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2019: Erma Bombeck

Kristina Schulz

University of Dayton, kschulz1@udayton.edu

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During Women's History Month, the University of Dayton Women's Center coordinates, as an experiential learning opportunity for students, an annual exhibit highlighting the contributions women have made at the University of Dayton.

Theme for 2019: Trailblazers

2019: Erma Bombeck

Written by Kristina Schulz

Erma Bombeck, born Erma Louise Fiste, attended the University of Dayton, graduating with a degree in English in 1949. A regular contributor of humorous columns to school publications during both junior high and high school, she worked for the Dayton Herald during her years at Dayton Co-Op High School. While at the Herald, Bombeck interviewed a teenage Shirley Temple when she visited Dayton to promote a movie. The article won Erma a newspaper staff award and boosted her confidence in her writing ability.



Writing was a central part of Bombeck's life - as a vocation and in order to help pay for her college classes. She wrote humorous articles for a company newsletter as a part-time job with Rike's, the local department store. Eventually, Bombeck wrote for the University of Dayton's student magazine publication, *The Exponent* and for the student newspaper, the *UD News*.

In her May 1949 column for the *University of Dayton Exponent* titled "With the Coeds..." Erma Fiste muses about gifts that each class leaves a university:

With each graduating class that crawls toward Alberta Street on their hands and knees with a sheepskin in their teeth goes the question, "And what did you leave UD ... a plastic drinking fountain? A weasel head for the mantle in Alumni Hall? ... Or a red and black typewriter ribbon for the Journalism Department? (Exponent article, May 1949)

Bombeck left a lasting legacy, not only to UD, but to the larger community. Achieving success as a newspaper columnist, Bombeck provided humorous affirmation to housewives. She also wrote for magazines, including *Good Housekeeping* and *Reader's Digest* and published eleven books during her career. In 1975, Erma began providing commentaries to Good Morning

America and continued this through the mid-1980s. Bombeck wrote and produced her own sitcom, *Maggie*, a show based on her family life.

Both Erma and her husband, Bill, maintained a relationship with their alma mater that has enriched the university community. Bombeck was named a Distinguished Alumnus in 1976 and awarded an honorary doctorate from the university in 1981. She served on the University's Board of Trustees in the 1980s and participated in the Challenge Campaign during the alumni phase in 1986. She was named an honorary trustee in 1988.

Bombeck was appointed to the President's National Advisory Committee on Women by President Carter in the late 1970s and promoted the Equal Rights Amendment. Through work with the Arizona Kidney Foundation, Erma helped raise awareness of the need for donors and to increase the number of living donors by creating the "Save a Life, It's in You" project. Erma was a champion of housewives, promoter of women's rights, and philanthropist. These were just a few of the gifts she gave as a result of her talents.