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## NEWS RELEASE

### AS TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF ERMA BOMBECK'S DEATH APPROACHES, DOCUMENTARY TO PREMIERE NATIONALLY, MUSEUM DRAWS THOUSANDS

DAYTON, Ohio – When 350 writers saw the premiere of the first documentary produced about Erma Bombeck's life, they were quick to applaud her legacy.

"On behalf of all the Erma wannabes, most of us feel we're not worthy to touch the fuzz on her house slippers," one writer quipped as the Bombeck family and the audience erupted into laughter. The piece premiered during the University of Dayton's March 23-25 Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop, which drew writers from 44 states and Canada.

Narrated by talk show pioneer and former neighbor Phil Donahue, "Erma Bombeck: A Legacy of Laughter" will air on more than 270 public television stations – more than 90 percent of the nation's television markets. Produced by ThinkTV, the half-hour documentary is being distributed nationally by American Public Television (APT). In Dayton, it will air on ThinkTV Channel 16 (WPTD) at 9 p.m. on May 12, with a repeat showing at 6 p.m. on May 14. It will air on ThinkTV Channel 14 (WPTO) at 8 p.m. on May 18.

The national attention comes a decade after Bombeck's death from complications of a kidney transplant on April 22, 1996.

"We didn't set out to make this a laugh riot ... or a celebrity-laden remembrance. We decided to make this a warm and intimate portrait of Erma Bombeck. How do you take a life as rich as Erma Bombeck's and fit it into such a tiny envelope? Erma wrote about family matters, and that's what we chose to focus on – family," said Richard Wonderling, who wrote, produced and directed the documentary.

The documentary celebrates one of America's best-loved humorists through recollections from family and friends along with photographs and rare home movies. Bill Bombeck, Erma's widower, and their children, Betsy, Matt and Andy, were all interviewed for the piece.

"One resource that Bill provided was just magical – his extensive library of home movies, Wonderling said. "Unguarded moments of laughter and joy deliver an intimacy. ... It was like

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every Thanksgiving and Christmas I was standing outside their picture window looking in. This is about real life, and we all know real life is not a bowl of cherries."

The documentary's premiere sparked laughter, tears and some guilt from the mostly female audience. One writer asked if the kids ever felt like they were intruding on their mom while she wrote. "She used to lock herself in her office, and we'd slip notes – lots of notes – under the door. I don't know. It didn't seem like neglect," said Betsy Bombeck to laughter.

Besides the Bombeck family, others interviewed for the documentary included Norma Born, Erma's assistant; Patricia Wynn Brown, author and performer; Bruce Cameron, author of *8 Simple Rules for Dating My Teenage Daughter*, and Tim Bete, director of the Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop.

"I think Erma should be canonized a saint because she takes simple words that all of us use every day and transforms them into an elixir that's spirit-raising and mood-alternating," Brown said during a panel discussion after the premiere. "And kids, that's transubstantiation. So let's all write a letter to the Vatican."

How would Bombeck judge the documentary and the gathering of writers from all over the nation eager to learn more about humor and human interest writing?

"One of the banes of Erma's existence was that you don't really analyze humor," said Bill Bombeck, who called her "the patron saint" of the workshop that's offered by the University of Dayton every other year. "I think Erma would be very proud. I commend the University of Dayton for turning this into a premiere event for writers."

Launched in 2000, the workshop has drawn such notable speakers as Dave Barry, Art Buchwald, Bil Keane, Phil Donahue, Nancy Cartwright and Don Novello. The University of Dayton, where Bombeck honed her humor writing skills, also maintains the Erma Bombeck Online Museum ([www.ErmaMuseum.org](http://www.ErmaMuseum.org)). More than 100,000 visitors each year tap into the museum and ask hundreds of questions – ranging from "I lost a column from 1973 that used to hang on my refrigerator and would like to get a replacement" to junior high school students wondering if her work qualifies as fiction or non-fiction. Bombeck's most humorous lines still draw a chuckle. "When Erma Bombeck said, 'I don't participate in any sport with ambulances at the bottom of the hill,' what sport was she talking about?" one visitor asked.

"While Erma died 10 years ago, she's still incredibly popular among all ages," said Bete, who directs the workshop and maintains the online museum.

Added Kitty Lensman, director of marketing and business development for ThinkTV: "In the top-10 markets every station has picked it (the documentary) up. That's an unheard-of response, considering it's a one-time show, but it speaks of Erma Bombeck's appeal."