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## Erin Brockovich: A Friend of the Court

■ Onetime paralegal made famous by Julia Roberts film talks to rapt attorneys in Irvine seminar.

By HECTOR BECERRA, Times Staff Writer

In the hit movie bearing her name, Erin Brockovich--played by Julia Roberts--cursed attorneys as if the mother-of-all-torts depended on it.

But after working for a small law firm that takes on corporate interests, the real Brockovich says she came to see lawyers--especially contingency attorneys who take on cases without fees in hopes of a big payoff in court--as unfairly maligned risk takers.

"I am so in favor of you," Brockovich told a rapt audience of 150 mesmerized attorneys attending an Orange County Bar Assn. seminar in Irvine on Friday. "Plaintiff's attorneys can be among the great defenders of justice."

Brockovich and her boss, attorney Edward Masry, both said the movie has had a positive impact on public perceptions of contingency lawyers, and on plaintiff attorneys in general. As a paralegal who worked her way into an investigator's position at the law offices of Masry & Vittoe in Westlake Village, Brockovich said she sees herself as "an ambassador between the attorneys and the people."

During the lunchtime seminar, she and Masry verbally sparred with each other, much as their counterparts, Roberts and Albert Finney, do in the film.

Masry joked that Roberts' portrayal of Brockovich was accurate, "except Erin's skirts are shorter and her blouses lower."

The two celebrities also answered questions about the movie's accuracy and the impact it has had on their work and their private lives.

Many of the lawyers attending the series of workshops titled "Advocacy in the Modern Trial II," spread over Thursday and Friday, were there to meet their continuing education requirement. Among course offerings such as "Achieving Higher Quality Contracting" and "Scientific Evidence: The Parameters of Admissibility and Foundation at Trial and Use for Settlement," they said, the talk by Masry and Brockovich was a welcome break.

Brockovich told the crowd there is a great need for high-minded advocacy in the legal world. She said she was seeking a higher purpose when, as a lowly, poor and disliked employee at Masry's firm, she got her hands on the file that would eventually turn into a successful \$333-million lawsuit against Pacific Gas & Electric, accused of poisoning a desert town's water supply.

"I was in such a low place in my life," Brockovich told the group. "What I didn't want to do was just open a file. I wanted to go beyond the routine."

For his part, Masry said the sued company could have "probably settled for \$500,000" at the beginning, but torpedoed their chances through arrogance. Brockovich went on to uncover more and more problems with PG&E, and a growing list of townspeople with debilitating illnesses.

One of the more poignant moments came when Brockovich spoke about some of the negative effects the film has had on her family life.

"My daughter is embarrassed at my celebrity," Brockovich said. "She's scathingly angry that I feel comfortable talking about my personal life."

Attorneys such as John Balent of Brea said he found Brockovich's humanity and passion for advocacy impressive. A family law attorney and full-time surfer dude, Balent said he had made a conscious decision not to see the movie, considering it just one more in a line of reality-based films like "The Insider" and "A Civil Action."

By the end of the seminar, Balent said he was anxious to watch the movie. "She was so incredibly honest, and that passion is such an asset to a firm," Balent said. "And it is important to be an ambassador between the lawyers and the people. Lawyers have such notorious bedside manners. We could learn from her."

Wylie Aitken, one of Orange County's most prominent personal injury lawyers, said Brockovich's words were an inspiring reminder of why many lawyers got into the business in the first place.

"First thing on Monday, I'm going to tell the rest of the firm, including the paralegals, 'I wish you were there,'" Aitken said.

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