



BILL ROSENDAHL PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD

*for Contributions
to the Public Good*

ERIN BROCKOVICH'S CRUSADE CONTINUES

RECIPIENT OF PRESS CLUB'S
BILL ROSENDAHL PUBLIC
SERVICE AWARD FOR
CONTRIBUTIONS TO
THE PUBLIC GOOD
HAS NEVER STOPPED
HER ACTIVISM

BY TED JOHNSON



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 environ-

mental 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 unglamorous, 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

PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD ERIN BROCKOVICH



'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 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." 🙌



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