

# Beverly Hills Mystery

Is there a cancer cluster at a famed L.A. high school? Erin Brockovich thinks so



"When you go to high school you think you are protected," says Lori Moss (at her alma mater), "but no one was really looking. No one."

First came the unbearable itching. The only way Lori Moss could soothe her legs was to scrape them with a kitchen knife. Then she found a lump under her arm, which grew to the size of a baseball. "I was scared," says Moss, 28, who was diagnosed in 1995 with Hodgkin's disease, a cancer of the lymphatic system. Surgery, chemotherapy and radiation sent the disease into remission, but five years later she fell ill again—this time with thyroid cancer. "I asked myself, 'How did this happen? Did I do anything wrong?'"

Now she believes the wrong was done to her and that the culprit was her old school Beverly Hills High, alma mater to celebs ranging from Nicolas Cage to Monica Lewinsky. Backing Moss's claim is a star of another sort—Erin Brockovich, the file-clerk-turned-environmental-sleuth immortalized by Julia Roberts in the 2000 film. Brockovich and her boss, attorney Ed Masry, say they've uncovered more than 300 cancer cases among alumni of the famous public



Brockovich (above) says authorities only recently began testing the air around the oil rig (left) next to the school's athletic fields.



## The Beverly Hills High Alumni List



Celebrity grads include (from left) Nicolas Cage, Monica Lewinsky, Lenny Kravitz, Richard Dreyfuss and Angelina Jolie, none of whom is involved in the legal action.

school. They blame fumes from 15 oil and gas wells under the campus—and since late April they have filed 216 personal-injury claims against the school district and the city of Beverly Hills. “When I have 300 cancers staring me in the face and an oil-production facility underneath the school,” says Brockovich (who in 1996 helped win 600 residents of Hinkley, Calif., a \$333 million settlement from Pacific Gas & Electric in a water-contamination suit), “it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out that the two fit together.”

Many scientists disagree. “We haven’t seen any evidence of cause and effect,” says L.A. County’s director of toxics epidemiology Dr. Cyrus Rangan. But Brockovich says she connected the dots after meeting Moss, a homemaker, at a book signing last year

and learning of her two cancers. After some sleuthing, Brockovich says, she found that among the roughly 10,000 students who attended the school between 1981 and 1998, the incidence of some types of cancer, based on age, was about 20 times the national average. She also says her tests found levels of toxic oil by-products such as benzene and formaldehyde far exceeding government safety standards.

State regulators, however, say their own testing has revealed nothing abnormal, and the school district also disputes the charges. “I’m a father of three,” says Barry Wallerstein, a South Coast Air Quality Management District official and an alum. “Would I allow my kids to go there? Yes.”

Medical experts contest the claimants’ cancer statistics and point out

that most of their ailments—Hodgkin’s disease, non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma and thyroid cancer—have not been linked to petroleum products. “To call this a cancer cluster is a misnomer,” says Dr. Rangan. Brockovich is undeterred. “We get so caught up in the legal and scientific explanation of these cases when sometimes common sense can be applied,” she says. “Any time you have a developing child who has been potentially exposed to high levels of a chemical that’s known to cause cancer, it might cause Hodgkin’s.”

Companies have been drilling on the site since 1906, 22 years before the school opened; the present wells have operated since the early ’80s. Venoco, which currently holds the lease, denies responsibility for any illnesses. The company briefly shut down the operation this month after a piece of equipment was found to be emitting high levels of benzene, but it says the cancer risk was negligible. The wells earn the school system and the city \$600,000 a year in royalties—money that Brockovich says has blinded the authorities. “They knew there was a potential problem,” she says, “but it was ignored.”

For claimant Lori Urov, class of ’84, that’s not an option. Now 36 and living in Brooklyn, N.Y., she is in the advanced stages of Hodgkin’s disease. “I’m bleeding everywhere from scratching,” says the former social worker, who has 4-year-old twins. “These people took something away from me and my family. If all this could have been prevented, I would like my family to have some compensation.”

Though a judge has yet to decide if a lawsuit will go forward, Lori Moss wants payback too. She takes medication every day to replace her thyroid hormones and lives with the constant threat of a recurrence. “Cancer has already robbed me of much of my 20s,” says Moss, married to marketing exec Randy Moss, 35. “In my 30s I want to start a family and get on with my life.”

• Susan Horsburgh  
• Johnny Dodd, Lorenzo Benet and Frank Swertlow in Los Angeles



Urov “likes a fight,” says husband Timothy Ross (at home with kids Leah and Martin).