

# CALIFORNIA LAWYER

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## THE HOLLYWOOD EFFECT

HOW ERIN BROCKOVICH  
TURNED A TINY LAW FIRM  
INTO A PLAYER

*Erin Brockovich*

**Plaintiffs bar brings global torts to U.S. courts**

**5 steps to happy lawyering**

**Geoffrey Nunberg on slungshot, prurient,  
and other verbal oddities**

# THE BROCKOVICH

After the movie, Ed Masry's firm was inundated with attention. Not all of it has been welcome.

Even for those who recognize the awesome ability of Hollywood to change the world, or at least our perception of it, the intertwined stories of the Conejo Valley law firm of Masry & Vititoe and a once obscure toxic substance called chromium 6 offer a startling lesson in the power of the movies to move us.

Masry & Vititoe, of course, is the small firm that filed suit against Pacific Gas & Electric for fouling the drinking water and ruining the health of hundreds of people in the tiny desert town of Hinkley, just west of Barstow. The massive \$333 million award pried out of PG&E put attorney Ed Masry on the map as an expert in toxic torts and generated more than 2,000 referrals.

That's quite a lot for a firm that until then was best known for its work in brain-trauma personal injury cases, which is what partner James W. Vititoe specialized in. But after Julia Roberts made a star vehicle out of the PG&E case, playing Masry's client-turned-clerk-turned-toxics investigator Erin Brockovich, the firm received thousands of calls from people all over the world wanting to talk to Julia, er, that is, Erin, about the cancers and other diseases they believed stemmed from toxic exposures.

To keep up with the demand, the 13-lawyer firm hired four more people just to field and screen calls on its new toxic hotline (800/96TOXIC). More than a hundred promising leads were identified in this fashion, which were investigated further by a small army of certified hazardous materials technicians who traveled everywhere, from the resorts of St. Croix to the working-class neighborhoods of Rochester, New York. Seven new Hinkley-style cases have or will soon be filed as a result of this activity, one of which originates in California. In all, about 3,500 plaintiffs are involved in these suits, a third of whom



*A Pulitzer Prize winner, Edward Humes is the author of three books—Baby E.R. (2000), Mean Justice (1999), and No Matter How Loud I Shout (1997). He is currently working on a fourth book.*



# BONANZA



by Edward Humes  
photography by  
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*Erin Brockovich and Ed Masry*