

In 1996, as a result of her investigative work, the Pacific Gas and Electric Company paid the largest toxic tort injury settlement in the country's history to families living in and around Hinkley, CA, who had been exposed to chromium 6, a cancer-causing chemical. "My father taught me that the greatest gifts we have are our family and our health," Brockovich-Ellis says. "I'm not an expert, a politician, a scientist, or a doctor, but I've seen too many people lose those precious gifts."

Her biggest challenge: "Getting people in the community who have been injured to come forward and not be afraid," she says. "They feel hopeless. They feel like giving up. But I'm patient. It's a teaching process."

What she's learned: "Persistence and determination get you everything you ever hoped for," says Brockovich-Ellis, who has dyslexia and was told as a child that she'd be a failure. "In hindsight, my disability was my greatest gift because it challenged me to believe in myself."

Julie BURNS

Honored for: Nurturing babies born into poverty. Burns is the founder and executive director of Room to Grow, a nonprofit organization that provides children's clothing, equipment, books, toys, guidance, and support to low-income parents.

Parents are referred to Room to Grow through prenatal programs for disadvantaged families. Every three months, from just before their baby is born until their child turns 3, the parents meet one-on-one with a social worker, who helps them select essential items and provides information and resources to help them care for their growing children. Room to Grow's welcoming store-like setting, with its racks and shelves full of neatly arranged baby gear and clothing, makes the experience feel like a shopping trip and a friendly chat. "For the parents we serve at Room to Grow, the blessing of raising a child is tempered by the many emotional and practical challenges of meeting their baby's needs," says Burns. "Our work is to provide them with the tools they need to navigate this precious and fragile time, to honor the dignity that is inherent in parent-child relationships, and to recognize the responsibility each one of us has to care for another human being, whether that person is a stranger, friend, or neighbor down the street."

How and why she got started: Burns was working as a child and adolescent psychotherapist when she realized that many of the problems of the kids she treated were related to the deprivation they had experienced in their earliest years. That's when Burns had "the extraordinarily simple idea" of collecting new and gently used baby goods from more fortunate members of the community and giving them to those in need. She opened Room to Grow in New York City in 1988 and this year has expanded to Boston. "When I first started, I envisioned this as an organization that should be in every city," Burns says.

Her biggest frustration: The lack of federal policy addressing the concerns of children during the critical period from birth to age 3. She'd like to see more action—and more empathy.

What she's learned: Caring is contagious. "Love multiplies. The most valuable thing in life is being kind to others," says Burns. "I feel blessed that I have been able to devote my professional life to striving toward this wonderful ideal. Room to Grow has not only changed the lives of the families we serve, it has changed mine too. Despite the fact that all the mothers and fathers who are so devoted to our program are living in poverty and with all the obstacles that breeds, they make their appointments for three years. I'm in awe of that commitment." ➤



DYNAMIC DUO On introducing his wife, Julie Burns (above left), documentary filmmaker Ken Burns (above) said that by founding her charity, Room to Grow, she created "a living organism committed to ending a kind of darkness and spreading a much-needed light." Below left: Julie Burns with J. Russell Denson. Bottom left: The Burnses meeting beloved children's author Judy Blume, whose writing, Julie Burns said, "was such a gift and joy to me as a young child."

