EARLIER THIS YEAR, as the Flint, Michigan, water crisis grew into a national news story, Erin Brockovich sat with Stephen Colbert on CBS’s “The Late Show” and the host called her the “water Batman.” It was amusing, and reflected the extent to which her name is still instantly recognized, even 16 years after Julia Roberts portrayed her in an Oscar-winning performance. It also showed the extent to which she is called upon in the face of toxic disasters.

Brockovich used the Colbert segment not only to explain the chemical dangers posed by the crisis, but to point out the urgency to act. She had first heard about it a year earlier.

“Flint, Michigan,” she said, “is the tip of the iceberg.”

Brockovich is the recipient of the Los Angeles Press Club's Public Service Award, which this year has been renamed the Bill Rosendahl Public Service Award for Contributions to the Public Good, in honor of the late City Councilman, longtime Los Angeles public affairs television host and cable executive and onetime Press Club president.

Brockovich says that she was “so taken aback and honored” by the award, and cites the role that the media has played, and continues to play, in building awareness and investigating environmental and toxic disasters. She is currently grappling with what seem to be ever-increasing reports of perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA, contamination. She calls this the “OSHA moment,” a reminder for the public not to assume that their water is being properly monitored, and to be aware of the flaws in the systems that lead to public agency and private corporation failures.

“The point is people are waking up,” she said. “We have been lulled into a false sense of security.”

Like Rosendahl, Brockovich’s story is one of “pressing on,” as she writes in her book Take It From Me.

She became a nationally known figure through her work on the case against Pacific Gas & Electric over the contamination of drinking water in the town of Hinkley, Calif. She was working as a legal clerk for the firm of Masry & Vititoe when she pursued the investigation. That led to the 2000 movie, which showed that the company had been polluting the town’s drinking water with chromium 6. When Brockovich started in 1991, she had three children: Elizabeth, then 1, Katie, who was 6, and Matthew 7.

The case led to a settlement of $333 million. Brockovich received $2.5 million as her share in 1996.

She wrote that there were “many
people who naturally assumed... that it
must have been my hot-cha clothes, big
chest and presumably loose high heels
that had led me to victory. In truth, it was
my identification with the victims—the
un glamorous, hard working, dirt-on-
their-hands, clothes-on-the-line, early-
to-bed and early-to-rise folks—that
helped me understand why in my own
life for such a long time it had been
difficult to ever get anyone to listen to me
about anything.”

Brockovich says that the movie was
“98% accurate,” and the producers took
few creative licenses. “Yes, I had a potty
mouth in the movie and I still do,” she
wrote.

Brockovich grew up in Lawrence,
Kansas, to “wonderful parents who had
strong, deeply ingrained values regarding
family, land and health.” Her father was
an engineer for Texaco and her mother
was a journalist for the University of
Kansas, which, she has noted, was pretty
progressive for the time.

“This made them equal partners in
their marriage at a time when most
women were taught by their parents that
marriage meant staying home, having
babies, making dinner and cleaning
house,” she wrote.

“Superman’s not coming. Guess who is: You are.
We are. And that is what I think is happening.”

Given his work for Texaco, her
father “always taught me the value of
water, health and the right to a clean
environment, is all that matters.” she
says. Her mother wrote for the KU
alumni association and showed her the
value of “digging and looking for that
truth.”

Brockovich earned an associate
in applied arts degree in fashion
merchandising and interior design from
Wade Business College in Dallas. In the
'80s she had a series of jobs, including a brief stint at Kmart and even entered a beauty pageant, winning the title of Miss Pacific Coast in 1981. She originally came in contact with Masry & Vititoe because she needed an attorney to represent her after she suffered serious injuries in a car accident. They ended up settling “for a pittance,” she wrote, but afterwards she asked Jim Vititoe and Ed Masry if they needed someone to answer phones for them. After some persistence, they hired her.

Since the movie, Brockovich has worked on a number of high-profile environmental lawsuits, including litigation over chromium contamination in Willits, Calif., and additional PG&E claims in Kings County, Calif. More recently, as a consumer protection advocate for the law firm of Weitz & Luxenberg, she has worked with residents of Porter Ranch on claims related to the ruptured gas leak from a Southern California Gas Co. well.

She says that, “The same seed is there from Hinkley in every situation I am involved in—deceit. Someone is hiding something for the sake of fear or greed.”

When it comes to Porter Ranch, she believes that it will turn out that there was more awareness of the dangers than has been publicly disclosed.

Still, Brockovich is hopeful that government and corporate practices will change through the power and pressure of public awareness, in part driven by the ability of victims to communicate with each other via social media. In some cases, she notes, this occurs decades after exposure to toxic chemicals.

She points to communities where residents are being advised not to drink their water, creating enough of a public outrage where “every day people are going to move the dial.”

What she warns against is politicizing environmental situations—or believing promises of a quick fix. “Superman’s not coming,” she says. “Guess who is. You are. We are. And that is what I think is happening.”