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The University of Dayton

News Release

March 24, 1993

Contact: Pam Huber

REALITY AND FICTION MERGE, DIVERGE IN "NORTHERN EXPOSURE'S" ALASKA

DAYTON, Ohio — The notion of frontier — where civilization meets wilderness and survival will test your mettle — has fired the imaginations of Americans for centuries and draws viewers to "Northern Exposure," says a University of Dayton professor.

"The mystery about Alaska is just what makes 'Northern Exposure' work," says Annette Taylor, assistant professor of communication at the University of Dayton who spent four years as a newspaper reporter and editor in Anchorage. "The show captures the popular conception of America's last frontier. It's a place so remote it must be different; a place so big it must be great; a place so wild that it must be exotic."

Taylor will present her research on "Landscape and Culture in 'Northern Exposure'" at the combined convention for the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association April 7-10 in New Orleans.

The multicultural band of Cicely residents "have created a society of comrades who have learned to get along, despite different beliefs, attitudes and ideas," Taylor says, adding that they're individualists, like many of Alaska's real residents. "People often reinvent themselves in Alaska, into what they hope are better people. Alaska tends to draw adventurers as well as people who are running away from something. Fishermen have doctorates, youngsters just out of college become bank officers and women win the Iditarod.

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You have a lot of different personalities in Alaska.”

The cooperation and compassion among the characters on the show is pretty much on the mark, she says. “The elements force you to get along. You may be stuck in your pick-up truck somewhere and the only person who comes along to save your life may be the person you had a fight with last night. So you can’t hold a grudge for too long.”

The show does ignore Alaskan realities, she says. “There’s way too much sunlight for winter, that’s the most obvious.” She says characters routinely walk around with their coats unzipped, and in one episode Maggie even shed her parka to dine at a temporary sidewalk cafe with a despondent Joel. “You just don’t do that. It’s too cold,” Taylor says.

Another goof? The scenery. Since the show is shot in Washington, the trees are tall and bushy, but most of the trees in Alaska are thin and show the effects of the very harsh climate. “The only place that trees are nice and full is in southeastern Alaska, but the only way you can get there is by plane or boat. Yet it seems everyone drives to get to Cicely.”

From the clues on the show, Taylor figures Cicely is somewhere between Anchorage and Fairbanks. It’s on the road in Alaska, but off the beaten path.

NOTE TO EDITORS: For media interviews, call Annette Taylor at (419) 352-3350.