

LHS graduate grateful for family's advice

Brockovich praises parents

Editor's note: Emporia Gazette executive editor Jeff Burkhead and Erin Brockovich, then Erin Pattee, were classmates in the 1970s at Lawrence High School. Burkhead interviewed Brockovich by phone after her recent appearance in Kansas City, Mo.

● **The celebrity says** she's thinking about writing a book and hosting a talk show.

BY JEFF BURKHEAD
THE EMPORIA GAZETTE

EMPORIA — Known for her plunging necklines and rough language — as portrayed on the big screen by movie star Julia Roberts — the real-life Erin Brockovich is more substance than glamour.

The success of the movie, "Erin Brockovich," based on the real-life experiences of Brockovich and her role in the lawsuit against a California utility company, has turned the once down-on-her-luck single mom into a Hollywood celebrity.

It's a rag-to-riches story. The environmental case — filed on behalf of residents of Hinkley, Calif., against Pacific Gas & Electric Co. — resulted in a record \$333 million settlement. And it changed Brockovich's life.

As far as fame and fortune — Brockovich received more than \$2 million for her part in the Hinkley case — and how it has affected her life, she said, "It's been overwhelming."

But the two people who have helped Brockovich keep things in perspective, through all the ups and downs of her life, and there have been plenty of downs, she said, are her parents — Frank and B.J. Pattee of Lawrence.

During a recent speech in Kansas City, Mo., Brockovich talked about her parents and the influence they have had, and continue to have, on her life.

"I've been poor and I've had money," she said. "I've been nobody and, suddenly, I've become somebody. (Money) is not the answer to life. How you feel about who you are, if you have love in your life and if you have your health ... that's what makes you happy."



LOS ANGELES TIMES PHOTO

Erin Brockovich, a Lawrence High School graduate, credits her parents for much of her life's successes. During a recent appearance in Kansas City, Mo., she described their roles in her life.

Those are lessons she learned from her parents.

"What my parents always taught me was that family and health matter the most," Brockovich said. "When I uncovered Hinkley, that's what those people taught me again ... family and health."

Brockovich said her parents have always been there for her.

"Those building blocks (from her parents), I applied to my life and to my work, and they got me through," she said.

Dogged determination

Life has not always been rosy for Brockovich.

A 1978 Lawrence High School graduate, she attended Kansas State University for one year.

"That was my party period," Brockovich said.

After that, she went to a school in Dallas and earned a degree in fashion merchandising. She then landed a job in California as a management trainee with Kmart, but that didn't last long.

She was married in 1982, but the marriage ended in divorce in 1987. The couple had two children.

Brockovich remarried in 1989, but that marriage also failed. She was divorced in 1990, right around the time she found out she was pregnant with her third child.

Life was hard for Brockovich. Three kids. A single parent. No money.

In 1991, Brockovich had to talk Ed Masry of the Masry &

Vititoe law firm into giving her a job.

Her persistence paid off.

That same dogged determination led Brockovich to pursue the Hinkley water contamination case when Masry had told her to drop it.

Again, she credited her parents.

"Everything they taught me is what I saw in Hinkley," Brockovich said. "I had the ability to stick it out. I was taught that. I didn't have to be some big bad Ph.D. to take on a fight. I had it within me."

"I saw something that was morally wrong and I couldn't tolerate that, just simply because that was how I was raised."

Keeping her head

During her recent talk, Brockovich took the opportunity to publicly thank her parents, who were in the audience, along with her husband, actor Eric Ellis.

"My mom was always my cheerleader," Brockovich said. "She gave me my stick-to-it-iveness."

"My father is just a unique man. Whenever I need wisdom or advice, he's always there for me. He's not only my parent; he's a cherished mentor. I value what he has to say."

As far as her future plans, Brockovich is considering writing a book and there's talk about hosting a talk show. But, for now, she's just enjoying the ride, and trying to keep it all in perspective.