

Features

How did Erin Brockovich, a hard-up divorcee with outrageous clothes, become a celebrated legal crusader? **Charles Laurence** finds out

The avenging angel in 3in heels

Picture: ROBERT GALLAGHER/CORRA

THIS TIME, Hollywood is not exaggerating. In person, Erin Brockovich, the impoverished single mother and unlikely environmental crusader whose life story has provided Julia Roberts with her latest blockbuster role, is every bit the cartoony blonde she is portrayed as being on the big screen.

In fact, if there is an authenticity problem, it has to do with Roberts's cleavage not being va-voom enough. Not even the best efforts of the studio's costume and make-up department could quite put the actress's natural assets on a par with Brockovich's. Instead, Paramount artfully contrived to make up for cup-size by having her display the frilly edges of a selection of enticing brassieres beneath plunging tops.

"Actually, I never show my bra," says Brockovich, with a little flash of indignation. "I wouldn't. It's not 'my style.'" She arches her back at the thought, and adjusts her blouse. Unfortunately, this gesture merely draws the eye back to the relevant parts for confirmation of all that has prompted the fuss now sweeping America. Not since the Fifties has a bosom been so celebrated.

Ever since *Erin Brockovich* opened to huge box office success, the real Erin, now 39, has been a national sensation. At first, all the attention was on Roberts, who had abandoned her usual soft-focus romantic comedies to play an unemployed divorcee with three kids who takes on the energy corporation she has discovered is poisoning a village, and wins.

Then the real Brockovich sashayed up the red carpet at the Los Angeles premiere of the film in her favourite Chanel dress, cut down-to-her and up-to-her. "Wow!" says Brockovich. "I had never experienced anything like this before — a Hollywood opening! — and I was just trembling. The photographers kept calling out: 'Come closer, come closer, and I was looking at them and thinking: 'Nooo... no way, buster, no way!'"

The resulting photographs,



Brockovich in her office at Masry & Vititoe, the law firm where she started in the filing department. 'The case changed my life,' she says. 'For once, people respected me for something I had done'

second time, with her youngest child Elizabeth, now nine, just eight months, and is struggling to pay the rent on her Valley bungalow in a dingy Los Angeles suburb. In a fit of pride, she has traded full custody rights over Elizabeth for any child support. As the mov-

once been something of a campaigning lawyer with a significant local reputation, and he saw something special in his whacky client-cum-would-be-employee. So he relented, and gave her a job in the filing department.

When the women in the

halter-necked top, ventured by. After a long and daring legal campaign, in 1997, PGE was forced to pay \$335 million in compensation to some 600 villagers whom Brockovich had cajoled into joining a class action suit.

"The case changed my

has the room next to Masry's in a shiny new office. They make an unlikely team but, together, have won a number of high-profile David and Goliath compensation cases. Brockovich is currently working 15-hour days on seven new toxic-litigation cases.

her own health, always at the mercy of her nerves and her moods, shows signs of having suffered from the poisons she has investigated. There have been headaches and nosebleeds and a benign tumour in the right nostril, but she is fighting back with the kind of

time was divided between her kids and her crusade. But that, she decided, was no excuse. "Tough love!" she cries. "You got it! I told them to knock it off, and they didn't, so now they are both at real tough boarding schools. "I got no tolerance for drugs,

Brockovich is behind her big polished desk, there are a couple of young lawyers in shirtsleeves offering her files and she has a telephone crooked on her shoulder.

America's least-likely avenging angel is back at work, talking tough to some