

Then and WOW!

After a rocky ride at the top, Julia Roberts—with a steady love and a string of hits—seems finally content with her life as a superstar

Gerry Dame knew it was a long shot. But as principal of Lenwood Elementary School in the small desert city of Barstow, Calif., he is always looking for ways to give his 435 students—many from low-income, single-parent homes—what he calls “an opportunity to dream.” And what better way than to arrange a visit from fellow small-town girl Julia Roberts, who was in Barstow last summer filming her new movie, *Erin Brockovich*. One Friday he had a note delivered to the set. “It said that I knew she was really busy, but that sometimes just coming and sharing who you are and showing that you made it gives them hope to hang on to,” says Dame. He included his phone number, said he could be reached all weekend and waited for her call. “It never came,” he says. “We were pretty sad, but I figured, well, she’s a busy lady.”

Not that busy. At 9:30 Monday morning, Roberts, 32, pulled up outside the single-story school. Her ground rules were simple: no photos, no autographs, no hot dogs—not for her, at



1990 Unprepared for the demands of superstardom, Roberts (in L.A.) was soon wishing, she said, for a “nice life where I can run around and laugh and not sit hunched over with a hat over my face.”

RALPH DOMINGUEZ/VOLCANO PHOTOS



Cover

2000 Today, says friend Joan Cusack, Roberts has "true wisdom. [She] has worked hard to be real and to value the things that are important in life"—including beau Benjamin Bratt (at the Manhattan premiere of *The Next Best Thing* last month).

Cover

least. "I guess she really watches her diet," says Dame, 55, with a laugh. But that didn't stop the star—who spent five hours visiting each of 21 classes and talking to kids who invariably ended up "in her lap," says Dame—from doling out lunch to her new pals. "She actually rolled up her sleeves and poured on the ketchup," says Dame. "The next day I had parents calling saying, 'My kid just came home and said Julia Roberts was in the classroom, and we know he's making it up.' I had to say, 'No, she was really here.' We were all really smitten with her. It was obvious she wasn't here for the adults or to further some movie. She was here for the kids, to let them know that dreams do come true."

This too is obvious: She speaks from often painful experience. As even the most casual fan knows, the path for Roberts from doe-eyed ingenue to Hollywood superstar was potholed with problems, from failed romances to fights with costars to days spent hiding from paparazzi. Back then, as she told reporters in New York City last week, "I weighed about 20 lbs. more and knew about 50 things less." But dreamers, take note: Time may be on your side. Ten years to the week after the release of *Pretty Woman*, when the toothy 22-year-old from Smyrna, Ga., first wobbled her stiletto-heeled way into the big time, Roberts has never been on firmer ground. Last year her back-to-back romantic comedies—*Runaway Bride* and *Notting Hill*—each passed the \$100 million box office mark. At her current \$20 million per picture (a long way from the \$300,000 she earned for *Woman*), she is Hollywood's highest-paid actress. And by all accounts, the star—who 1989's *Steel Magnolias* director Herb Ross once grumbled was a less than accomplished actor—is worth every penny.

"I feel very lucky, like I was catching her at a real high point," says Steven Soderbergh, who directed Roberts in *Erin Brockovich*, the fact-based story of a cleavage-baring, single-mom legal researcher who discovers that a utility com-

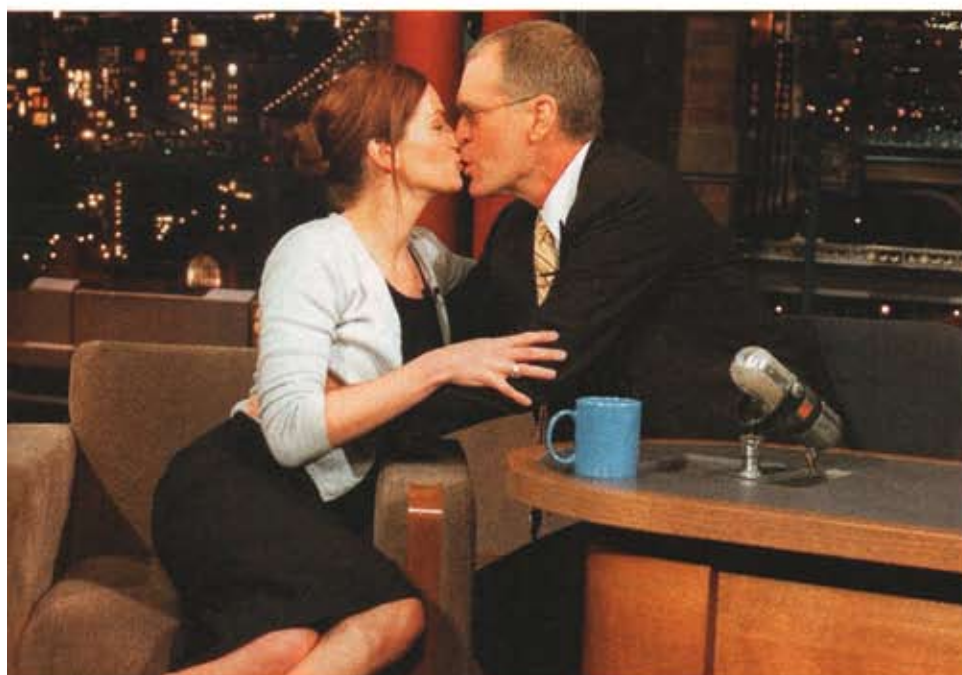


With fans, Roberts (in '99) is "friendly without being frivolous," says a colleague.

pany is poisoning a town's water and helps win the largest class-action lawsuit in history. Last year, ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY listed Roberts as the eighth-most-powerful person in Hollywood, her highest ranking ever. And with a 1999 income of \$50 million, she was placed by *Forbes* magazine above the likes of Michael Jordan, Oprah Winfrey, Tom Hanks and the Backstreet Boys as the most powerful celebrity in any field. But her professional achievement still ranks second to one that's even more remarkable—her contentment.

She spent years running from the pressures of the industry (which she calls "the beast"), alienating insiders like Steven Spielberg, who on *60 Minutes* called his stint directing her

in 1991's *Hook* "an unfortunate time for us to work together." She was also decidedly ambivalent about a public hungry to know everything from the size of her bra (34B) to the number of Girl Scout merit badges she earned ("All of them," she told friend Joan Cusack). But Roberts has figured out that there's no point having it all if she can't stop to smell the sunflowers. And so she now does, whether it involves sitting on her blue Ford tractor at her 51-acre ranch in Taos, N.Mex., gazing out at a freshly planted field soon to be filled with the giant blossoms or just taking a break from filming *Brockovich* to hang out with schoolkids. Or, for that matter, absentmindedly fiddling with a button on the suit of her boyfriend of two years, former



"I was very worried about you," Roberts told David Letterman after giving him a therapeutic aspirin. Her own life, she confided on air, is "beautifully, perfectly intact."



A mother in *Brockovich*, Roberts is, in fact, "maternal and loving," says a pal.



At her Taos ranch, Roberts is hands-on, whether tilling the fields or tiling the bathrooms.



Roberts (with her People's Choice award in January) will next star with Brad Pitt.

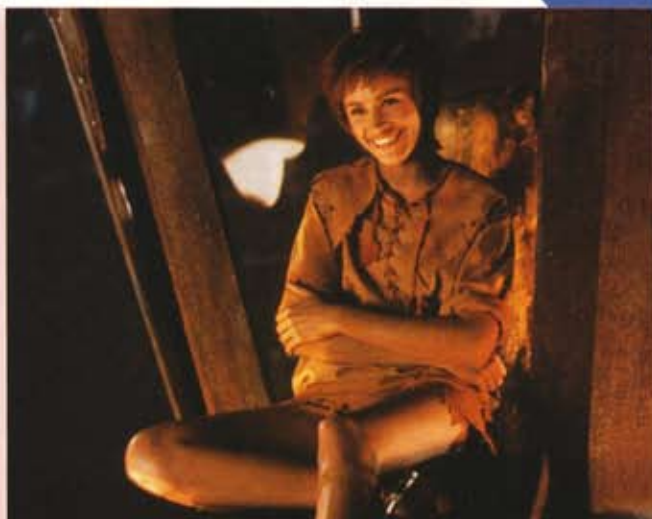
Law & Order star Benjamin Bratt, 36, as he chats with a reporter at last month's Manhattan premiere of the just-released romantic comedy *The Next Best Thing*, in which he costars with Madonna and Rupert Everett. Says Tom Rosenberg, who produced both *Best Thing* and *Runaway Bride*: "They're obviously very happy with each other. I think this is the real thing."

Standing at Bratt's side, Roberts showed no trace of the skittish young woman who once plunged into commitments she seemed unready to keep. In her 20s she fell in and out of love with Dylan McDermott, Liam Neeson and Jason Patric; became engaged—and unengaged—to Kiefer Sutherland; and in 1993 married country singer Lyle Lovett after a three-week courtship, only to split with him after 21 months and later divorce him.

It was almost two years after the end of her brief romance with *Friends* star Matthew Perry in 1996 that Roberts hooked up with the half-Peruvian Northern California native Bratt—whom she says she first noticed in a Manhattan restau-



In 1990, *Pretty Woman*'s Richard Gere called Roberts "amazingly well-adjusted. Also fearless." Then came superstardom.



During work on *Hook* in '91, set sources said Roberts—dubbed Tinkerbell—sequestered herself in her trailer for hours.

rant in 1997 and started dating later that year. Though the two try not to be apart for more than three weeks, they keep separate homes—hers in Manhattan and his in San Francisco—and are not rushing into a legal commitment. Yet her attraction to Bratt is unmistakable. Mingling with Madonna, Gwyneth Paltrow and Isabella Rossellini at the *Best Thing* premiere, she gazes at Bratt with easy, self-assured adoration.

"[We] balance it by keeping it real," Bratt says of his relationship with Roberts, "by keeping those things that are important to you close to you, those simple things that everyone wants:

peace, love, security, privacy. You'd be amazed at just how normal our lives together are. We can walk around the streets of New York and San Francisco, and no one really bothers us. We don't walk around with bodyguards because that in itself creates a scene. We behave as what we are—just human beings."

But being Julia Roberts can still rattle the rest of us, even high-ranking colleagues like *Notting Hill* co-star Hugh Grant. At their initial meeting a couple of years back, "I



My Best Friend's Wedding (with Cameron Diaz) was Roberts's rebound from flops—and bad haircuts.

was frightened," he says. Her arrival in London for filming hardly allayed fears that he and others in the cast were in the presence of a genuine Hollywood grande dame—complete with her own weight-training equipment, treadmill, hairstylist, makeup artist and personal dresser. But there were no airs. "She's not superstarish," says *Notting Hill* hair and makeup designer Jenny Shircore, who also worked with Roberts on 1996's *Mary Reilly*. "Julia talks to any and everybody.



Runaway Bride's Cusack (left, in '99) found new friend Roberts "fun, spirited and smart."

She's interested in our lives." Still, she obviously wasn't quite one of the gang. "Julia was relaxed, but she didn't fool around the way we did," says Tim McInnerny, who played Grant's best friend. "She was much more businesslike."

Indeed, gone was the hyperemotional girl whom *Pretty Woman* director Garry Marshall once described as "a sobbing mess" between scenes—one who, he told PEOPLE, had to be reminded that "it's just acting." A decade later, says *Notting Hill* producer Duncan Kenworthy, "she had this ability to be joking around and two seconds later, when they say 'action,' to be in a very serious moment in the film. Not everyone can do that." Kenworthy was grateful for a profes-

FROM LEFT: COLUMBIA/TRISTAR/PHOTOFEST; RON BATZDORFF/PARAMOUNT PICTURES AND TOUCHSTONE PICTURES

THEATRAUMAL PETERS COLLECTION

sionalism that was at once gracious and no-nonsense. "She was never once late. She always knew her lines. She didn't stay out late partying," he says. "She was incredibly nice and friendly but not so friendly that people thought she was going to send them Christmas cards."

Back in the States later that summer, Roberts was every bit a team player during the four-week *Brockovich* shoot in Barstow. She stayed at the local Holiday Inn, ate food from the catering truck and put on rented shoes to bowl with the gang at a local alley (signing in on her electronic scorecard as Lulu). She even tested her mechanical skills when a piece of equipment began humming strangely before one of her key scenes. "She got up and played with the thermostat and searched for the noise along with everyone else," says Marg Helgenberger, who plays a coplaintiff. "She's not the type to sit there and let everyone else do something for her."

Especially not something as important as playing hide-and-seek with Scotty Leavenworth, 9 (who plays her son), her visiting niece Emma, 8 (daughter of her estranged brother, actor Eric Roberts), and her other young costars. "She came into the kids' trailers and let them go into hers," says Leavenworth's mother, Brenda, 35. "At one point she told them, 'Oh, so you just come in and trash my trailer and then leave.' And they said, 'Yup.' She would clown around. But I liked the way she handled them—just like a mom. If they got out of line, she'd be like, 'Hey, get over here!' But loving." And where loving reason failed, the star—flip-flopping around in dime-store rubber thongs—could always count on the half nelson. "She would wrestle with Scotty," says Brenda with a laugh. Adds her still-impressed 55-lb. son: "She'd pick me up, throw me over her shoulder and down on the ground—that's how strong she is."

But it's another kind of strength that most impresses her friends. Actress Joan Cusack, who became close to Roberts on the set of *Runaway Bride* in 1998, credits her with being "really aware—not self-conscious but



In 1990, Roberts left beau Dylan McDermott (in 1989) after meeting Kiefer Sutherland.



Then-husband (and still good friend) Lyle Lovett (in '93), Roberts says, was "a great love."

conscious—of her status. She works hard at her job"—as actress and star—"in a way that is respectful of how powerful she is. Obviously it has a lot of perks," says Cusack. "But people can end up like Michael Jackson, and she certainly is not that. She maintains her normalcy." And not just by hand-stitching goodies for friends, like the B-covered blanket she knit for Bratt on the set of *Bride*. When she's not working, her long-time agent and close friend Elaine Goldsmith-Thomas told PEOPLE last year, she leads a no-fuss life: She jogs and does yoga to stay in shape and uses public transportation to get around. "She always says to me, 'Just



Sutherland knew their painful split was for the best, Roberts (in '90) said.



Roberts briefly dated Manhattan fitness trainer Pat Manocchia in 1996.

JIM SPELLMAN/RETNA

FROM LEFT: BILL DAVIS/RETNA; PHIL LOFTUS/LONDON FEATURES

EVAN AGOSTINI/GAMMA LIAISON

hop a bus.' She does it, and she's flabbergasted that I don't."

As Roberts has learned, when she acts less like a celebrity, she is treated less like one. Whether stopping in for a green-chili enchilada at the Apple Tree Restaurant in Taos or strolling with Bratt near her Gramercy Park apartment, picking up soy milk from a local deli or a few new baubles from a favorite jewelry shop, Me & Ro, she generally goes unbothered. "It's like there's this invisible bubble of protection around us," says Bratt. "When people do acknowledge her, it's in a respectful way."

Usually. After a late dinner in L.A. last year, Roberts was walking to a nearby friend's home when a handful of paparazzi jumped out of the bushes and "terrified" her, she says. "It was late at night and it completely horrified me. Later I thought, why didn't they just come up to me and say, 'Good evening, Miss Roberts. May I take your picture?' I guess that was out of the question." Roberts was unnerved by the incident but not undone. "Julia's still vulnerable, and she's a sensitive girl," says her friend Marshall (who also directed her in *Runaway Bride*). "But I think she's learned a lot about handling the life of a star." Like others, Marshall gives much of the credit to Bratt. A self-described "simple man" with "simple needs," Bratt has little in common, it seems, with the men in her past—say, the one she declared herself "in love with" 10 years ago. A month before Roberts's planned 1991 wedding to Kiefer Sutherland, then 24, the actor made headlines keeping cozy company with a go-go dancer he met at a favorite Hollywood pool hall. Such antics are anathema to Bratt, who is described by friends as polite, self-confident and straightforward. "Benjamin has good values," says producer Tom Rosenberg. "He's very comfortable about who he is—and who she is."

"Despite all the complexity and chaos that appear to exist in her life, she's also a very simple person," Bratt told *Women's Wear Daily* in January. "Simple in the most beautiful ways: generous, soulful, giving, humorous,



"She's nuts about him," says a friend of Roberts's about Bratt (in Manhattan last year).

loving—all those things that are important to me." Silver ring she gave him notwithstanding, the two have no plans for marriage, he added. "We both know we're in it as deep as it gets. And knowing that is enough." For now. No one who knows Roberts doubts she will have children one day. Once upon a time, she told *Entertainment Tonight Online* last month, she might have tried motherhood solo. "But I have Benjamin now," she went on. Still, should the first lady of hide-and-seek focus on her own inner child for a while, no one would likely complain. "Julia is touched by some-

thing, a zest and life force you just want to be around," says director Soderbergh. "She became a huge star early, which a lot of people don't survive," he adds. "She's managed to get through it with her soul intact."

• Karen S. Schneider

• Julie Jordan, Mark Dagostino, Elizabeth Leonard and Karen Brailsford in Los Angeles, Fannie Weinstein, Donna Freydkin and Sue Miller in New York City, Michael Fleeman in Barstow, Zelig Pollon in Taos and Pete Norman and Eileen Finan in London



For more on Roberts, go to PEOPLE on AOL (Keyword: People)