

Erma Bombeck

Erma Bombeck always had a desire to write. From her earliest years she practiced writing. Even when teachers who didn't appreciate her skills attempted to discourage her, she kept with her dream. The famous personality that wrote syndicated, humor columns, several best-selling books and graced ABC Television's *Good Morning America* for years, was well acquainted with tragedy, disappointments and illness in her life. Yet she is remembered as an indomitable spirit who overcame adversity throughout her life. Born Erma Louise Fiste in Dayton, Ohio in 1929, to a lower middle class working family, she had a natural love for reading. She collected books and did fairly well in school.

Reading opened up life to her and helped her cope with the world of adults in which she found herself. When the school day ended, she would rush home and grab a book. Erma loved reading humorous material... the works of authors such as James Thurber and Robert Benchley. She began her writing career when she wrote a humor column for the school newspaper. She discovered a love for writing and the adulation of her peers and teachers encouraged her to continue. At the age of 15 she boldly went to the *Dayton Herald* and told them she wanted to write for the paper. Although there was only full-time position open, she came up with an ingenious plan to hire another girl to write part-time while she attended class. The Editor accepted and Erma had her first professional column.

Her big break came when she was sent to interview child star Shirley Temple, who was in town. Erma's one teen to another column was published on the Feature Page and her career was on its way. It was at the morning paper, the Dayton Journal that she met a young copy boy, Bill Bombeck. Their attraction grew for several years before they finally dated. Shortly thereafter, Bill was sent to Korea in the Army. In college Erma thought she would excel at writing but her studies proved to be difficult. With more paid experience that almost any other student at Ohio University, Erma set her sights on improving her writing abilities, but where she had received praise in High School, she now felt discouraged as her grades fell well below her expectations. She was even told by one guidance counselor that she should "forget about writing." Hired by a department store, she joked about employee working conditions and the various departments at the store in the store newsletter. Her work was well received.

Erma finally found someone who encouraged her and restored her self-confidence, when she transferred colleges. Brother Tom Price, at the University of Dayton, a Catholic School, had read some articles she had produced for the school newspaper and asked her to write for the university's magazine. At night, when she returned from work, she'd sit at the typewriter and write her copy. One day Brother Price told her, "Erma, you can write!" This lifted her spirits and raised her self-image. She graduated in 1949. She returned to the *Dayton Journal-Herald* and wrote a women's column. When Bill returned from the Army, their romance continued and they were wed. They tried desperately, but unsuccessfully for years to have a child.

Doctors told Erma she couldn't have children, so she and Bill adopted a daughter, Betsy. She gave up her job to become a full-time mother and housekeeper. Housework proved to be frustrating. She sought out other women who were as frustrated as she and found that she was not alone. After a year of full-time motherhood, she wrote some for a local Shopping Newspaper.

One day she met the Editor of the *Kettering-Oakwood Times* in Kettering, OH. She outright offered her services and was hired immediately to write a humor column for women. It was very funny and turned out to be very successful. Her old employer, the *Dayton Journal-Herald* offered Erma more money and more column appearances per week to return. The Dayton Editor sent a few of her columns, titled "At Wit's End," to the Newsday Newspaper Syndicate and suggesting they might be interested in syndicating Erma nationally. Three weeks after her first column appeared in the *Dayton Journal-Herald*, thirty-eight papers were buying her columns. Five years later "At Wit's End" was a regular in 500 papers. Erma was now a nationally syndicated humorist with her subscriber base growing weekly.

As more papers carried Erma's columns, she gained fame. She traveled, spoke and worked on books. "Success," said Erma firmly, "is outliving your failures." Her first few books didn't bring her fame and fortune as she expected, but her fourth book, *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* brought her six figures in income. Other successful books followed including *If Life is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pits?* Personally she and Bill had managed to have a child naturally, two years after adopting Betsy, against all predictions. It was not easy, though. She was pregnant four times in four years, but only two of the babies survived. For over thirty years Erma wrote weekly columns, fifteen books, was recognized as one of the 25 most influential women in America, graced the cover of *Time Magazine*, appeared regularly on *Good Morning America*, received numerous awards and fifteen honorary degrees.

Don't be fooled by what you see on the surface, though. Erma had her share of problems. Her life was difficult for years. She fought several physical battles including breast cancer, a mastectomy and kidney failure. On the speaking circuit, Erma would say that life hadn't just handed success to her. She spoke about book signings that almost no one showed up to, a Broadway play that didn't play on Broadway and a failed recorded album and a sitcom. Erma's struggles ended in 1996. She succumbed to death following surgery for a kidney transplant. She continued to write her syndicated weekly column almost until her last weeks. Erma said, "What you have to tell yourself is, 'I'm not a failure. I failed at doing something.' There's a big difference...Personally and career-wise, it's been a corduroy road. I've buried babies, lost parents, had cancer, and worried over kids. The trick is to put it all in perspective...and that's what I do for a living."

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