

A TRIBUTE TO ERMA BOMBECK

Beloved columnist spent her life looking on the bright side

The editors at Universal Press were touched by the remarks made by Bill Bombeck, Erma's husband of 46 years, at her private service on April 28. They asked him to share those remarks with Erma's readers, and he agreed.

BY BILL BOMBECK

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Dear Readers: In 1989, Erma began to experience a series of painful medical problems, but she disdained letting her readers know most of the details. She usually brushed aside rumors and inquiries with a joke and a plea that her purpose was to write humor and make people smile. Health reports are not funny. Her greatest fear was to become a "poster child" and have people feel sorry for her.

Throughout these assaults she remained unbelievably optimistic. Erma always knew that there was a pony in there someplace. Not only did the research and writing of her book "I Want to Grow Hair, I Want to Grow Up, I Want to Go to Boise" provide a nation with the heroics of kids surviving cancer, but it also helped give Erma the courage to face her many trials, including her last one.

I have met astronauts, war heroes, firefighters and police officers, but I have never known anyone with more courage than Erma. Courage has been called grace under fire. I would propose we call it Erma under fire.

Erma would not have approved of my words. But for this one time I will do what Erma admonished all who challenged her words, and that was to "go out and get your own column."

I have searched for a way to show my family's gratitude to the thousands of fans and friends who have shown so much love and compassion toward her. I'd like to share with you a personal recollection I read at the family services that were held before the funeral.

In 1947, three or four couples were outside the Lakeside Ballroom in Dayton, Ohio. We were too early to be admitted for the big-band dance, so we all wandered over to the adjoining amusement park.

Not far from the ballroom was the roller coaster. All of the boys began cajoling their dates to ride with them. The girls giggled and said no. It was too frightening, and it would mess up their hair and dresses.



FILE PHOTO

Bill and Erma Bombeck visit a Waldenbooks store here in 1980.

I looked at my date and asked her if she wanted to go. She didn't hesitate. She said, "Sure, I'll go." I was surprised and looked at her again. She was slight, narrow-shouldered, with tiny hands and feet. But she had the greatest smile and laugh. Her smile had a charming space between her two front teeth. I thought, this is some kind of girl.

The Lakeside roller coaster was a rickety old leftover from the Depression. The frame was mostly made of unpainted 2-by-4s. No modern inspection by OSHA would have ever approved this for man's use.

The cars were linked together with what looked like modified train couplers. They were mostly red-painted wood with metal wheels and a coglike device that clicked loudly. The seats had worn black leather padding. There were no belts, but there were worn steel bars that had to be raised and lowered by the attendant.

The attendant was an old man in oil-stained bib overalls. He said little, but raised the bar and she entered the seat first, and I followed by her side. The bar clicked in place just above our waists.

There were two tapered 2-by-4s on the

platform, each angled away from the other. He moved the one closest to the car to an upright position. The car moved forward, slowly picking up speed. The metal wheels on the metal track made so much noise you had to yell to your partner to be heard.

The car left the level starting track and began a slow ascent. In about 20 or 30 seconds, when the track became steeper, the cog device engaged the car. You could feel it grab. Then there was a distinct rhythmic clacking sound as the cog device labored to overcome the near perpendicular angle of the track. You felt like it wouldn't make it, but just when it reached a point that forced the passengers to stare, not at the car ahead or the track, but only at the night sky, it plunged downward, a wild, almost free-fall. Maybe whatever controlled the speed was now broken.

She made her first sound since she had said, "Sure, I'll go." She screamed and clenched my arm. I said, "Hang on to the bar." She kept hanging on to my arm. Suddenly we were at the bottom, and we both were so relieved that we laughed, and I saw that smile again.

The ride continued, with bone-jarring twists and turns, dizzy heights and abrupt plunges. Sometimes we would enter a dark tunnel, so dark the sparks from the wheels and tracks made it look like it was on fire.

She kept hanging on to my arm. I was gripping the metal bar so tightly I thought I would bend it. This was some ride. We were thrilled and exhilarated, scared and breathless.

We had been in and out of many tunnels. Each time they ended with almost blinding light in our eyes, and then on to another straight-up climb.

We started in a tunnel that seemed to plunge deeper than all the others. It kept dropping. We both sensed this one was really different. Finally, instead of the bright lights, we were back at the platform.

We looked at each other. We didn't speak, but we sensed the ride had changed. The man in the bib overalls was standing by the tapered 2-by-4s. He started to push one from its angle to a straight-up position. The car stopped. I told him the ride was great, but it was too short; we wanted to go on. He raised the bar. She smiled again. I looked at the attendant again. He said this is April 22, 1996 — your ride is over. I looked over at her seat. She was gone.