and cry.

Little known to many of her readers, Erma was battling a serious kidney condition of her own, but kept it quiet, "not wanting to be a poster child for her illness," according to her husband, and also refusing to use her fame to be pushed to the top of a waiting list for a new kidney. After waiting several years, she died three weeks after receiving her new kidney in a

Matt Bombeck

A writer in his own right of television movies, Matt Bombeck claims his mother's diligence and the hard work she put into her writing is what has influenced him the most in his career. "She never saw herself as an entertainer or as a celebrity. She saw herself as a writer. When people ask me what she was really like, I'm always at a loss for words. I say read her books, read her columns. That's who she was. Her work speaks of her life."

As a child, Matt once got into trouble by referring to his mother as a "syndicated communist." He and his siblings knew only that Erma was confining herself to her office and wasn't to be disturbed for a certain period. Erma never consulted her family about her columns, and in fact they knew little about what was going to be in it until it appeared. They never were troubled by what she wrote since it never was more than playful exaggeration. "And besides, she never named names," Matt says. "If she wrote about something 'my son' did, I could always blame my

Caryl Miller

Caryl Miller is a television writer with credits ranging from the Mary Tyler Moore and original Bob Newhart shows and *Maude*. She worked with Erma on the short-lived *Maggie* series, which lasted for only eight episodes. With Erma herself involved in the writing of the series, it had seemed assured of success, but the show never really found an audience, partially because of ABC's changing its time slot, Caryl believes. Even though Erma worked feverishly during the show's few weeks, Caryl remembers her as an absolute delight. "It was like having a girlfriend at work; it was a party every day." Perhaps Erma and Caryl bonded so quickly because they both were housewives and working mothers. "Like Erma, I knew the business end of a diaper like I knew my own hand," Caryl said.

San Francisco hospital on April 22, 1996, at age 69.

Perhaps her former neighbor and longtime friend, Phil Donahue, summed it up best in his remarks at Erma's memorial service: "We shall never see the likes of her again. We shall never know again her brilliance, her insight and especially her generosity...She was real and she brought us all down to earth — gently, generously and with brilliant humor. She is a 20th century political figure, and when the scholars gather hundreds of years from now to learn about us, they can't know it all if they don't read Erma. She will live forever." □



The Bombecks at home, Christmas 1982. Pictured are Bill and Erma, sons Matt and Andy, and daughter Betsy.

brother. My sister wasn't so lucky."

Matt thinks if his mother were still alive, she'd now be writing about what it's like to be a grandmother, and like his father, he thinks Erma would have produced a nostalgic reminiscence of her

early years in Dayton. His family frequently wonder what Erma's take would be on any given situation, especially so last December when Matt's brother, Andy, was married. Andy inherited the same kidney condition that Erma had, and his exceedingly generous fiancé gave him an unusual wedding gift several months in advance of the wedding — one of her own kidneys. The Bombecks know Erma would have thoroughly approved and would have found much comic fodder in Andy's instant transformation from perennial bachelor to grandfather. (Wife Shari already had three children and six grandchildren.)

Matt says his mother's laugh is one of his fondest memories. "She was very quickwitted, and it was just her nature to laugh and be funny and to find humor in situations around her. That really was her. There was never any facade."

Caryl vividly remembers the first day of work on the series when Erma showed up wearing what Caryl called the "most god-awful ugly brown pleated skirt I have ever seen." In Tinseltown's glamor, the skirt stuck out — and not in a good way. According to Caryl, Erma caught on quickly to her fashion faux pas. She turned to Caryl and said "The last person who saw me in a pleated skirt went blind." According to Caryl, "I'm still laughing, and the joke didn't really make sense. That was Erma. How could you not love her? She was such a breath of fresh air."

Erma covered her deep disappointment at the series' quick cancellation. She sent a telegram to the head of ABC saying that if she had it all to do over again, she'd have thrown in more car chases and had everyone in bikinis.

(Continued on page 15)

Tony Cochran

Creator of the very funny comic strip "Agnes," about a sassy, self-important girl with a big vocabulary, Tony Cochran, now of Columbus, knew Erma when he was a child because his mother and Erma were the best of friends and would "gab on the phone by the hour from one kitchen to another talking about things of little consequence to children," he says. Occasionally, his family would visit the Bombecks from their home about 20 minutes away, and the two families' youngsters would sit uncomfortably together in one room "like good Catholic children while the adults were in another room laughing uproariously. Sometimes my mom would play the piano, they would sing, and someone would drag



D.L. Stewart

A columnist and writer for the *Dayton Daily News*, D.L. Stewart says that Erma has inspired him in his work, not only because he's drawn to writing about off-beat things — like Pizza Hut's new square pizzas — but also because he's written humor based on being a parent. "Erma had the motherhood stuff locked up, but no one was writing about fatherhood. Fatherhood doesn't really begin until a man rolls up his sleeve, reaches into the toilet and pulls out a fistful of Lincoln logs," Stewart laughs.

As a fellow writer, Stewart recognizes that Erma was skilled at her craft. She was successful, he thinks, because she was the first of her kind to dispel the image of the June Cleaver type of mother from *Leave it to Beaver*. "She was the first to say, in a very gentle way, things like 'children should be judged on what they are — a punishment from God.' She hit people's buttons." Almost edgy for its day, Erma's good-natured satire never offended

Stewart remembers Erma as extremely generous. "She was the kind of person I could and did call. She never really changed. She couldn't have been any more modest or self-effacing. And she was a generous laughter. She didn't have to be 'on' all the time. She didn't insist on being the only person getting the laughs."

One classic Erma story Stewart recalls is a time when he found himself getting on the same flight as Erma in Dayton. Erma's syndicate had paid for a first-class seat for her, whereas Stewart was in coach. He suggested that she join him in the back of the plane. "What? With all the little people?" Erma said, with pretended horror. But sure enough, as soon as the "Fasten Seatbelt" light went off, Erma came back and joined Stewart in humorous repartee for the remainder of the flight. "She was truly a First Class lady," Stewart said.

out a ukelele-sized banjo and strum on it. I think there had to have been some alcohol involved."

Tony remembers Erma was "always happy and smiling and one of the shortest women I have ever met." He found himself studying her because "she could make my mom laugh, and that was always a personal goal of my own, so I watched how she did it." Nowadays, he thinks his own sense of humor doesn't have much in common with Erma's, but he still thinks he's benefited as an adult from studying her writing. "I learned a lot about timing and the importance of creating a voice in your writing from Erma," he explains. "Erma's voice comes across so strongly, I can actually hear her speaking what she wrote in my mind."

Brother Raymond Fitz, S.M.

Brother Raymond Fitz was president of the University of Dayton from 1979 to 2002. He worked with Erma on UD's Board of Trustees, of which Erma was a member for many years. He remembers her as a person of genuine warmth with a gifted insight into matters related to families and women. She took her position on the board very seriously, flying in from Arizona for meetings and becoming "seriously involved" in matters before the board before going shopping with a number of her friends who still lived in town. When his father passed away, Erma took the time

to write him a note, which he still treasures. One of her principal legacies is now carried on at UD through the biennial Writers Workshop, he says. "To have students and our faculty tracing her ideas and how her career evolved has to be a valuable asset for aspiring writers," he said.

(Above) Nine-year-old Erma tap dancing; (Right) Erma shopping with Phyllis Diller dressed as a nun for a segment of Good Morning America. Photos courtesy of the Bombeck family. These photos and dozens of others can be seen online at www.ermamuseum.org.



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