

# Gutsy Beauty

Julia wins critics' raves, but real-life sleuth Erin Brockovich gets the prize for pluck, passion and plunging necklines



BOB MATSUK/UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

Brockovich found her screen alter ego "genuinely warm."



Working with ill plaintiffs "taught me the value of family," says Brockovich (near her Agoura Hills, Calif., home last week).



**E**rin Brockovich wants to set the record straight: She is not exactly the trash-talking, cleavage-baring hellion that *Erin Brockovich*'s Julia Roberts makes her out to be. Okay, so the swearing part is right. "Sometimes," says the 39-year-old researcher at the L.A. law firm of Masry & Vititoe, "a simple F-you is the only thing that works." And she does admit to a penchant for the low-cut tops that Roberts wears in nearly every scene. "I do dress that way," says Brockovich with a laugh, but "I'd *never* let my bra strap hang out like Julia does. Never."

Call it harmless error. As Brockovich is the first to say, the tale depicted in *Brockovich*—Roberts's third-straight No. 1 movie in the past 10 months—is "right on." Eight years ago she was a struggling, divorced mother of three who wrangled an \$800-a-month clerical job in a small law firm only to discover—after sorting through the file on a pro bono real estate case—that a utility company was contaminating a town's water supply. In between juggling endless child-care crises and a hunky, Harley-loving boyfriend, she helped win one of the largest class-action lawsuits in history. *Brockovich* co-executive producer



Her divorces and working hours have been hard on (left to right, ca. 1992) Katie, Beth and Matthew. Says Brockovich: "I'd be lying if I said they didn't have tough times."

Carla Santos Shamberg first heard the story at the office of the chiropractor she shares with Brockovich. Though at first skeptical of Shamberg's interest, Brockovich gave the green light. Still, sitting today in her French-country-decorated five-bedroom ranch house in L.A., she can't quite believe that her life story

is playing at the multiplex. Says Brockovich: "It's very, *very* weird."

But probably not as weird as the sight, some six years ago, of a striking 5'9" blonde in high heels knocking on the doors of house after house in Hinkley, Calif., talking to residents about the possible link between the chromium once used by the local Pacific Gas & Electric Company plant and the rash of ailments—from nosebleeds to cancer—striking the community. "When I saw Erin get out of her car, I thought, 'Oh my God,'" recalls Valerie Bruce, 37, whose husband suffers from brain damage. "But she's more than a great body. She's smart and honest and forthcoming." Like many of the approximately 600 plaintiffs who settled for a total of \$333 million from PG&E, Bruce has a mixed reaction to the payoff: "Some of us felt people needed to go to jail for what they did." Still, she adds, "Money is important. Getting such a wonderful settlement in such a short period of time was a miracle. And Erin played a huge role in that."

A role that came as little surprise to her sister, Jodie Knight, 49, a health-care provider in Silver City, N.Mex. "Erin has always operated in extremes," says Knight with a chuckle, "whether an extremely foul



"Erin has a tremendous drive to succeed," says Ed Masry (at Brockovich's home).



mouth or an extremely big heart." The youngest child of Frank Pattee, a retired engineer, and Betty Jo, a retired journalist, both 76 (brother Frank Jr., 52, is a baking company distributor in Topeka, Kans.; Tommy died at 36 in 1994 from a severe allergic reaction), Erin was, recalls Frank, "fun-loving." At Lawrence High School in Lawrence, Kans., Brockovich was less interested in studying than in boyfriends, buddies and the occasional beer. "Life was great," she says.

But the great life ended when Brockovich graduated in 1978. After earning a fashion merchandising degree in Dallas, she took a job as a management trainee for Kmart in Newport Beach, Calif., in 1981. Unsatisfied, she quit several months later to try her luck in potentially lucrative beauty pageants. That year she was named Miss Pacific Coast, but Brockovich found the contest world "shallow" and gave it up. In 1982 she married restaurant manager Shawn Brown, eventually

moved to Reno and within four years gave birth to Matthew, now 16, and Katie, 15. But as Brockovich says, she and Shawn "had troubles we couldn't fix." In 1987 they divorced, and she began dating stockbroker Steven Brockovich. They were married in 1989, she says, but "my kids weren't accepting of him and he couldn't handle the stress."

Their 1990 divorce had just become final when she found out she was pregnant with Beth, now 9. As for Brown, "I didn't even know where he was," says Brockovich. And Steven Brockovich, who has never seen Beth, paid support for her only intermittently. (In 1995 he gave up all parental rights in order to avoid paying child support.) In 1991, Brockovich hired Masry & Vitoe to sue a driver who had hit her car—and later persuaded them to hire her to do, she says, "anything. Ed [Masry] still teases that if I misbehave, I'm on bathroom duty again." Not likely. "The most impressive thing about Erin is her

brain," says Masry, 67, who paid her more than \$2 million for her PG&E work. "She put her heart and soul into that case."

And then some. According to Brockovich, her obsession with the case contributed to the end of her 18-month relationship with Jorge Halaby, played in the film by Aaron Eckhart. (She hasn't had contact with him for two years.) She also believes her contact with samples of contaminated dirt and water caused her to develop a tumor in her nose. But most difficult was the toll her work took on her kids. Last year, she says, she made the "gut-wrenching" decision to send Matthew and Katie to out-of-state boarding schools when they became chronic truants and started using drugs. "It was tough love," she says. "I cried for hours after I dropped my son off at the airport. But I didn't want to bury my head in the sand."

Today, she phones and writes both kids several times a week—in between 15-hour days working on seven new toxic-litigation cases. But no one is complaining—certainly not Eric Ellis, the 34-year-old actor she married last March. "Erin's tenacious and very set in her ways," says Ellis. "But that's what drove me to her." Either that or those miniskirts. After a recent appearance along with Roberts on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Brockovich got a call from Matthew, who said, "All my friends were going, 'Dude, that's your mom?'" But it was his reaction that touched her. "He said, 'I'm so proud of you.' That was awesome."

- Karen S. Schneider
- Julie Jordan in Los Angeles



"He was able to stop the chaos [in my life]," says Brockovich of husband Eric Ellis (at home last week).



For more on Brockovich and the movie, go to

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