

# Erin Brockovich, The Brand

With two TV shows in development, a new book and a steady gig on the luncheon circuit, how does the real-life Erin Brockovich find time to fight those polluters? **By Austin Bunn**

**T**here are few people alive today who have gotten a better deal from Hollywood than Erin Brockovich. Steven Soderbergh's 2000 film, an anthem to Brockovich's legal crusade against the Pacific Gas and Electric Company for toxic dumping in Hinkley, Calif., turned her name into a brand for flinty righteousness. Julia Roberts, who won an Oscar for playing her, needed a water-padded bra to get her dimensions right. All this has left Brockovich with an undeniably powerful, albeit peculiar, kind of fame. She has the Pentecostal tan of celebrity, and she has that name, but for the time being people don't automatically connect the two. She gets confused with Heather Locklear and Suzanne Somers. One guy approached her at a restaurant to tell her he loved her ThighMaster.

The confusion can't last too much longer. Two years after the release of Soderbergh's cinematic folk tale, the 41-year-old Brockovich has arrived on shelves, stage and the small screen. Over the course of last year, she became the most popular public-speaking client in the William Morris stable. Her recently published self-help volume, "Take It From Me: Life's a Struggle but You Can Win," will get that best-seller stamp when it hits paperback. She is developing two television pilots, a talk show for NBC and a true-life program for Lifetime about women "overcoming any kind of obstacles." Finally, there is the work that made her famous, her investigations into corporate polluting. She is finishing up the research for her first big case to go to trial since the historic \$333 million Hinkley settlement in 1996, another class-action suit against P.G. & E., this time in Kettleman City, Calif., for contaminating ground water with chromium 6. The trial date is to be set next month.

On one of her "wildly busy" mornings, with half an hour to spare, Brockovich has suggested we meet at her favorite boutique, Nicole, on Sunset Boulevard in West Hollywood. It's the kind of place that sells thongs with the word "spoiled" in sequins on the front. The saleswomen know her style ("provocative," they call it) and even fetch her the occasional cranberry-and-vodka from a restaurant next door.

When she glides in, nearly an hour late, she heads immediately to the dressing room. She throws on a pair of blatantly age-inappropriate, low-slung denim pants and models them in the mirror. For most, this









would be a private moment, but not for Brockovich. She pulls up her shirt and suspiciously eyes her miraculous waistline. She wants to know if the jeans reveal too much skin. "I don't like my bellybutton showing," she says. "I really don't." She looks magnificent in everything here, which makes choosing hard. "When I have the vodkas-and-cranberries, I come home with all kinds of stuff," she says, twisting her hair into curlers that have been warmed for her. "I tell my husband, 'Don't let me shop when I've been drinking.'"

Just when I'm about to give in to the vacuity of the spree, I ask her — through the slats on the dressing-room door — "What do you think of Michael Fumento?" and everything changes. Fumento is a lawyer who works at the conservative Hudson Institute. Since the film, Fumento has been trying to spread the word that ingested chromium 6 does not cause cancer and that Brockovich's science is shoddy.

She bolts out of the dressing room, cursing, and confronts me. "C6 causes liver failure, kidney failure and can kill you," she tells me. "There are reams of data on that. Fumento is just taking a dig because he protects the big company. I don't like him." It's an abrupt switch of subject matter, from \$150 denims to legal

in the audience muttered, "Oh, my God." Brockovich lives for that shock response but dares you to leave it at that. When she advises in her book to "dress for the part," she's talking about a role that she invented: the all-star, foxy suburban mom. Brockovich is proof of the second act in American life. The question is, What does it take to keep the curtain from falling?

OUT IN AGOURA HILLS, at the far western rim of the San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles sprawl recedes, for the time being anyway, into perfected suburbia. The \$1-million-plus manses nestle cozily, each with its own ornately carved mailbox, and all surrounded by the Santa Monica Mountains.

With her \$2.5 million bonus from the original P.G. & E. settlement, Brockovich, her third husband, Eric, and her 11-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, moved into a two-story corner-lot property here in 1997, only to discover that their house was thoroughly contaminated with what she calls "tarantula fur": toxic mold. "I had a lake underneath the house," Brockovich says, giving me the tour of the place. "It's been a nightmare." For almost two years, builders tore down interior walls, and major rooms of the house were "deconned" in bubble units and could be entered only in hazmat suits. The renovation still isn't

ovich," with Brockovich superimposed over Roberts's face and beaming.) The two women — the star and her source material — met for the first time on the set. Brockovich was in the dressing room getting her hair done for her cameo. (She played a waitress with the name tag "Julia.") Roberts came in and introduced herself. "It was odd," Brockovich recalls. "She said, 'I'm Julia Roberts, and geez, I don't even have my boobs in yet.'" People often ask her if she has a continuing relationship with the star. "She's doing her thing, and I'm doing mine," Brockovich says. "But there's an unspoken bond."

Brockovich is no longer the single mom she was in the movie — she has been married to the sometime actor Eric Ellis for three years — but it can still seem as if she is. She has a third-marriage hardness to her. She makes it clear that the house is hers, that the wealth is hers and that she can do just fine solo. Reclining on an overstuffed couch in her living room, Brockovich says, "A lot of women make the mistake of getting married just because they are afraid to be alone." She pauses and looks at Eric, who is sitting, looking somewhat bored, on a couch across the room. It's unclear if she's insulting him or not until she continues: "And that's the beauty of Eric. Because I wasn't looking for him, and there wasn't that sense of wanting to hang on to somebody or something because the fear wasn't there."

This openness, which is essential to Brockovich's appeal, extends to her finances as well. Not so long ago, she supported three children on \$300 a week. Now she talks readily about the \$100,000 she got from Jersey Films for her life rights, the \$2.5 million bonus that made her cry and the \$500,000 she has already dumped into expunging the toxic mold. While I was at her house, she ordered her agent to secure "the other 10 grand" for a pilot, then agreed to transfer \$400 into Eric's bank account so he could go shopping. Afterward, we discussed the \$250,000 she spent on rehab for her kids (as well as the \$100,000 lien on her house that a contractor filed after she refused to pay him for work she considered substandard).

The natural suspicion is that as her "work" becomes more and more negotiating about work — lecture dates, new books, pilot shoots and renovations — she has stopped really doing the work she is famous for: investigating polluters and organizing victims. But when I ask her a leading question about her legal research — how does a nonlawyer become such a central figure in a legal case, after all? — she pulls me into her dining room, fetches a box full of paper and sits cross-legged on the floor. She wants to show me exactly how she works.

This box is from the California Department of Toxic Substances Control. "Imagine getting hundreds of these boxes," she says, running a lacquered fingernail along the sheaves. "You come to the 40th box, what does your attitude be-

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trangling, and I almost feel guilty for bringing it up and shattering the playful mood. But she clearly knows how to handle the dissonance.

We're used to our crusaders rejecting style and sexuality for high seriousness, as if they were mutually exclusive. But Brockovich demands to be taken seriously with her Armani suits and her breast implants (and in some cases, yes, her bellybutton showing). In the post-Enron mood of increasing suspicion of corporate goodwill, Brockovich is a real David in boot-cut Levi's. A rambunctious, loudmouthed sister to Sherron Watkins and Jane Fonda, Brockovich is a vocal enemy of bad companies at a moment when bad companies are very, very bad. "Ralph Nader with cleavage," they called me," she says. "I don't want to picture that."

On the lecture circuit, her audiences gasp when she first walks onstage. At one event, she sauntered on dressed in skin-tight leather pants, leather jacket, leather boots and swooping leather bustier — in so much leather that she was practically a glove — and the woman behind me

done — the backyard has been flayed, the front yard will be and a hammer bangs above us the entire time I'm there. But as awful as the experience has been, there's an undeniable humanizing quality to the tragedy. For all her toxic heroism, Brockovich herself is not immune.

Nor is her family. When she found out that her two oldest children, Matthew and Katie (now in their late teens), were trying drugs, she sent them to wilderness camps and boarding schools. "Their attitude was extremely defiant," she tells me. "I gave them fair warning as early as 9 years old — you start doing drugs, I'll pop you out, and you are gone. I gave them enough rope to hang themselves." Her youngest, Elizabeth, lives at home and is a tomboy. "She doesn't like baths," she says. "If she has bugs on her, that doesn't bother her."

As we tour the rooms, I expect to see a lot of memorabilia from the film. But Brockovich has kept very little, save the movie poster at the top of the stairs — the one with Julia Roberts gritting her teeth and the tag line "She brought a small town to its feet and a huge company to its knees." (There's another one downstairs, a gift from Jersey Films, which produced "Erin Brock-

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**No longer the single mom of her movie fame, Brockovich married Eric Ellis three years ago.**

come? 'Forget it. There's nothing here.' Well, I go through it paper by paper. You will see me in my office, on the floor, all the files around me, and I won't talk to you, I won't take phone calls."

She shows me her "Hot Doc" book, which she compiles from the mass of paper. This one looks like a college notebook of class notes, covered in hastily applied colored stickers and highlighter. She points out a single piece of paper, a report from Oct. 10, 1995, that water well 31A in Redlands, Calif., is "inactive," with a trichloroethylene reading of 34.4 parts per billion. The maximum allowable level of TCE (a cleaning solvent) in drinking water is 5 P.P.B. Then she shows me another piece of paper that reveals that the well was active and producing water for the town the same day, in clear violation of environmental law. Brockovich leans back with pride, savoring the contradiction. "That is what I do," she says.

Edward Masry, the menschy partner at Masry & Vititoe who used Brockovich's research in the Hinkley case and still employs her for his class-action crusades, calls her "the best in the field," but he admits that he can't exactly describe what her skill is and doesn't really know any other law firms that have somebody like her. Masry gave Brockovich away to her current husband, so he is not only father figure but also fan. "She's a workaholic," he tells me. "If it comes down to watching a movie or looking at toxic cases, she'll look at the boxes."

She turns what most lawyers would never have the patience for into her grand metier. No doubt part of the success of the Brockovich mythology is that it reaffirms the idea that lousy jobs can still make us heroes if we take them seriously enough. The fact remains, though, that she has no real credentials except moxie and friendliness.

It is this genuine amiability that makes her a lightning rod for potential plaintiffs, says Brockovich's chief critic, Michael Fumento. Brockovich claims to have challenged him to debate "a million times," but he disputes it: "I would so love to debate her. Where? When? But she has nothing to gain. It's like the leading presidential candidate agreeing to debate the fourth independent candidate."

Beyond his complaints about Brockovich's science, Fumento argues that she's dangerous because she's so good at convincing people that corporations are to blame. "She's a one-woman juggernaut for rounding people up," he says. He has a point; even as she glamorizes the reputation of personal-injury lawyers — typically considered ethical bottom-feeders — her brand recognition might warp a legal process vulnerable to abuse. Tort litigation is already out of proportion

with evidence of harm. Currently, more than \$20 billion has been spent on the 200,000 asbestos lawsuits on the books, a number that continues to rise each year though asbestos use was discontinued in the 1970's. About 90 percent of these claims are from asbestos victims who "were exposed but are unimpaired," says Michael Hotra of the American Tort Reform Association.

Brockovich can turn up plaintiffs without even trying. One Saturday, I met up with her at a book signing in Barstow, Calif., where I overheard a friend of hers (who had grown up there) say to her offhandedly, "You know, I should have joined the Hinkley lawsuit." He said this not because he was sick but because, what was there to lose? Erin Brockovich now has a "seal of approval," as Hotra calls it, that could sway juries and accelerate settlements. Masry & Vititoe represents about 1,000 people in the coming Kettleman case against P.G.&E., nearly twice the number as the 1996 settlement. No wonder Brockovich calls this suit "bigger than Hinkley." With a landmark case behind it, Masry & Vititoe's biggest problem may not be winning the case as much as drawing the line between who gets a piece and who doesn't.

Through her work, Brockovich has met people who are real victims, which is why Fumento's attacks frustrate her so much. While I was with her in Barstow, Brockovich decided — partly because she is so rarely there and partly because I was there to write about it — that she wanted to visit Nola Wetterman, who lives in Hinkley, about 15 miles away. Wetterman was one of the early plaintiffs of the Hinkley case; her father was one of the first farmers out in the "contamination plume." Wetterman's family has been riddled with disease: deterioration of the bones and the spine, arthritis at young ages. As we drove over to the house in Brockovich's BMW, she told me that Wetterman has had "seven or eight" miscarriages and that one grandson of hers was born with a "soft neck" — the inability to hold up his head.

When we arrived at the modest ranch, the cheerful but clearly weathered Wetterman was watching TV with twin boys, her foster children. Nothing about the Hinkley settlement appears to have changed Wetterman's life, except to enlarge her generosity — she has supported, in one way or another, more than 250 foster children.

Brockovich reclined on the couch and started chatting about Wetterman's imminent spinal surgery and the fact that she can't feel her feet anymore. I wanted to think of this scene as rehearsed somehow, a calculated poignancy. But for the time that we were there, Brockovich and Wetterman effectively ignored me. They swapped stories and names, names I could not keep up with — the folks from Hinkley who have died, the kids who have done well and the ones who haven't. As Brockovich became increasingly late for dinner, a dinner for 20 friends, which she would pay for, it became apparent that she could have stayed all night.

**D**ays later, I ask Brockovich, as someone who deals directly with irreparable human damages, if she needs to attribute blame in lawsuits to anyone specifically, if she needs a name. She answers that she's at war with a "corporate mentality." She tells me about a P.G. & E. memorandum that advised employees who were drilling to determine how much chromium 6 was in the ground in Hinkley to lie and tell people that they were drilling because the water table was low. "They made an absolute decision, and over time it becomes a corporate secret," she says. "It becomes their code of ethics to keep it."

But her anger is contained and wedded to a playful consumerism that broadens her appeal even as it diminishes her politics. She lives in a house with a lifesize Elvis statue inside the front door and a three-car garage for two adults of driving age. She smokes Capris, the itty-bitsy, expensive cigarettes. She wears bountiful amounts of leather and uses aerosol hair spray to mount her hair. "I'm not out to destroy corporate America," she says to audiences in her lectures. "I enjoy corporate America as much as all of you."

Brockovich is attracted to the idea of the fight and the way that enemies and obstacles get a rise out of us. The danger is that as she becomes more of a celebrity, her defiance — maybe even her prodigious empathy — runs the risk of turning into a pose. With as much style as she exudes, it is already hard to tell the difference.

In the dressing room before a recent lecture in New Brunswick, N.J., Brockovich coaxed her hair up into a style that she refers to as her "Debbie Does Dallas" look. She was dressed in her favorite black knee-high boots, a pinstripe suit that she takes with her everywhere, her "lacy" bustier, because the red one "was bunching," and a masterful choker. From the wings, she studied two women preparing to translate her lecture into sign language. When she walked onstage, into the spotlight that catches up to her everywhere eventually, the audience roared with surprise as much as applause. Her first words were: "I just want to thank the signers tonight. The only universal sign language I know is this." And she flipped all of us the bird. ■