

Ellerbee at OU

Journalist captivates student audience

By Linda Bachrack
special writer

Linda Ellerbee, author, journalist, and broadcaster, often sprawls in her favorite "big, brown, disgusting chair" and contemplates change. At home in Greenwich Village, N.Y., the humorist ponders the episodes of her life and asks herself just what she has learned.

And so, in her own captivating style, she shared with a large, appreciative Oakland University audience Monday in the school's student center her five flexible rules for a changing world, or "only dead fish swim with the stream."

"I've learned the easier a change is to make, unusually the less it matters, and that the older we get, the harder it is to choose change," she says in her new book, "Move On: Adventures in the Real World."

Ellerbee, 47, has risked change throughout her life. She has successfully raised a son and daughter alone, hoppedscotching from Texas cowgirl to community television host for Congress for NBC News. She was a news anchor and an Emmy-winning news writer, and has finally settled into her current role as businesswoman. She formed Lucky Duck Productions in 1987, producing children's news shows for Nickelodeon.

THE MOST DIFFICULT and challenging change Ellerbee was forced to make was learning to live sober. She is celebrating two years of sobriety.

"To cope with a changing world," she says, "you must do it your own way. It may be right. Remember the best things in life are not things and treat people as human beings. And it is the duty of every citizen to keep your mouth open, raise your voice."

Ellerbee's enthusiasm was contagious and the mostly-student audience responded with laughter and spontaneous bursts of applause. A lively question and answer session followed her talk, with the obvious question of the day posed by Cynthia Feischo of Rochester. She asked Ellerbee's opinion on the Senate confirmation hearings.

Ellerbee prefaced her response by clearing up some inconsistencies in the news. She insists that the press did not sneak around and leak Anita Hill's story. "Someone went to Nina Totenberg with the story and it was reported. Someone was disturbed that the issue of harassment wasn't being taken seriously," she said. "It's a hell of a spectacle, but you're watching the truth. Women are treated this way. This in not

about sex, it's about power," Ellerbee said. She considers the hearings healthy for the nation because it has gotten people talking, making them aware of the issue of sexual harassment.

"IT'S DEFINITELY a question of who do you believe. If Thomas is confirmed, it will mean the old ways are still in place, the U.S. Senate doesn't perceive women to be political threats, and that women prefer the status quo (these things happen)," Ellerbee said.

"I am not part of any feminist conspiracy, these are just my opinions," she added with a laugh.

A university student asked Ellerbee what spurred her on to speak her mind, and she responded that it was a lifelong habit. "I was raised by storytellers and readers. I am a writer because I am a reader."

In her book she relates a humorous story about the year TV came to her Bryan, Texas home. She liked books better, but the family insisted upon eating dinner on trays in front of the television, and she was only allowed to speak during thirty-second commercial breaks. "Which, is, I suspect, where I learned to speak in thirty-second bursts."

Perhaps referring to her 1989 Maxwell House coffee commercial in which she was criticized for peddling a product in the guise of a journalist, one audience member asked Ellerbee about the fine line between

news and entertainment. She explained that she did the commercial only to save Lucky Duck, her production company.

JOHN GULAN of Warren asked Ellerbee's opinion on the direction of hard news. Is it being featured? "TV news began by imitating print. In 1981, print (USA Today) started imitating TV. Today TV news is imitating USA Today. The answer is to offer a wider range of information. TV is not there for you, it is there to make money," said Ellerbee. She predicted that CNN will be the giant that eats the whole thing, and hinted that networks and news divisions may not be in business 5 years from now.

When asked if the downsizing of the news is the reason why we don't have any more Harry Reasoners, Ellerbee said the networks want only one star. "They only have anchor monsters (Tom, Dan, and Peter) and firemen (inexperienced reporters). There is no opportunity for the middle level to develop. There are no more documentaries, only instant specials anchored by network stars."

Ellerbee's final rule for a changing world is the one that kept her Oakland University audience attentive and entertained. "Most of all, I've learned that a good time to laugh is any time you can," she said, and they did.

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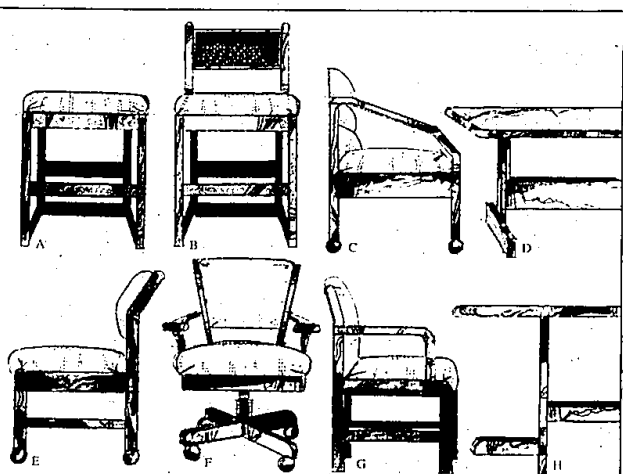
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