



# A Quarter Century of Service

ERA Landmark owner Robyn Erlenbush awarded Business to Business' annual Citizen's Award

BY NICOLE ROSENLEAF RITTER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY THOMAS LEE

**HEN ROBYN ERLENBUSH MOVED TO BOZEMAN** from the small, eastern Montana town of Sidney in the early 1980s, it wasn't exactly booming. "From an economic point of view, it was a tough time for Bozeman," she says, recalling double-digit interest rates, major job losses and the near-collapse of home prices.

And it wasn't an easy time to be in real estate. "My first experience in Bozeman real estate business was sellers coming to closing with checks, sellers looking not to lose their properties to the bank," she notes. In the years since those hard times, things have changed dramatically, but Erlenbush isn't quick to forget.

"I think there's something to be said for having been here when Bozeman was at that stage," she says. "Not only was it developing as a community, but all the arts organizations were developing and starting to spread their wings and become financially capable as well, the museum was going through its growth, and the hospital hadn't yet opened in its new location. If you really look back and see the powerful things that

have happened in the community in the past 25 years, it's pretty mind-boggling."

Erlenbush has been involved firsthand in many of those mind-boggling changes — giving generously of her time, her money and herself to causes ranging from the arts to health care and beyond. Her commitment to the community, according to those who know her, has never wavered.

"Robyn knows this community and she values this community," asserts Debra Gill, executive vice president for philanthropy at the Bozeman Deaconess Foundation. "She always has the mindset of helping the community to grow in a way that is consistent with the character of our area."

Jackie Vick, executive director of the Bozeman Symphony, adds that Erlenbush always seems to know exactly how to help "in a way that makes a real difference."

Growing up in eastern Montana on a cattle and sheep ranch in tiny Baker, Montana, Erlenbush found an example of giving close to home. "I can remember my mom going to church council meetings, sitting on the hospital board, helping to build the library," Erlenbush says. "She picked two or three things that she could really impact and she did it."

Philanthropy and community involvement weren't the only things that she discovered in Baker. It was also where she met her childhood sweetheart and the man she would later marry, Orville Erlenbush.

In fact, after earning a bachelor's degree in music from Arizona State University, Robyn returned to her home state of Montana to marry Orville, a banker, and to become a music teacher. Real estate was supposed to be a "temporary distraction."

"We were living in (the eastern Montana town of) Sidney, and I was looking for work while I was waiting to be certified to teach music in Montana," Erlenbush — who now owns ERA Landmark, with offices in Bozeman, Big Sky, Livingston, and Clyde Park, as well as property management, vacation rental and commercial real estate companies — recalls. "I took a job at a title company and started watching a lot of real estate transactions and wondered if it was something I might be interested in."

"I've never really looked back," she says of the career path on which she unexpectedly embarked at the age of 23.

In 1981, the bank where Orville was working transferred him to Bozeman. By the next year, Robyn was working at ERA in Bozeman, the same company she would eventually buy eight years later.

Although she had found her calling in real estate, she wanted to remain involved in her first love, the performing arts. "It's ironic, because part of my passion for charities and supporting performing arts comes from my musical

background, but what I figured out early on was that I could have more impact by volunteering my time and giving my money and support than I could by pursuing a career in music," Erlenbush asserts.

She adds that real estate is the "day job that supports my love of the performing arts."

Her passion for the arts led her to serve a nine-year stint on the board of the Bozeman Symphony, including four years as president of the board. During her tenure, the organization grew dramatically, eventually launching its first-ever nationwide search for a music director. That process resulted in the hiring of Matthew Savery, now in his 14th season with the Bozeman Symphony. The symphony in that period was also able to begin paying performers for the first time.

Symphony Executive Director Vick calls Erlenbush "very instrumental" in the development of the symphony during the 1990s. "She saw the bigger picture of the symphony," Vick says of the process leading up to Savery's hiring. "Having the right vision and music director was going to make that difference, and she was key in keeping that going."

Erlenbush herself says that her time on the

2002 — Dick Walter  
 2003 — Tim Barnard  
 2004 — John Murdoch  
 2005 — Joe Billion  
 2006 — Scott and Barbara Heck

symphony board was eventful and rewarding. "I'm really proud of that decade of the 90s and what was accomplished in terms of growing and stabilizing that organization," she adds.

Although Erlenbush no longer serves on the board, Vick says that she is an "honorary board member," noting that she continues to make herself available when her expertise is needed. ERA Landmark also sponsors one concert each year, and Vick reports that Erlenbush — a season-ticket holder — is "always at the concerts."

In addition to her work at the symphony, Erlenbush has also been actively involved in Intermountain Opera and the Sweet Pea Festival. She currently sits on the advisory committee for the College of Music at Montana State University, an institution that she calls "one of the jewels of the community" and which receives regular and dedicated support from both Robyn and husband Orville.

She continues to be passionate about the arts. "Knowing how difficult it is to make a living as a performer or an artist, it's up to the those in the community who can afford to support them to cause them to flourish and sustain," she asserts. "Bozeman is living proof that you can do that."

## GOING TO THE HOSPITAL

After nearly two decades focusing on Bozeman's cultural scene, Erlenbush decided to try something new and quite different: health care. She took a seat on the hospital board in 1998, serving there until just this year.

"At the time I was going onto that board, I kept wondering if I would have the same passion for health care that I did for the performing arts," she recalls.

She did. Although at that point when she started, Erlenbush says her family "had not been touched by serious illness," she and husband Orville began thinking seriously about how they could best support health care in Bozeman. They decided on an endowment.

"We established an endowment named after our family for wellness," she explains. "We thought if we could help people with preventative checks and help people be diagnosed early, maybe other families could be as lucky as ours. Many cancers can be fully cured with early detection."

Not long after, Erlenbush's own mother was diagnosed with colon cancer. Five years later, she is a survivor of the disease, and living proof of the power of early diagnosis.

"What I've realized is that everyone is touched," she says of supporting the hospital. "To me it's almost like asking how many legs on a stool you need to have a healthy community. Everyone in their lifetime will have to deal with health care."

John Nordwick is the president and CEO of Bozeman Deaconess Hospital. He says that Erlenbush's contributions to the board were numerous and important.

"Her sense of business strategy and ability to see the big picture is unique," Nordwick says. "She is always looking for a new and better way to do things, constantly looking to improve."

Following her service on the hospital board, Erlenbush has remained involved at Bozeman's community hospital, assisting the Bozeman Deaconess Foundation in its work. The Foundation's Gill describes the organization as "very fortunate" to have Erlenbush's support, not just now but also during her board service with the hospital.

"She helped grow the foundation over the last 10 years, and she was instrumental in helping us connect out with leaders of the community and build relationships with people who really cared about the mission of healthcare," Gill says.

While still deeply involved with improving health care and supporting the performing arts, Erlenbush has also remained committed to her faith, which she says propels her toward giving back.

A member of Hope Lutheran Church — as it happens, the same house of worship attended by two previous Citizen's Award winners, Joe Billion and John Murdoch — Erlenbush has been involved in the church's capital campaign to build

## Citizen's Award *continued*

a new facility and also sings in a contemporary Christian quartet called Living Hope. They are in the process right now of finishing a CD.

More than music, Erlenbush says that her faith provides her with ready motivation to contribute to the community and the larger world. "If I understand that the blessings that I receive are not directly related to my intellect or my timing — they only prove that I've been blessed — I need to recognize that and need to try to do whatever I can to make other people's lives better."

All the while, she is quick to point out that her contributions have not been hers alone.

"This is a community of some very, very humble people who quietly serve behind the scenes," Erlenbush says. "It never really is just one person. It's the family, it's the company, and it's the community."

Erlenbush's own company and its associates and staff have a nearly 25-year-old Christmas fund that provides discretionary funds to

people and organizations in need as well as supporting the local arm of the national Muscular Dystrophy Association, an ERA-wide relationship. ERA also maintains a downtown business presence that doubles as a community office for cultural groups without Main Street office space.

It's all part of Erlenbush's emphasis on contributing to those pillars of the community that she sees as key to Bozeman's current and future success and development — cultural organizations, health care and Montana State University. "I try to choose organizations that are good for the community and, quite frankly, make Bozeman a great place to live," she explains.

As for Robyn Erlenbush, she says she can't imagine living anywhere else — a belief that, as it turns out, is pretty lucky for Bozeman.

*Nicole Rosenleaf Ritter is the managing editor of Business to Business and At Home.*