

I trusted my stepdad, and the next thing I know, he's killed mum

Kirstie's mother, Natalie, was brutally murdered in 2016 by her partner, Paul Hemming. In a new documentary the teenager finally gets to give her side of the story about growing up in an abusive household

Louise Court

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'I saw him hit my mum but I was too scared to intervene,' says Kirstie

MATTHEW LLOYD FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE



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from six in the evening until seven in the morning, because her stepdad was cross about a mouldy apple in the bottom of her school bag. As the rest of the family slept, he checked on her, coming downstairs to make sure she hadn't moved.

She also thought there was nothing strange in having a multitude of naughty corners around the house, or in being sent to bed straight after school without any dinner because she'd not done a piece of homework.

That was just the tip of the iceberg of Paul Hemming's cruelty. It culminated in the brutal murder on Sunday May 1, 2016, of Kirstie's mum, 31-year-old Natalie, in the sitting room of their Milton Keynes home.

Every step of the police investigation was captured in a groundbreaking film by Anna Hall, *Catching a Killer*. The acclaimed documentary showed unsparingly the grief of the family who had been told Natalie had gone missing, knowing in their hearts she would never have walked out on her daughter, and included fly-on-the-wall footage of the investigation.

Natalie had been a 21-year-old single mother, struggling with postnatal depression, when she met Hemming, 11 years her senior. Despite once injuring her so badly that she had to go to A&E, like many perpetrators he promised to change and she withdrew her complaint to the police.

disappeared. His elaborate web of lies had unravelled, and he was handed a minimum of 20 years in jail.

Sentencing him, Judge Richard Foster said: “Natalie Hemming knew you were overbearing, controlling, jealous and on occasions violent. You said you would mend your ways but you did not. The manner in which you have conducted yourself since the murder indicates a complete lack of remorse.”

Next week BBC2 will screen Hall’s follow-up documentary, *Behind Closed Doors – Through the Eyes of the Child*, which shows Kirstie and her aunt Jo talking about the effects of growing up in a home controlled by an abuser. The film makes for disturbing viewing as Kirstie and children from three other families talk honestly to camera. Often it is not what they say but what they don’t that sends chills down the spine.

The carefree childhood that ordinary youngsters experience is stolen from these children and replaced by fear, whether they are on the run in safe houses or denied simple pleasures such as having friends round for tea or enjoying family jokes. In a house ruled by domestic abuse everybody lives on tenterhooks. The wrong tone of voice or a roll of the eyes can unleash terrifying violence. According to the domestic violence charity Women’s Aid, 10% of all police work is in connection with domestic violence, and 33% of all recorded assaults that result in an injury are connected to domestic abuse. It costs society £66bn a year.



Now 14, Kirstie is articulate and poised when she talks about her life in an abused family. Asked how she feels about her stepdad, she says: “I think I feel a bit numb towards him, because most of my childhood I trusted him, and the next thing I know he’s killed my mum and I don’t really understand why he would do that.

“I remember him being really kind to me all the time at first, and I remember feeling scared when it [his violent outbursts] first happened, but because I was so young I didn’t really understand what was going on. I thought it happened in everyone’s home.

“It wasn’t just random anger: there was always something that started it off. It could be little things like a room wasn’t tidy or wasn’t the way he wanted it to be.

“Growing up in an abusive home is an awful place. There were times when I got home from school and I had forgotten to do a piece of homework and I was told to go to bed. My mum would just stay quiet. She wouldn’t put up an argument, but she would bring me food later. I saw him hit my mum, but I was too scared to intervene, so I kept it to myself.”

She last saw her mum cuddled up on the sofa with a blanket on the Sunday night and gave her a kiss. When she wasn’t downstairs on Monday morning, Kirstie assumed her mum was

One of the most heartbreaking parts of the film is police footage of 12-year-old Kirstie talking to a policewoman, clearly scared to tell her what was going on while Hemming was in custody. “I didn’t tell police I was scared when I was at home, because I didn’t know if he would get out, and I knew if he got out, if he found out I’d said anything, he would be angry.”

After the murder Kirstie went to live with her mother’s sister Jo, her husband, Stephen, and their four children, Isabelle, 3, Charles, 5, Morgan, 15, and Lauren, 18. “The hardest thing about the last two years is not having my mum,” she says, playing with her long dark plaits. “It doesn’t mean I don’t have a maternal figure in my life. I do — I have my aunt Jo — but the hardest thing is that we had to lose her to something so tragic.

“After my mum died and I moved to live with Jo, I had to leave my friends really quickly. It was very hard. Everyone had formed their friendship groups at the new school, and I was on the edge. I just told them I had moved up here from London: I didn’t go into details.”

Now she is ambassador for a programme called Operation Encompass, which aims to ensure that police inform a school immediately if one of its pupils has been exposed to violence at home.

Two years on, Kirstie has new friends and is keen to get on with her life. She talks of going into the navy, like her mum.

Her aunt Jo has observed a dramatic change in her niece since she came to live with her family.

“Kirstie definitely grew up too soon,” Jo admits. “She took on a lot of responsibility trying to protect her mum, to keep her safe.”

one we saw and the one she lived with. He always came across as a very good dad. A bit over-nice, really, but I wouldn't say there was anything that stood out about his behaviour."

She thinks Natalie never confessed the hell she was going through because she was scared her protective, no-nonsense big sister would do something about it.

"Kirstie says she feels guilty because she is happy. But she missed out on so much as a child. She had never had friends over or been allowed on sleepovers or to hang out with friends.

"A year ago, if I asked her questions about her mum, everything was robotic — there was no emotion. Now she can talk about her mum and she can cry and get upset and she knows that it is OK to do that."

How will it affect Kirstie in the long term? "She will always miss her mum and suffer a loss that we can't explain. Two and a half years ago we lost somebody in a horrific way, but it doesn't mean we can't live our lives. Natalie wouldn't have wanted us to be constantly sad.

"Kirstie's father, Matthew, is back in her life. He is a naval officer, and whenever he is home she spends time with him. But that has only been since this happened: Paul controlled all that and wouldn't allow contact, so they are now rebuilding their relationship.

Taking Kirstie, Lauren and Morgan to the Royal Television Society awards in West Yorkshire when the first documentary won two awards was poignant for the whole family.

"The girls got their hair and make-up done, their dads got them flowers and I surprised them with a Rolls-Royce to pick them up. When they went on stage to collect the award, Kirstie stepped forward and said, 'I just want to thank my aunties, as

“To see her standing up to accept that award . . . she looked so grown-up, so beautiful in her red dress. Her mum would have been so proud. The whole thing was about paying tribute to her mum, and he will never be able to take from us as a family again. Kirstie standing up there was the start of that. She is blossoming into this amazing young woman.

“When the first film was made, she didn’t feature in it, and she felt she had been erased. She told her social worker that she was upset that she wasn’t allowed to be involved in something about her mum. This new film has given her a voice.”

Lorraine Davies-Smith, a consultant family therapist who has had several senior roles within the NHS, thinks there is a problem with the way social care and NHS services are set up. If a child has experienced domestic abuse, they may be referred to social services for safeguarding, but not to the NHS for help in dealing with the emotional aspect, unless they have specific mental-health symptoms such as self-harm or eating disorders.

But growing up in a controlled household, living under the shadow of the threat that violence could erupt at any moment, means the children will believe certain ways of behaviour are normal. This damages their ability to form healthy relationships as adults.

“Some boys promise themselves they will not be the type of man their father was and then find themselves getting into rages and don’t know how to manage them. They don’t have the tools to deal with their emotions,” says Davies-Smith.

“Girls can either grow into very strong women who are determined not to be victims or become ultra-passive because they don’t want to cause problems.”

Hall decided to make this new film so that the children’s voices would be heard. “The children are hidden victims,” says Hall.

good at understanding the full impact on children.”

Women’s Aid echoes that sentiment and already has a campaign called Child First. “What we know is that children are often invisible in cases of domestic abuse,” explains Sian Hawkins, the charity’s head of campaigns. “In England alone a quarter of a million children live in households where domestic abuse takes place. We talk about them witnessing abuse, but they are not just witnesses. They are experiencing it.”

The charity welcomes the ban on abusers cross-examining victims in the family courts proposed in the new domestic abuse bill, but it fears that will not protect all children because of the official approach of “contact at all costs”, which can give violent partners access to their offspring.

Amna Abdullatif, children and young people’s officer at Women’s Aid, stresses that child services need more funding. “If we don’t deal with children’s trauma early on, we will be dealing with a much bigger problem further down the line.”

Behind Closed Doors – Through the Eyes of the Child is on BBC2 on February 6 at 9pm



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M

MJJ · 18 HOURS AGO

Am I alone in thinking that it is inexcusable for a woman to allow her children to be abused? In this country she can at least remove herself and her children from an abusive home. Why would she willingly endure such torment and also go back for more? She cares more for her man than her child.

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Report

S

Selah → MJJ · 17 HOURS AGO

I agree. It can work the other way too. My stepmother was cruel, angry and controlling and my father, who was completely infatuated with her until the day he died, sat by as she threw out my brother at 15 and me at 16. We were glad to go. Life under her rule had been hellish.

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S

Sally Tisserand → MJJ · 13 HOURS AGO

Probably not alone but certainly in a minority.

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G

grumpygit → MJJ · 11 HOURS AGO

I think you misunderstand the controlling nature of the abusers and the fear they engender in the family. In order to get away, the abused partner (usually but not always female) has to be prepared to lose home, friends and family, and risks a severe beating, or

Y

Yorkshirebase, if the attempt fails.

Amazing young lady with an incredible Aunt.

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4 Recommend

Report

For decades the mantra was that proving a person who abusive towards a spouse wasn't evidence of risk to the children. Even when the highest court in the land had recognised the damage done to children just by their presence when abuse happened and the risk to them if there was contact afterwards the lower courts continued to ignore it, regularly dismissing calls for fact finding hearings. It took many years of rule changes to force some judges to treat the history of abuse against a parent seriously when dealing with contact issues.

[Reply](#)3 [Recommend](#)[Report](#)**M****MJJ** → Sui generis · 18 HOURS AGO

Social workers are, of course, the people who came up with the idea of feeding children to their abusers.

[Reply](#)[Recommend](#)[Report](#)**R****ramtops** → MJJ · 16 HOURS AGO

Feeding?

[Reply](#)[Recommend](#)[Report](#)**M****MJJ** → ramtops · 5 HOURS AGO

Yes - they line them up, the abusers gobble them up, enjoying every minute. Remember how social workers in Rotherham children's homes popped little girls into taxis which took them to their abusers?

Y**Yersinia Pestis** · 23 HOURS AGO

My daughter was about nine. I'd had a pig of a night at work (a night manager in a hotel) and I'd had problems with one man in particular. Eventually he lunged at me, so I laid him out.

As we had breakfast in the morning my wife said you'll never guess what your dad did last last night he thumped someone. My daughter burst out laughing and said What? Him? I felt quite proud in an odd sort of way.

[Reply](#)1 [Recommend](#)[Report](#)**T****Tracy Humphreys** · 23 HOURS AGO

It takes patience and years of therapy to undo the damage of living in a household ruled by violence and unfortunately Children's Services have limited funds to provide that therapeutic input, half doing the job and then having to revisit the same family many years later when the children of that child form relationships which are abusive, it's short sighted

important enough to get it right first time . Kirsty is an inspiration, I hope she gets the help and service she deserves

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7  Recommend

 Report



ramtops → Tracy Humphreys · 16 HOURS AGO

I was well into my forties before I could properly process and deal with my childhood abuse.

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