

Erin Brockovich

The Real-Life Sequel

It was a real-life fairy tale, perfect for a movie: Erin Brockovich, a brassy, busty, smart-mouthed single mom, is down on her luck after the glory of her beauty-queen days. Though just a lowly law firm file clerk—one who wears low-cut shirts and thigh-high skirts—her solo four-year investigation uncovers water pollution caused by giant utility Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) in the small desert town of Hinkley, California. She doggedly pursues justice for the residents



As a high school senior, 1978

sickened by a toxic substance (chromium 6) in their drinking water, helping to win them a historic \$333 million settlement and herself a \$2.5 million bonus—and respect. Fame and fortune follow—as

well as a Best Actress Oscar to Julia Roberts for starring in the film version of the story.

But Erin Brockovich would like everyone to know that life has *not* been picture-perfect since she became a household name thanks to the movie. In fact, Brockovich's real life has been a lightning rod for drama; if Hollywood

were so inclined, it could do a sequel *and* a prequel.

Erin grew up Erin Pattee in Lawrence, Kansas, the youngest of four children. She was a poor student, considered “pretty but dumb” until a caring high-school teacher discovered that she was bright—just dyslexic. She eventually earned a two-year degree in fashion merchandising and went through several jobs with mixed success. By age 31 she had two ex-husbands and three kids she was struggling to raise with little child support. She spent several years in only-macaroni-for-dinner poverty, living in a cockroach-infested house. She suffered from panic attacks, anorexia, and guilt over an unwanted abortion during her second marriage, and she was shattered by the sudden death of her beloved 38-year-old brother. In a period of low self-esteem she decided to get breast implants. Though she was injured in a car accident in 1991—and underwent risky neck surgery—she wound up with only a small settlement and was mired in debt, prompting her to bully Masry & Vititoe, the law firm that had represented her, into giving her a job. Then her ex-boyfriend (portrayed in the film by Aaron Eckhart as a nice biker-turned-nanny) hit her with a \$3 million palimony suit.

BY LINDA PETERSON



Julia Roberts' Oscar-winning role as the title character in *Erin Brockovich*

It seemed as if things were looking up when she received her bonus from the PG&E settlement in 1996. But then Brockovich's two oldest children, teenagers Matt and Katie, got involved with drugs and alcohol—and she spent over \$250,000 on rehabilitation programs and boarding schools. Next, her 6,000-square-foot dream home turned out to be permeated with a toxic mold, and everyone in the family got sick. She spent more than \$700,000 to fix the house, and sued the builder and former owner.

But wait, there's more. After the film about her battle with PG&E came out, her first ex-husband and the biker hired an attorney, who tried to pressure Brockovich into handing over \$310,000 to keep his clients from telling the tabloids that she'd been a "bad mother" who had slept with her married boss at the law firm, trial lawyer Edward Masry. Infuriated by the lies and what she viewed as the men's "twisted sense of entitlement," Brockovich decided to fight. She and Masry went to the district attorney, who set up a sting operation; the three men were arrested when they accepted the cash. Though the extortion charges against her ex-husband and ex-boyfriend were ultimately dropped by the district attorney, the lawyer was convicted, spent time in jail, and was disbarred for life.

Perhaps all this unique life experience explains Brockovich's current popularity as a motivational speaker. Last year she was the busiest lecturer represented by the

Erin Brockovich



William Morris Agency, earning \$25,000 per appearance. The lecture circuit led to her first book, an upbeat self-help volume called *Take It From Me: Life's a Struggle But You Can Win* (with co-author Marc Eliot). The book encourages people to follow her "inner-strength workout" with such basic tenets for living as "don't be afraid to go it alone" or "do what you like and you'll succeed." Brockovich is also pursuing a TV career: She hosted an ABC special in December called "Challenge America with Erin Brockovich," where she spearheaded a short-term community improvement project, and she's also filmed a talk-show pilot for NBC. She's even ventured onstage as an actress, appearing in a Toronto production of *The Vagina Monologues*.

Not that she's left the law firm behind. Now director of environmental research at Masry & Vittoe, Brockovich remains heavily

involved in several "toxic torts," including another chromium 6 case against PG&E.

As for her luck with men, the third time truly was the charm. Now 42, she's been happily married since 1999 to actor Eric Ellis, 36, and today prefers to be known as Erin Brockovich-Ellis. They live with her youngest child, 11-year-old Elizabeth, in the nearly repaired dream house in suburban Los Angeles.

BIOGRAPHY: Why do you think you're still in the public eye?



With boss Ed Masry, who hired her as a file clerk and launched her current career

BROCKOVICH: I think it's a relatability factor. I'm not perfect, I've made mistakes, I've learned from them. And I'm sharing a story that might be able to help somebody else learn from my mistakes. I know I like to get advice or just a bit of encouragement from someone who's walked in my shoes, and I think that I have walked a lot of paths in my life that make people, especially women, relate to me. I truly enjoy my lectures. I get asked to speak by all kinds of different companies, corporations, universities. I especially love the college kids. They're always so

full of enthusiasm and want to make a difference in the future.

BIOGRAPHY: Generally, what do you tell your audiences?

BROCKOVICH: To believe in themselves. That you have to follow your own gut, your own heart, that no one knows what's right for you better than you do. No matter what your past failures, you can learn and you can change if you have persistence and what my mother taught me: stick-to-it-iveness. I talk about the importance of honesty and integrity. I've al-



Proudly holding the 2002 Olympic flame aloft in the streets of Pasadena. "It was a thrill," she says of being a torchbearer



Brockovich has been happily married to actor Eric Ellis since 1999. Here, the couple poses with dogs Gabby (left) and Fran

ways had the moral foundation I got from my parents—to them the worst thing any of us kids could do was tell a lie.

I talk about my work in Hinkley. It was certainly about environmental issues because we're destroying our environment. But for me it was *really* about just wanting to help those people. And through my lecture circuit and my book, I feel I'm still doing that work. This year I cut back speaking a little because I've just had this urge to get my hands in a toxic case.



Travolta



Washington



Sarandon



Kingsley



Crowe



Day-Lewis



Field



Neeson



Streep

From Real to Reel

The box-office hit *Erin Brockovich* was just one of several contemporary Hollywood films that have depicted the inspiring stories of real-life crusaders, social activists, and whistle-blowers.

Given the inherent drama and passion in these characters, the actors who portray them often earn critical praise—and sometimes even an Academy Award—for their efforts. Here are several other notable movies based on true tales:

A Civil Action (1998): In a storyline similar to *Erin Brockovich*, John Travolta played trial lawyer Jan Schlichtmann, who took on two major corporations for leaking toxic chemicals into the water supply of a town in Massachusetts, where several children died of leukemia.

Cry Freedom (1987): Denzel Washington earned a Best Supporting Actor Oscar nomination for his role as political activist Steven Biko, who struggled to free blacks from the apartheid regime in South Africa and died in police custody in 1977 at age 30.

Dead Man Walking (1995): Sister Helen Prejean tried in vain to save a death-row prisoner from execution, but perhaps was able to save his soul. Susan Sarandon won the Best Actress Oscar for her moving portrayal of a nun who comes to empathize with a killer as well as the families of his victims.

Gandhi (1982): As Mohandas Gandhi, the spiritual and political leader who freed India from British rule through nonviolent protest, Ben Kingsley took home the Oscar for Best Actor.

The Insider (1999): Former tobacco executive and biochemist Jeffrey Wigand blew the whistle on the tobacco industry for knowing and deliberately suppressing information on the dangers of cigarette smoking and nicotine addiction. Australian actor Russell Crowe was nominated for a Best Actor Oscar for his portrayal of Wigand.

In the Name of the Father (1993): Gerry Conlon was a petty thief from Belfast, Ireland, wrongly convicted of a fatal IRA bombing in London and sent to prison, along with his father. Daniel Day-Lewis earned a Best Actor Oscar nomination for his depiction of Conlon, who was ultimately freed after 14 years.

Norma Rae (1979): Sally Field won her first Best Actress Oscar portraying Crystal Lee Sutton (called Norma Rae in the film), a courageous single mother who rallied her fellow employees to form a union at their southern textile mill.

Schindler's List (1993): Irish actor Liam Neeson took on the challenge of portraying the complex Oskar Schindler, a Catholic of German heritage who saved more Jews during the Holocaust than any other private individual. Neeson was nominated for the Best Actor Oscar.

Silkwood (1983): In November 1974, Karen Silkwood, an Oklahoma nuclear plant worker, was driving to meet a *New York Times* reporter to reveal the unsafe practices at her plant. On the way, she died in a still-mysterious one-car accident. As Silkwood, Meryl Streep earned an Oscar nomination for Best Actress.

BIOGRAPHY: Just to clarify, you've never trained to be a paralegal and are not interested in going to law school yourself?

BROCKOVICH: I'm not a paralegal. I have my niche and that's fine—the world has enough lawyers. I've become a huge advocate of attorneys, I really have. But they spend all day in court or in offices and I'm not that breed of cat. I need to be out.

BIOGRAPHY: You're famous for your sexy outfits. Why do you feel they're appropriate in an office?

BROCKOVICH: How I dress shouldn't be a re-

flection of how my brain works or what's in my heart; it shouldn't interfere with what I'm capable of doing. Whether I'm sitting there in a skirt one inch above my knees—or 18 inches above them—I can still do my document search, I can still have compassion for another person. How I dress is just a fun thing. I don't wear my skirts as short anymore simply because I've gotten older, though it may depend on my mood. I do wear bustiers a lot. But even though I may have on a provocative top I always have a blazer in my office or my car, and I will put it on before I go into court.

BIOGRAPHY: But don't people—men especially—make judgments about women who dress as you do?

BROCKOVICH: You hit the nail on the head: It's an instant judgment and women are just as capable of it. All of us probably were taught not to judge others, yet we still do it. Having grown up dyslexic and having always been labeled and judged, there's still a fiery part of me that doesn't like to be labeled or judged. So I tend to be a fighter for issues like that.

BIOGRAPHY: Playing devil's advocate, would you allow your 17-year-old daughter Katie to go out the door dressed like that?

BROCKOVICH: Are you kidding? Usually I say, "Do me a favor, put on a jacket." And she'll do that. I do have some restrictions, but not a whole lot. Katie got her belly button pierced at 16 without my permission and I absolutely had a meltdown. She hid it from me and I thought smoke was coming out of my ears, I was so worried about her getting an infection. She just knows not to show it to me now. But you know I was at a 7-Eleven the other day and there were a bunch of girls in there with belly-button rings. I asked them, how old are you? They said seventh grade. And I thought, "Oh my God." My youngest, Elizabeth, is going into sixth grade and she's still such an innocent little child in jeans.

BIOGRAPHY: Isn't it sort of ironic that Erin Brockovich has toxic mold in her house?

BIOGRAPHY: I know! I get a bonus for my work in a toxic case and I buy a toxic house! I've spent about \$735,000 so far cleaning it room by room. If I'd known then what I know now I should have just torn it down and started over. Selling it was not an option because I'd have to disclose everything and who would buy it? And buying another house and paying two mortgages was not appealing. So either way I had to fix it.

BIOGRAPHY: Why does a millionaire still work so hard?

BROCKOVICH: I talk about that in my lectures. First of all, I got that \$2.5 million back in 1996, and paid half in taxes. I put a nice down payment on the toxic home. I bought a nice ski boat for the family. But then I had two kids with problems, and I opted to put them into boarding schools with intervention programs. That was very expensive—each one cost from \$4,100 to \$5,000 a month—but I'm so glad I did it. I just had to get the kids out of their environment and get them away from that peer pressure, away from drugs.

(Continued on page 94)

Patriots

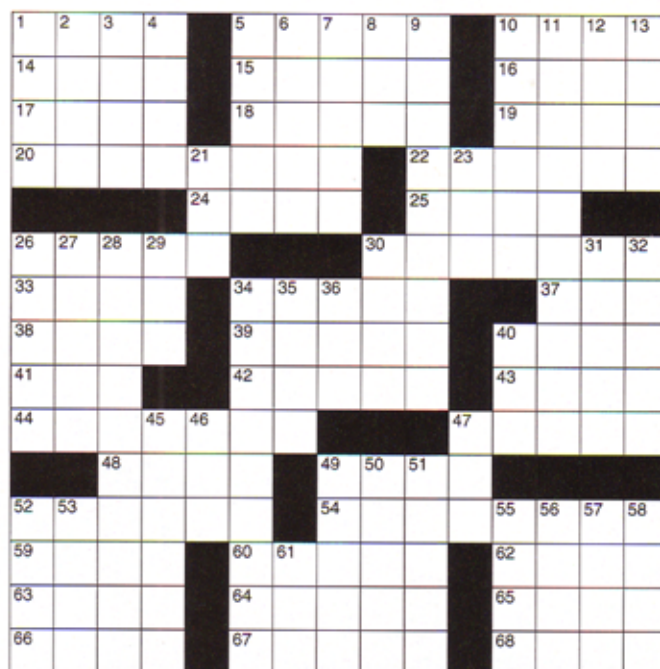
Across

- 1 Spy of 1776
5 Master, in old India
10 George W. Bush's dog
14 Aqua regia, e.g.
15 Richard E. Byrd book
16 *Gone With the Wind* manor
17 Hall-of-Famer Musial
18 Intimidate
19 Regretted
20 Boston Tea Party leader
22 Drama coach Adler
24 Great Plains tribe
25 River of Flanders
26 He rode with 11-Down
30 Thrusts
33 Sonant
34 Enrique Iglesias' father
37 Ex-soldier
38 Kind of jockey
39 Adlai's 1956 running mate
40 Golfer Ballesteros
41 "Well, lah-di-___!"
- 42 Evidence
43 Ontario tribe
44 Doff
47 Chicago's Soldier ____
48 Cloud number
49 Pointed arch
52 Former NYC mayor
54 Famous kite flyer
59 Dashiell's dog
60 Lute with drone strings
62 Côte d'Azur resort
63 Bar measure
64 Paddy in *Patriot Games*
65 Plenty, in poetry
66 Elizabeth in *La Bamba*
67 Kind of goat
68 "They ___ thataway!"

Down

- 1 U.S. Poet Laureate: 1995-1997
2 Minutes
3 Neeson in *Ethan Frome*
4 Giant author Ferber

- 5 1977 Time Man of the Year
6 Where Col. Travis died
7 Colonial, for one
8 Tavern
9 Reputed flag maker
10 Meryl in *Sophie's Choice*
11 Midnight rider of 1775
12 Pitcher Hershisier
13 "I did it!"
21 John ___ Passos
23 Ontario ensemble (abbr.)
26 Trevor of the PGA
27 Popular font
28 "Father of his country"
29 Caribou cousin
30 Painter Mondrian
31 Flat
32 28-Down's Old Nelson, e.g.
34 Declaration of Independence author
35 F-16 letters
36 Rank above maj.
40 ___-fi film
45 Birthday party bust?



- 46 United
47 Marsh
49 Time after time
50 "For amber waves of ___"
51 With time to spare
52 Yellow jacket
53 A *Hard Road to Glory* author
55 "What Maisie ___": Henry James
56 In the ___ of Fire (1993)
57 John Hancock, for one
58 Mr. Gingrich
61 Pairs skater Kyoko

ANSWERS ON PAGE 100

Erin Brockovich from page 69

BIOGRAPHY: Did they appreciate it at the time?

BROCKOVICH: No. They *hated* me. But I have to tell you, over the past year I've heard more thank-yous from them and speculation about where they'd be today if I hadn't intervened. A sound future for Katie and Matt is the best return on my investment. I looked at it this way: What if a doctor had told me that one or both of the kids needed kidney transplants or they were gonna die? I would've spent every last penny I had. And when I saw them getting lost in drugs and peer pressure and bad attitudes and truancy in school, I knew it was going to result in jail, pregnancy, maybe even death. I just couldn't let that happen.

Today they're doing great. Katie is already in college and she's driven to help these kids who are into Ecstasy or other drugs and she can see how it's ruining their lives. At 17 she's figured it out. And I'm very, very proud of Matt, who just turned 19. He'll be leaving to join the 82nd Airborne (U.S. Army). It makes me nervous—I don't go see movies like *Black Hawk Down*—but I think it will be a good experience for him. It's something he feels he needs to do.

BIOGRAPHY: Did you feel their problems were due to your working so much, as the movie depicted?

BROCKOVICH: I think there were a lot of factors: a divorce, an absent mom working all the time, an absent father. In boarding school the kids got to face their anger and find appropriate ways to handle it. I mean, I was *shocked* at some of the things I heard from my kids, but once we could talk about it and they could cry about it and it was *okay* to feel that way, things started to change.

BIOGRAPHY: Give an example of something that shocked you.

BROCKOVICH: That they were both so *angry* about a divorce that happened 12 years ago. Nothing had ever been said; I thought there had been acceptance. And still resenting that I hadn't been at a third-grade play! Being kids, they didn't understand that Mom had to go to work to feed them. I had no idea that all of this stuff was getting pent up.

BIOGRAPHY: You talk about learning from mistakes, so do you do anything different with Elizabeth?

BROCKOVICH: Yeah. It was an eye-opening experience for me, how important something like a school play is to a child. So now at work I'll say, "You know what, I cannot make that meeting today at noon because I have to be at a recital for Elizabeth. We can schedule it tomorrow." Part of the problem is, I get so *engrossed* in wanting to unravel a case or read a document to find that lie. But I've learned

that when Elizabeth comes in and says, "Mommy, can I show you my new cheer?" I stop what I'm doing. She just needs that little bit of devotion, then she runs on. I also took Katie out on a lecture tour with me. We went from Chicago to Washington to Pennsylvania to Canada, and when we were back she said, "Mom, that was a great experience and I never want to go again!"

BIOGRAPHY: Your boss, Ed Masry, is now the mayor of Thousand Oaks. Would you ever consider running for office?

BROCKOVICH: I'm not sure how I feel about politics. I have been approached often, but I don't know that I'm there yet. If I felt that I could do any good I might try.

BIOGRAPHY: After the movie came out, some of the original 634 plaintiffs were publicly unhappy with you and Ed Masry. How did you react to that?

BROCKOVICH: When they got their settlements in 1996, not once did any of them ever complain about a thing. Then the movie came out. I think what happened was they realized some people got different dollar figures than they did and it made them mad. I can't take that away from them because for each one of those people, their injury is to them the most significant. Those were their feelings and they're entitled to them. I feel we did our best, and I think we did a good job.

BIOGRAPHY: You've said that some details in the movie were "Hollywood." Give a few examples of how it deviated from your real life.

BROCKOVICH: I was Miss Pacific Coast 1981, not Miss Wichita. And it wasn't Ed but Jimmy Vitoe, Ed's partner, who handled my lawsuit after my car accident in Nevada. And there was a *fabulous* scene in the movie, during a conversation in our law office, where a defense attorney picked up a glass of water to drink. Julia Roberts says, "We brought that in special for you folks, it's from a well in Hinkley"—and then the lawyer won't drink it. That actually happened during the trial. PG&E had an expert on the witness stand who had been claiming to drink hexavalent chromium (also called chromium 6) with no ill health effects. But hexavalent chromium has a latency period of up to 20 years; you might not see the health effects for some time, just as the people in Hinkley didn't see health effects right away. So while this man was on the witness stand, our legal team decided that we would actually bring out a glass of hexavalent chromium mixed from a lab and ask the expert to drink it. The expert would not. It was riveting. The movie scene got the same message across.

BIOGRAPHY: Were you disappointed that you weren't at the Oscars when Julia Roberts won?

BROCKOVICH: No. Katie was really sick and it was more important to be with her. Besides, Oscar night was Julia's night, not mine. I had attended the Golden Globes, and when I looked over and realized that Catherine Zeta-Jones was standing near me I suddenly felt one inch tall and just ran off the carpet. It was absolutely nerve-wracking.

BIOGRAPHY: After all that's happened, are there more pros or cons to being Erin Brockovich?

BROCKOVICH: Definitely more pros, although the extortion was an unpleasant experience. And I still see the misperception that because I had a movie made about me and got a big bonus that my life is perfect, and that's not true. A cop recently pulled me over for speeding and I still got a ticket!

BIOGRAPHY: You carried the Olympic flame through your area. What was that experience like for you?

BROCKOVICH: It was a thrill. The organizers came to me after somebody nominated me; I never found out who. Of everything I've ever done throughout my life—raising children, the Hinkley litigation, the movie—there's always a bittersweet side to it. But

passing that torch was nothing but sweet. ●

LINDA PETERSON IS AN ASSOCIATE EDITOR FOR THIS MAGAZINE.

Cosmetic Surgery from page 65

"saddlebags" on the thighs and "love handles" at the waist can be equally intractable—a double chin or a fatty neck can't be minimized with slimming undergarments or camouflaged with clothing. For the very thin person with a sagging neck, Hanke says a facelift may be the only solution. But where there's fat, liposuction offers a safer option, with minimal potential complications and almost no downtime. "The goal really is to erase the neck," says Hanke. "When you see the neck because of excess fat or wrinkles, you miss the face."

With a black marker he outlines a bib-shaped area from his patient's jawline to collarbone. There, he'll remove the layer of fat just below the skin with an advanced technique called Tumescence Liposuction. "Tumescence" means the target area is swollen with a special anesthetic that minimizes bleeding and bruising by causing blood vessels to tighten. The patient has also received a nerve block.

Hanke makes a tiny incision at the tip of her chin and inserts a thin metal suction device called a cannula. Awake and comfortable, with no sedation, she feels only a little vibration as fat is sucked out down a long transparent tube and into a canister on the floor. Once removed, fat cells don't grow back, even if the patient gains weight. He tells this patient she'll see dramatic improvement within a week, and her skin will continue to tighten for as long as 18 months.

It takes Hanke about an hour to reshape her neck and chin line, standing back occasionally to consider the effect, like a sculptor creating a work of art. He's chatting all the while, and clearly enjoying his conversation with the patient.

"Listening to people's concerns and—hopefully—solving them is very satisfying," Hanke says. He also listens very closely to the patient's reasons for seeking treatment. "If it's to please someone else, that's not a good reason. And if a patient says, 'My husband just left me and I want liposuction today,' there's no way I'm going to touch it. The best reason is just wanting to look as good as you can look—for yourself." ●

BIBI WEIN FREQUENTLY WRITES ABOUT HEALTH AND PSYCHOLOGY.

Julia Stiles from page 77

Stiles shines no matter the project. Her confident stance and real-girl demeanor

rescued the teen flick *Down to You* (2000), with Freddie Prinze Jr. And many credit her fancy footwork with making *Save the Last Dance* into a big hit. "I put a lot of pressure on myself about the dancing aspect of it," admits Stiles. "I quit ballet just before going on pointe, so I'd always felt I wanted to revisit that again. I was excited to do the movie just to get all that training."

Truth is, Stiles seems virtually unfazed by the fame aspect of her occupation. She claims her college plans were never in doubt, never mind that her career began exploding on the eve of her freshman year. Typical of her measured attitude, her only plans to date for the summer are a week-long trip to South Africa with Habitat for Humanity, the nonprofit organization that builds homes for underprivileged families (she went on a similar trip to Costa Rica two years ago). "I've been getting a lot of scripts, but I haven't decided on anything yet."

And don't even dare to ask about her personal life. Previously linked with Joseph Gordon-Levitt from *3rd Rock From the Sun* (a fellow Columbia student), she is reserved about her current involvements.

A similarly restrained perspective helps ground her in regard to the fickle entertainment biz. "I always go back and forth thinking that this is the moment to celebrate," she says. "You get a job and you think everything is going to be easy from this moment on, and then of course once you're done with one job you have to go on to your next audition. And while it's gotten easier for me now, it's not entirely handed to me on a silver platter."

Wise old Shakespeare couldn't have put it better. ●

ALEC FOGG LAST INTERVIEWED JENNIFER LOVE HEWITT FOR THIS MAGAZINE.

Roger Axtell from page 73

so I got used to being different."

In 1944, the family returned to Wisconsin, where Roger's mother soon passed away. Following advice from mentors in high school and college, the teen honed his natural talent for public speaking and earned a degree in history and journalism from the University of Wisconsin. After marrying his college sweetheart, Mitzi, Axtell worked in small-town radio news, then served two years in the Army writing and announcing for a radio network before joining Parker.

Today, the father of three and grandfather of six lives in Janesville, Wisconsin. He is a prostate cancer survivor and a vocal advocate for early detection of the disease. "It was quite a saga," he says of his illness, "but it