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Special Gift

University of Dayton

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NEWS



Thursday August 20, 2015

Special Gift

The author of the only authorized biography of humorist Erma Bombeck has donated her interview tapes to her alma mater.

Humorist Erma Bombeck shied away from the limelight, but when a magazine writer asked if she could interview her for a biography for middle-school students, she surprisingly relented.

“She loved kids and thought it was important to inspire them to write,” said Lynn Hutner Colwell, author of the 1992 book, *Erma Bombeck: Writer and Humorist*. “I lucked out. She was an extremely modest person. It was all about the work. It was never about her.”

In packing for a recent move, the Seattle writer stumbled across seven cassette tapes from a full day of interviewing Bombeck '49 at her Paradise Valley, Ariz., home. She's donating those never-before-heard-publicly tapes, her handwritten notes, photo releases and other material to the University of Dayton archives, which is building a repository of artifacts about the late humorist, one of the school's most famous graduates. The University also honors Bombeck's legacy through the biennial Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop, which draws writers from throughout the nation.

Excerpts from Colwell's book are already the basis for biographical material in the University of Dayton's Erma Bombeck Online Museum. The book — part of Enslow Publishing's contemporary women's series — is the only authorized biography of Bombeck's life.

“It was well known that she didn't want her life written about,” Colwell said in a telephone interview. “She told me, ‘I will do this only because it's for kids.’”

Colwell, who's written for *Reader's Digest*, *Family Circle* and other national magazines, had never tackled a book before.

“When I visited her house, my knees were shaking. I was a complete wreck,” she recalled with a laugh. “But she put me completely at ease. There wasn't a fake bone in her body. She was just an amazing person.”

When Colwell finished the 112-page book, she worried whether she had done justice to Bombeck, who achieved extraordinary fame as a newspaper columnist by chronicling the absurdities of ordinary American family life with wit. At Bombeck's height of popularity, 900 newspapers carried her column, nine out of her 12 books landed on the *New York Times*' bestseller list and she appeared regularly on “Good Morning America” as part of the original cast. A champion for women's rights, she stumped for the Equal Rights Amendment.

“I was not worried if the book sold a single copy. I was worried about her reaction,” Colwell said. “A few days after I sent her a copy, I received a big bouquet of flowers and a card that said, ‘Please add to resume miracle worker. Love, Erma.’ You can imagine how that sent me over the moon for a day or two.”

Kirkus gave the book a strong review, noting that Colwell “makes a smooth presentation well sprinkled with anecdotes, especially from Bombeck's early years.

“She also includes good summaries of related topics — syndication, book publishing, the changes in women's lives and self-perception that buoyed Bombeck's popularity,” the reviewer said. “The focus here is on the public figure and the writer; the family is offstage, and even Bombeck herself remains essentially private — though what evidence Colwell offers confirms her picture of a sensible, conscientious person who is a compulsive, dedicated writer.”

Colwell describes her interview with Bombeck as “the highlight of my life.” She found her to be unpretentious, warm, friendly — and funny.

“She was comfortable in her own skin,” Colwell said. “She was just a very good human being in my estimation. I felt so privileged to have met her and written this book.”

The donation of Colwell's tapes comes at a time when Bombeck's life is receiving renewed appreciation. The world premiere of a one-woman play, “Erma Bombeck: At Wit's End,” is slated Oct. 9-Nov. 8 at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., as part of the Women's Voices Theater Festival.

For more information, contact Teri Rizvi, founder and co-director of the Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop, at erma@udayton.edu.