

ERIN BROCKOVICH
**RIDES
AGAIN**

*THE TOXIC CRUSADER TALKS
ABOUT FAME, LEOPARD-PRINT BRAS,
AND HER LATEST BATTLE WITH PG&E*

THE JUNGLE INTERVIEW

BY DIMITRA KESSENIDES

ILLUSTRATION BY DANIEL ADEL



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In 1993, Erin Brockovich and attorney Ed Masry filed a class-action lawsuit against the Pacific Gas and Electric Company for contaminating the groundwater in Hinkley, California. Brockovich, who began working for Masry as an office assistant, took it upon herself to research the matter, and through a combination of hard work, pluck, and crack investigative skills, assembled a mountain of evidence against PG&E. The claim: The company had poisoned the citizens of Hinkley by fouling their water with a toxic chemical called hexavalent chromium, or C-6. In 1996, PG&E settled the case and agreed to pay the plaintiffs \$333 million. The story was made into the 2000 feature film *Erin Brockovich*, and Brockovich herself became a modern American folk hero. *JD Jungle* caught up with the toxic crusader to talk about what she's up to now. She spoke with trademark candor.

JD JUNGLE YOU'RE SUING PG&E AGAIN, THIS TIME FOR CONTAMINATING GROUNDWATER IN KETTLEMAN, CALIFORNIA. WHERE DOES THE CASE STAND?

ERIN BROCKOVICH We're going through motions. I uncovered this case in 1995, but this one's taken a lot longer than Hinkley because PG&E pulled that clever move, and filed for bankruptcy last year, which slowed us down. Right now, we're trying to pick a trial date. I hope it'll be soon. I'm guessing six months to a year.

JD A LOT OF LAWYERS WOULD KILL TO HAVE YOUR NOSE FOR A CASE. HOW DO YOU DO IT?

EB I'm not an expert. I'm not a rocket scientist. I'm not a lawyer. But I have compassion, and I have the ability to listen to people's suffering, to see that somebody is frightened, sick, dying. In Hinkley, I didn't see just one person, but two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. I would drive home and think, "Why would people unknown to each other make up lies about cows having tumors all over their body, or about dogs drinking water and then running around in circles and dropping dead, or about everybody having nosebleeds?" Do I have to be a rocket scientist to stop and think, "Gosh, maybe something's wrong?" That's where I begin my work. Then I ask questions, and I go into the local agencies, and I look through the files, and I look at the documents. From there, it's like putting the pieces of a puzzle together.

JD HOW DID YOU UNCOVER THE KETTLEMAN CASE?

EB While I was working on Hinkley, I'd gotten tips from PG&E employees—things like, "You really need to look at Kettleman." So Ed and I went out there, and we looked around, and he said, "I don't think there's anything here, kid. Let's go." But just as we were getting ready to leave, I saw some tamarisk trees that looked like trees I'd seen in Hinkley. They had this white substance on their leaves. I had learned in Hinkley that a tamarisk will secrete a poison through its

leaves. The Hinkley case was in full gear at the time, so Ed said, "I know what you're thinking, but I don't want you coming back here." And I said, "Okay." The next day, I got in my car and drove straight to the water board in Fresno. One of the first documents I found was a letter from the United States Department of the Interior, dating back to the '60s, notifying PG&E in San Francisco that they had excessive hexavalent chromium in one of their on-site wells about 10 miles north of Kettleman. I thought, "Here we go again."

JD HOW MUCH MONEY ARE YOU SEEKING IN THIS CASE?

EB I think it should be about the same dollar value as Hinkley. It's just as bad. The number of people affected is roughly the same, maybe a little bit more. They have the same illnesses and problems as the people in Hinkley—nosebleeds, a lot of kidney problems, people with Crohn's disease, on colostomy bags.

JD YOUR CRITICS SAY YOU'RE OUT TO DESTROY CORPORATE AMERICA. WHAT DO YOU SAY TO THAT?

EB Big companies like to say that about me, but I like corporate America as much as anybody else. I like a nice car, and I like nice things. But when I see corporations that have the resources and the technology to protect human health and human life—like the companies Ed and I have litigation against—I think it's their duty to do that. Our job is to try and hold them accountable.

JD WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE ENRON CASE AND THE OTHER CORPORATE SCANDALS GOING ON NOW?

EB I can't believe the ego in corporate America. What, you think you're never going to get caught? Enron thought that. PG&E thought that. I remember a conversation with Ed back in 1992 about PG&E. I told him, "It will be their ego that will be their demise." If these corporations had more to lose than just money,

maybe they wouldn't do it. If people on their boards had to face criminal charges, maybe they'd think twice.

JD YOU LIVE IN CALIFORNIA. IS PG&E YOUR ELECTRIC COMPANY?

EB No, Southern California Edison is my provider. I've never had a problem with them. PG&E would probably cut me off.

JD AFTER THE HINKLEY CASE, ED MASRY GAVE YOU A \$2.5 MILLION BONUS. YOU MOVED INTO AN EXPENSIVE NEW HOUSE THAT HAD TO BE GUTTED TO GET RID OF TOXIC MOLD. WEIRD, HUH?

EB I wouldn't have believed this had I not been through it myself. I work on a toxic case. They make a movie about it. I get a bonus from it. Then I go and buy a toxic-mold home. I must carry around a neon sign that says TOXIC.

JD YOU HAVE TWO TELEVISION SHOWS IN THE WORKS: ONE FOR NBC AND ONE FOR LIFETIME. WILL YOU BE THE NEW OPRAH?

EB I can't talk about the specifics yet, but they will involve the same kind of work I've been doing—with people, with the environment, with illness. I wouldn't want to do a show for entertainment value, but for educational purposes. I like *48 Hours* and *20/20*. They teach me something. I like women like Barbara Walters and Diane Sawyer.

JD WHEN YOU LOOK BACK AT THE MOVIE, WHAT'S THE ONE THING IT GOT WRONG ABOUT YOU?

EB In general, it came across well. I'm passionate about my work, and they captured that passion. The only thing that wasn't really right is that very rarely will you see me with my bra straps hanging out. I wear low-cut tops, but my straps aren't showing. And you wouldn't see me wearing a leopard-print bra underneath a black sheer top, either. If I wore a sheer black top, I'd wear a sheer black bra. Leopard print doesn't look good underneath a black see-through shirt.

JD SPEAKING OF THE WAY YOU DRESS, IS IT A GOOD IDEA FOR A WOMAN TO DISPLAY HER SEXUALITY AT WORK?

EB Yes. There are so many mixed messages for corporate lawyers, or any woman in the workplace. I mean, my gosh, we see what's out there in magazines. We know what's considered attractive. Yet when a woman in corporate America wants to show part of her sexuality, because it makes her feel good and that's a part of her, there's a backlash. That doesn't make sense to me. The way you dress should be no reflection of what you're capable of doing. Your clothes don't reflect what's in your brain or your heart. When I go to court, I'm respectful. I wear a blazer. But if I want to wear a bustier underneath it, you bet I will.

JD DO YOU WISH JULIA ROBERTS STAYED MORE COMMITTED TO YOUR WORK?

EB No. I think she sent a message just by doing the movie. It's clear to me that she cares about America and she cares about people being poisoned. I wouldn't expect anything more from her.

JD WHAT'S THE WORST THING ABOUT FAME?

EB One of the hardest things is the expectation that every case that comes to us is going to be another Hinkley. There are days when I come home feeling pretty bad because there's somebody who is truly suffering and we can't help them. Maybe we're not licensed to practice in their state. Or the facts aren't there. Sometimes there are statute problems. It's sad because there's hope that it will be another Hinkley, but it doesn't always turn out that way.

JD YOU'RE SO VISIBLE NOW. DO YOU WORRY THAT PEOPLE MIGHT START TO TUNE YOU OUT? YOU KNOW: "THERE'S THAT WOMAN HOLLERING ABOUT TOXIC WASTE AGAIN."

EB I don't think about that. I am who I am. If something comes along where I think I can make a difference or maybe help somebody feel better about themselves, then I do it. I try to listen to my heart. That's what I follow.

JD YOU WEREN'T SO HIGH ON LAWYERS IN THE MOVIE. WHAT'S YOUR ATTITUDE TOWARD THEM NOW?

EB There are lawyers who come forward and make a difference—people like Ed Masry. Lawyers like that believe in their client. They take the time to listen to their client. And they are some of the finest lawyers I know. But then for every lawyer I know like that, I meet 10 who make me think, "My God. No wonder everyone hates lawyers!" Look at the defense attorneys I've seen. They demean you, they mock you, they make you feel stupid. And the turning of the words! They do it to every single client. "Isn't it true?" I hate that phrase. Everything starts with "Isn't it true?" For someone who isn't used to this, they have to stop and think, "Is it true? Is it not true?" The lawyers create that self-doubt. That's something that I cherish—that I can teach a client not to let that attorney make her doubt herself.

JD WHAT'S THE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU CAN GIVE TO LAWYERS?

EB One of the most important things for young lawyers to learn is ethics. Think of the people in charge at PG&E in the '60s—including their lawyers. I wonder what ethics class they missed. Had they made a different decision, they would have been responsible for saving hundreds of lives. When law students get out into the work world, their ethics are going to be challenged. And you know what, that new house, that new car, that raise, I'm telling you, I promise you, in the end, it will not be worth it if you got it covering up some dastardly deed.

JD ANY OTHER ADVICE?

EB In every aspect of the law, somebody's coming to you because something is a big deal to them. They've been in a car wreck, they're getting divorced, they've been injured on a job, they drank poisoned water. In every case, there's a person on the other side who is passionate about what is happening to them. Lawyers are the ones who can make a difference for those people. Listen to them. It's not just about the book and the law that you're reading. It's about the person. ©

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