

PURE GENIUS

TEN YEARS LATER, WHERE IS ERIN BROCKOVICH?



BY MELANIE D.G. KAPLAN

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THE ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVIST, FILLED WITH VIGOR AND MOXIE, IS STILL EXPOSING POLLUTION AND CONTAMINATION EVILS AROUND THE GLOBE.



(<http://i.bnet.com/blogs/erinbrockovich.png>)

Who doesn't know **Erin Brockovich** (<http://www.brockovich.com/>)? Or at least we all think we know her, through the role that Julia Roberts

played in the 2000 movie that bears her name. We remember Brockovich, the single mother and legal clerk who was instrumental in constructing a case against the **Pacific Gas and Electric Company of California** (<http://www.pge.com/>). The case, which led to one of the biggest class action lawsuits in American history, alleged contamination of drinking water with hexavalent chromium in the California town of Hinkley.

Thankfully, Brockovich hasn't stopped her crusade. I talked to her recently and learned that whether it's for clean air, water or land, Brockovich carries on her good fight.

It's been a decade since Julia Roberts played you in Erin Brockovich (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0195685/>). **What questions do you still get about the movie?**

People want to know if I married the biker dude (no); if I really dressed like that (yes, but not so much anymore--I'll be 50 in June); and whether I really talked like that (yes, but I do try to control the potty mouth). It was accurate, really dead-on. I give so much credit to [director] Steven Soderbergh for that. It was a great story, and it all turned really well for everyone, especially the victims. It doesn't always—or usually--turn out that well.

The movie brought a lot of attention to the contamination problems happening in our own backyards. Have things changed as much as you thought they would?

When the movie came out, I said, “Ask me in 10 years.” Now I say, “Ask me in 20.” I was hopeful that through the initial case and through the movie that industry and corporations would be much more conscientious of what they were going. When we uncovered the Hinkley case, there were so many other cases like it, and they’re just catching up. And we’re just starting to see the damage. I was hoping by now there would be more transparency and less defeat and cover-up. I haven’t seen much of that change.

So what message *did* get across?

People left the theater—single moms, environmentalists—and realized that could be us drinking poison water. Since then, there’s been much greater awareness. Awareness is key. In the absence of information, none of us know what is happening and what could be jeopardizing our health, our water supply and our planet.

What are you concerned about today?

I’m still dealing with some of the same things today—like hexavalent chromium contamination in Riverside, Calif., and Midland, Texas. Another thing that worries me is that as we are moving forward technologically, and coming up with better ways to run our businesses, we’re not cleaning up the 1,200 **Superfund** (<http://www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/>) sites that exist today, because the agencies are broke. I’m concerned that we don’t address the water pollution problems in other countries. If we move forward and don’t clean up the messes of the past, they’ll just get swept under the rug.

What kind of work are you doing?

I have never moved away from my mainstay—trying to address all the environmental issues that come to me. I consult with law firms in the U.S., Australia, the U.K., Italy, Greece and India, to begin to address environmental disasters. I do motivational speaking. I give people permission they feel they need—and they don't need permission from anyone—to start asking questions. While none of us can wake up tomorrow and save the world, it will all start with us as individuals. I'm working on another book and working on TV and radio projects. I wish I weren't as busy with environmental issues.

In your motivational speaking, what are your messages?

I talk about power of choice and perception a lot. Choose to ask a question. Choose to say this isn't right for me and my family. I have people say all the time, "You're not an attorney, so why should you know?" or "You're not a scientist, so how do you know?" I'm like, it's real simple—I believe the people. I want them to know they have a gift. We all have a gift that we've been given--we either forget about it, or we're taught not to use it--and that's common sense. I use it every day in my work, and I can't tell you how many times it's saved my butt. Common sense tells you a poison is a poison, and you don't drink it. Every one of these cases I get involved with starts with an angry mom. When your children are sick and wildlife is dying, you can connect the dots. You don't have to have a Masters degree. You know--at your cellular level--when something is wrong. I also talk about how hard it is to find our motivation every day, so take time for self-

renewal.

What's your mechanism for self-renewal?

I find it in the environment. I like being out in a boat on Lake Mead. Most people, when asked to close their eyes and relax, find themselves outside—in the sun, at the beach, birds chirping, smelling a rose. All those things we take for granted are such an integral part of who we are and how we relax. We get busy and forget to do that. Can you imagine if that were all gone and all we could do is step into a concrete jungle?

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