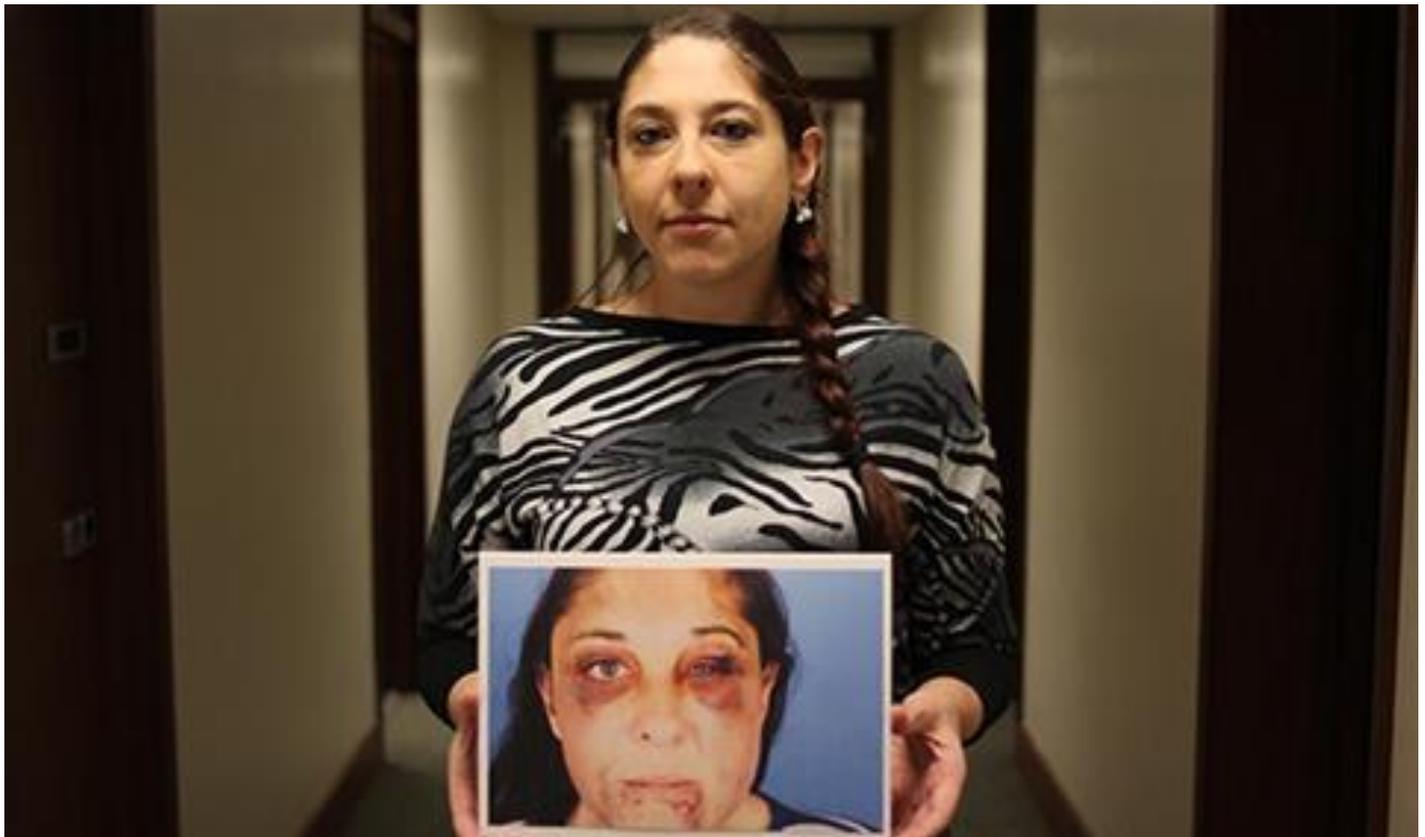


Broadcast

Behind Closed Doors, BBC1

By Erica Gornall | 14 March 2016

Our film is a testament to the brave domestic violence victims who chose to speak openly about their ordeal, says Erica Gornall



Behind Closed Doors

Production company True Vision

Commissioner Charlotte Moore; Clare Paterson

TX 9pm, Monday 14 March, BBC1

Length 1 x 60 minutes

Executive producer Brian Woods

Producer Erica Gornall

Director Anna Hall

Erica Gornall

Producer

We pulled into a gravel driveway and made our way up the bare concrete steps to a tiny bedsit just off a main road of an Oxfordshire town. With us were Detective Sam Hunter and Nikkie, who works for a domestic abuse charity.

‘She’s just come back from hospital, so she may not want to talk to you,’ said Sam.

I had only been working with the domestic abuse investigation unit at Thames Valley Police for a few weeks. The team was incredibly welcoming, given that I had walked through the door of their office with a TV camera in toe.

Officers were happy to share their experience and explain cases to me, but Sam made one thing clear: ‘I get what you’re doing but I’m not going on TV.’ I completely understood. It can be quite a shock having me turn up, although after a couple of brews and a natter, things usually go back to near normal.

Weeks later, and a still sceptical Sam was taking us to a high-risk victim who had just been beaten so severely that her head was swollen and her face black and blue. It was Sabrina, our first contributor.

Inside the flat was the chaos of what had been a horrific attack. Blood was spattered up the wall

and Nikkie brought in a duvet to replace the blood-soaked one on Sabina's bed.

Director Anna Hall and I sat and listened to Sabrina – she just wanted to talk it over, she was in so much shock. To see her like this was upsetting, and despite being in a relationship with the man who had done it, she knew that what had happened was very wrong.

After a while, Anna decided to approach her about filming. Normally, we get to know people for a while before filming, as the sensitive programmes we make means that it can be a big step going on camera. It takes particular bravery to openly identify as a current victim when the person abusing them is their partner.

Sabrina was one of those incredibly courageous women who wanted to speak out openly. She was so upset and angry about what had happened, and despite being a victim in the past, felt that this time she could have died.

I went outside and dragged the camera and tripod through into the bedsit. Anna was sat between two legs of the tripod, Nikkie was talking to Sabrina and perched on the other side was Detective Sam. It was raw and emotional, but for Sabrina she wanted the world to know her pain and to have her voice heard.

As you will see in the film, she has to battle all sorts of feelings and we see her struggle with the emotional side of domestic abuse. But that was a true documentation of how she felt then, and hopefully something that will keep her strong in the future.

Domestic violence is never an easy topic. Police footage needs to be released, contributors will disappear for a while and officers will have one-hundred and one more pressing things to do than answer the long list of enquiries you emailed them the day before.

But at the heart of filming, and particularly this film, is the passion and strength of the people in it. Officers regularly worked hefty overtime and the conversations I overheard while in the offices highlighted how much they cared about the victims.

This inevitably comes across on screen. When Detective Julia Jacobs tells Jemma that her ex-boyfriend was found guilty at trial, the camera captures how happy she is on her behalf. I will never forget the joy in her face, nor the absolute relief on Jemma's when she finds out.

By the very nature of documentaries, you film everything as it happens but it would take a very thick-skinned person not to live that journey with them to some extent. Jemma was the most incredibly strong person – she did not want to be upset because she didn't want her ex-boyfriend to see what he had done to her, especially if he was found not guilty and would be in her community.

It is sometimes hard to remember when watching a film like this, that we as a crew did not know the outcome of the trial until Jemma did. We film people and have to wait for the outcome of a trial to see if we can use it. So in the run-up to Jemma's trial, we saw the strain she was under.

When we weren't filming, I was at the trial, hearing the defence, hearing her evidence and waiting in her house once the jury was out to hear the news. It is hard to say to someone under that

amount of stress that you have to film, whatever the verdict. Certainly, I think Jemma wasn't keen on me filming if her ex-boyfriend was declared not guilty, but that is the reality of documenting stories like this.

These are the constant tensions, but luckily he was sentenced and it is the close relationships and trust Anna and I have with contributors that enables us to be there and show the reality for people in their darkest hour in an attempt to show the reality of fighting domestic violence in the UK.

One stark reality that we came across while filming was the feeling of vulnerability for those people whose abuser was not in jail. Helen openly admitted to us and on screen that she had seen her ex-partner a couple of times.

But this enabled him to continue the abuse and she was struggling hard to get away from him. He had recorded very threatening messages, which are rarely heard by anyone but the victim. He has a history of beating Helen and threatens to do the same in these messages.

Given the context, any breach of his non-molestation order, or any threats, put fear into Helen. Twice, at court, he was released on bail – to leave and be trusted to make his way out of the area.

The second time he was bailed, I was at the police station and my colleague Tom was filming Helen. I filmed the call from the police to Helen to tell her he was on his way out of court and I jump into action. Can police get round to Helen's house? How long could it take the perpetrator to get there? I call Tom – is Helen okay? Are you okay? I think, 'How I can get Tom out and keep Helen safe?'. These are real-life decisions that victims, domestic abuse workers and police have to think

about every day.

As it happened, he didn't turn up. But it is very hard for police and support services to have someone on standby every time someone dangerous is released. It made me think whether the court had the time to look into the context of the violence in this relationship, or just looked at the messages on their own. It was Helen who had to be in her house that night. She has a great support worker and, of course, she has the police, the alarms and us to call. She is one of the lucky ones.

There is far more to this film than we could fit into 57 minutes. Anna, Tom and I spent months with the police teams, in refuges, with charities and talking to many victims. In our nights out with police response, we saw how bodyworn cameras are used in domestic abuse cases and how police responded to calls.

We also met people supporting children of domestic violence, men and women victims, lawyers and people running domestic abuse perpetrator programmes. They couldn't make the cut this time because our focus was drawn to three incredible people.

Our film opens the closed door, shows you the people affected in a way never seen before and invites the audience to scratch further beneath the surface of one of the most pervasive type of abuse in our society.