

# THE REAL ERIN Brockovich

Playing Erin Brockovich was not a long stretch for Julia. Both are tall with killer bodies, megawatt smiles, bright, intelligent eyes and long, cascading tresses.

But while Julia's star was rising, Erin's life was spiraling downward with two failed marriages, three kids, a cramped house filled with roaches, an empty cupboard, jobs that didn't last and an empty bank account.

Her first marriage, to Shawn Brown, ended in 1987, leaving her with two small tykes – son Matthew, now 16, and daughter Katie, now 15.

She then wed Steve Brockovich, a stockbroker from Reno, Nev., and became pregnant. But they divorced before baby Elizabeth, now 9, was born.

"Steve signed off on any parental rights, in lieu of child support," explained Erin, 39. She was left to raise the three youngsters by herself. With no steady job, Erin was a mess. Then her life went from bad to worse.

"I had been in a car wreck in Reno, and had been laid up with a herniated disc," Erin recalled. The resulting lawsuit, which she hoped would provide some much-needed cash, was not settled in her favor. Desperate for work, she begged Ed Masry – the Los Angeles attorney she had hired to handle her personal injury claim – for a job as a legal secretary.

Her killer body and her brash behavior made her unpopular with the other women in the office.

Dressed in miniskirts, see-through blouses and high heels, she stood apart and aloof. On one occasion, some of the women measured Erin's miniskirt to prove it violated a company memo about short skirts and demanded that she be fired.

Then her life started to change when she learned that residents of the small California desert town named Hinkley were being slowly poisoned by chromium VI, a cancer-causing chemical Pacific Gas & Electric added to its plant to reduce corrosion.

The toxic chemical had leaked into the underground water supply. The result was an extraordinary number of cancer

cases, rare bone diseases, nosebleeds and congenital problems for the town's residents.

Although inexperienced in investigative work, her energy and tenacity won the support of 630 residents, enough to institute a class-action lawsuit. Not even the chores of single parenthood could stop her crusade for justice.

"At first I would bring my daughter Elizabeth with me," she said. "She was in diapers at the time and sometimes it would get embarrassing, like the time she just whipped off her diapers and pottied in someone's front yard."

Fortunately, Erin stopped bringing Elizabeth; the environment was not fit for a child – or an adult. During her investigation, Erin fell victim to the highly toxic pollution.

"I would develop these nosebleeds and get a strange rash on my arms and chest," she said. "Now I have a benign tumor in my nose and a suppressed immune system. I dismissed it at first, but frankly, it scares me."

But her grit and determination paid off.

PG&E settled the suit in 1996 for \$333 million – the highest major pollution lawsuit ever settled in U.S. history – and Ed Masry gave his star assistant a \$2-million bonus.

"Well, \$1 million after taxes," said Erin, who is now married to hubby No. 3, Eric Ellis, a 34-year-old actor, not the biker George, in the movie. They live with her three kids in a luxury \$900,000 home in Agoura

Hills, Calif.

In addition to the unexpected bonus from settling the case, she appears briefly in the film as the blonde waitress at the restaurant. She's the one wearing the "Julia" name tag.

Erin is now director of research at the law firm of Masry and Vititoe, P.A., and has six major toxic litigations in the works, including another one against PG&E.

She has no plans to become a lawyer – "I'd lose my edge" – and she has no plans to change her attitude or her appearance. Says Erin: "I go nowhere without my 4-inch spikes."

— L.A. Justice



ROSE/JOHN PASCHAL INTL

**The voluptuous and determined Erin Brockovich, with actor/husband Eric Ellis.**