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University of Dayton

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FAMOUS NEIGHBORS: PHIL RETURNS TO DAYTON TO REMINISCE, PAY TRIBUTE TO ERMA

DAYTON, Ohio — Phil Donahue lived diagonally across the street from the Bombecks on Cushwa Drive in Centerville where “there are some places where the grass is greener than at other places.”

Four decades later he is returning to Dayton to share stories about their friendship and reminisce about the spirit of those times at University of Dayton events paying tribute to humorist and 1949 graduate Erma Bombeck.

At “An Evening with Phil Donahue” at 8 p.m. on Friday, March 8, the nine-time Emmy Award-winning TV talk show host will recall what it was like to come of age in Dayton, Ohio, when a president was assassinated and America lost a war. The evening wouldn’t be complete without audience participation. The pioneer of the television talk show will take questions from the audience.

“Those were very, very interesting times for all of us,” Donahue said in a phone interview from Westport, Conn. “We all had stairstep kids, the (Vietnam) war was in full roar, the cities were collapsing, and we looked up to discover that we were prepared for a world that never materialized.”

The speech, part of the University of Dayton’s Erma Bombeck Writers’ Workshop and Distinguished Speaker Series, is free and open to the public, but tickets are required. No tickets will be available at the door. For tickets, call 229-2545 or visit UD’s box office in Kennedy Union from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday through Friday, or 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. on Saturdays.

Donahue also will participate in a sold-out Erma Bombeck Writers’ Workshop on Saturday, March 9, at the University of Dayton. Donahue and Bill Bombeck, Erma’s widower, will talk about “The Erma We Knew and Loved” at a luncheon that will feature the launching of the virtual Erma Bombeck Museum. Then he will team up with Matt Bombeck, Erma’s son who’s a TV screenwriter, to offer a workshop on breaking into television writing.

Donahue described Erma as “an extraordinary person” and “a loyal friend.”

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“This woman almost all by herself held the publishing industry aloft,” he said. “She was just magic. I think she could have done it without leaving her laundry room.”

In Donahue’s moving tribute to her at a 1996 memorial service, he observed, “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.”

Donahue’s early career included both radio and television news in Dayton. While a news anchor at WHIO-TV in the 1960s, he distinguished himself as the host of a radio call-in show, “Conversation Piece.” The radio program and his high-profile interviews with such newsmakers as John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Richard and Pat Nixon, Pete Rose and others brought him to the attention of Avco Broadcasting. The format he introduced on Nov. 6, 1967, as “The Phil Donahue Show” on WLWD-TV (now WDTN-TV) launched the first audience participation television talk show and changed the face of American daytime television.

The program, “Donahue,” moved to Chicago in 1974 and entered national syndication. Nearly 7,000 episodes later it went off the air after airing in more than 45 countries and winning 20 national Emmys and broadcasting’s prestigious Peabody Award. For his outstanding contribution to television and American culture, Donahue was inducted into the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame in 1993.

Donahue’s ties to Dayton run deep. Four out of his five children were born here. He bought his first house for $16,300 in Centerville, which he described in Donahue: My Own Story as “as far away from urban anxiety as you can get and still not have a septic tank.” He’s stayed in touch with old neighbors and journalism colleagues. In 1997, he eulogized local TV icon Don Wayne, and just three months ago he attended the funeral of Stanley Mouse, former general manager at WHIO-TV during Donahue’s anchor days.

“When I lived in Dayton, no one ever asked me to speak,” he joked.

Today, Donahue, 66, devotes his energies to political campaigns, television appearances and volunteer work. He worked on Ralph Nader’s presidential campaign, serves on numerous boards and helps raise money for St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, founded by his father-in-law, the late Danny Thomas. In his spare time, “I watch people screaming at each other on cable TV,” he said.

And what does he think about the direction of television talk shows? “They’re all my illegitimate children,” he said. “I try not to criticize them.”

Thinking back on the way his program reflected society, he added, “We were naughty. We had male strippers and more than a few interesting and controversial programs. When you watch daytime television, you’re looking in a mirror. It’s a reflection of our culture.”
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Phil Donahue's public address, the writers' workshop and the virtual museum are part of three days of special events honoring Bombeck. Bill Bombeck will present awards to winners of the annual Erma Bombeck Writing Competition at 7 p.m. on Thursday, March 7, at the Washington-Centerville Public Library, 111 W. Spring Valley Road. This year's competition attracted a record 1,000 entries from around the world. The Bombeck family will be on hand to help dedicate UD's Bombeck Family Learning Center at 10 a.m. on Friday, March 8. The family donated $1 million to transform UD's child care center into an early childhood education demonstration school.

The events are co-sponsored by UD's National Alumni Association; Dayton Daily News; Washington-Centerville Public Library; Books & Co.; ActiveDayton.com; WYSO-FM; WHIO-TV; Andrews McMeel Universal; Writer's Digest Book Club; and Suburban Newspapers of Dayton.

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For more information, see http://erma.udayton.edu. For a photo of Phil Donahue, contact Teri Rizvi or Tim Bete at (937) 229-3241.