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With Warning on Enron, a Celebrity Is Born

By JIM YARDLEY

HOUSTON, May 9 — The nightclub sparkled under a strobe light, as dancers gyrated to "Play That Funky Music, White Boy" and Court TV's guest of honor, Sherron S. Watkins, sipped wine from a glow-in-the-dark glass. The music stopped so Ms. Watkins could accept the cable channel's "Scales of Justice" award.

It was not quite the Nobel Prize ceremony.

"Let's rock-n-roll and have a few drinks!" exclaimed Court TV's chairman, Henry Schleiff, after handing Ms. Watkins a bronze statuette. The D.J. obeyed and blasted "Shaft," as the 1970's-themed publicity party roared on.

For Ms. Watkins, the Enron vice president whose blunt-spoken warning about the company's accounting practices made her an instant celebrity, the Court TV party in New Orleans on Sunday was only one weird scene from her surreal new life. The day before, Sam Donaldson introduced her to President Bush at the White House Correspondent's Association dinner in Washington.

And this week in Houston, she has continued to do what some consider the unlikeliest thing of all — work at Enron, whose improprieties she sought to expose in the now-famous memo she wrote to the former chairman, Kenneth L. Lay, months before the company filed for bankruptcy.

"Generally, people are surprised that she is still there," said Philip H. Hilder, Ms. Watkins's lawyer. "Some people think she has been fired. Some people thought that just on her own she had moved on."

For now, while she remains at Enron, the 42-year-old Ms. Watkins is also tip-toeing toward a public life. Her persona as an upscale Erin Brockovich has brought her book and movie deals. She is in demand on the lecture circuit, and next week she is scheduled to be the keynote speaker at a San Francisco conference sponsored by



Neal Alexander for The New York Times

Sherron S. Watkins, center, guest of honor Sunday at a Court TV awards party with a 70's theme.

Steve Forbes.

And yet while she talks about Enron in her speeches, she is not granting interviews. This is partly because her lawyer is wary about her future role as a witness in pending Enron litigation, and partly because her publisher does not want to dilute the exclusivity of her story. She is sharing a reported \$500,000 advance from Doubleday to co-author a book with Mimi Swartz, an executive editor at Texas Monthly.

Her future with Enron seems uncertain, at best. Friends say she met recently with Enron's chief executive, Stephen F. Cooper, to discuss her role, or lack of one, in the company. Mr. Hilder said she had felt frustrated

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