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University of Dayton

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HUMOR WRITER MICKEY GUISEWITE COMING HOME TO PAY TRIBUTE TO ERMA DURING UD'S ERMA BOMBECK WRITERS' WORKSHOP

DAYTON, Ohio — Syndicated humor columnist Mickey Guisewite is really, really looking forward to coming “home” for a visit. Part of it is her desire to reconnect with Kettering, the place where she grew up and graduated high school. Part of it is looking forward to seeing a couple of friends she hasn’t seen for many years. And part of it is that, as a guest speaker during the University of Dayton’s second Erma Bombeck Writers’ Workshop, Guisewite will be helping to pay tribute to Erma, whom she idolized.

But mostly it’s the pizza.

“The first thing I’m going to do when I get to Dayton is order a Cassano’s pizza,” said Guisewite of the Ohio-only delicacy that was once a staple of her diet — and one she laments not being able to get delivered to her Bloomfield Hills, Mich., home where she writes “A View From the Middle,” a weekly humor column syndicated by United Press Syndicate.

Guisewite will be one of 20 prominent humor writers, human interest columnists and editors coming to UD to pay tribute to the life and work of Erma Bombeck during the March 9 writers’ workshop. The daylong event, which sold out more than two months early, has attracted 250 attendees from 28 states and Canada.

For Guisewite, the road to syndication — a privilege she shares with her sister, Cathy, whose comic strip of the same name is also distributed by UPS — began when she received a bachelor of fine arts degree in theatre from Denison University, then discovered she suffered from stage fright.

“I realized I was meant to work behind the scenes,” she said. Armed with a minor in English, a creative bent and a family history of advertising — both parents were in the business — Guisewite went to work at an ad agency in Detroit.

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"I loved it," she said. "I worked in the creative department as a copywriter which, when you think about it, was really good training for what I do now. As a copywriter, you have to think short and fast; you have to cut out the extraneous and get right to the point." As she made her way up the ad ladder, Guisewite was promoted to creative supervisor and had her hand in big name accounts such as Vlasic Pickles, the National Guard and Reserve, Builders Square and, though she's not sure she should admit it, Kmart. In 1983 she met fellow adman and husband-to-be John DeCerchio, whom she would wed in 1989.

As much as she loved her work, however, Guisewite began to miss "the sheer joy of writing. I did a lot of essay writing in junior high and high school, and in college I wrote a collection of essays about college life," she said. "A professor told me I had a knack for writing about the mundane, and that stayed with me."

So in 1992, Guisewite started going in to work early each day to write essays "just for fun." Before the year was over, Bantam Books published Dancing Through Life in a Pair of Broken Heels, a collection of Guisewite's essays illustrated by sister Cathy.

That experience, combined with a lifelong love of Erma Bombeck's work, compelled Guisewite to pursue a full-time writing career.

"From the seventh-grade on, there was no bigger fan of Erma than me," she said. "I used to watch for the Dayton Daily News three days a week when her column ran. She had a great comedic sense, and I really feel she inspired me. I always knew I wanted to do that kind of writing, I just didn't know how to get a job doing it."

With Dancing as her motivation, Guisewite purchased a copy of the Writer's Market and analyzed every newspaper syndicate listed therein. After narrowing down the field to about 10, she drafted and sent each a column proposal detailing style and ideas, as well as writing samples.

"After that I just waited, and the rejections started coming in. Then one day I got a letter from King Features Syndicate, who had a niche they were trying to fill with a woman humorist." Contract in hand, Guisewite quit her day job.

She stayed with King Features until 1999, when she was wooed and won by Universal.

At times the job is challenging, and working from home isn't without its pitfalls, she said. There's the social issue — that routine connection with other adult human beings — and then there's the dilemma about what to wear to work. "I really used to miss getting dressed up—more—
to go to the office," she said. "It's hard to take yourself seriously as a professional when you wear a Donald Duck sweat suit and slippers to work. I went through a phase where I'd get completely decked out to work at home — suit, pantyhose and heels. My family used to look at me like I was crazy. Now my official uniform is jeans and a T-shirt."

But working from home also allows her the pleasure of being there with her 14-month-old daughter, Mia Anne, and seven-year-old son, Jack William, when he gets home from school.

When reflecting on where life has brought her, Guisewite credits her entire family for their support. "My sisters are my best friends, and both Mary Anne, a painter in Seattle, and Cathy were very supportive. Cathy was a big inspiration because she, too, started from scratch. My sisters and my parents all used to say 'somebody has to fill a space in the newspaper, why not you?'

"I'm very fortunate," she added. "I'm doing what I've wanted to do since the seventh grade. I'm living my dream."

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For media interviews, contact Mickey Guisewite at mguisewite@aol.com.