

Behind Closed Doors Monday 9.00pm  
BBC1 (9.45pm in Scotland, 11.00pm in Wales)

'I was afraid  
of him, but  
I loved him'

Helen was locked in a violent relationship for years – now she's speaking out on television



**F**OR THOSE WITHOUT first-hand knowledge of domestic violence, the question is always the same: "Why stay in an abusive relationship? Why not just leave?"

A new documentary seeks to answer this question, with the aid of three incredibly brave women who are all emerging from violent partnerships to talk about the abuse they suffered. The stories of Helen, Jemma and Sabrina do not make for easy viewing, because for all three women, regardless of the risk of staying, conclusively breaking free is never simple.

The film-maker Anna Hall worked with Thames Valley Police for nine months before filming even began. She liaised with two domestic abuse teams in that region, along with two independent charities called Reducing the Risk and Dash, which provide support for abuse victims.

"We were clear about what we were trying to achieve – to reach out to people in similar situations, and help clarify what domestic abuse is," Hall explains. She recognises how difficult – not to mention potentially dangerous – it was for the women to share their stories on camera and emphasises her duty of care to them.

"They all said their participation was worth it if it could help just one person in the same situation. But of course there's a huge issue around identification and appearing on camera. We have plans in place to ensure they are safe when

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the programme is transmitted and for months afterwards."

Helen, pictured above, was 26 when she met Lawrence, then 30, at a friend's house. She fell in love immediately. "He was charming and funny," she says. "We spent every day together."

Helen, now 37, says Lawrence was hugely attentive and good with her then two-year-old son. She cannot remember the first time Lawrence hit her, although she thinks it was a backhand slap.

"He was always apologetic. It was quite sporadic. It might happen twice in one week, or it might be three months. Many a time I looked in the mirror and saw a black eye or bruises round my neck, and asked myself what I was doing. No one ever saw me like that, and I became good at make-up. The only time it mattered was after my mum died. On the day we were putting her ashes in the ground, I couldn't go."

**T**HE COMMON PATTERN in such relationships is that the abuser gradually destroys their partner's confidence until they become entirely dependent upon the abuser.

Helen stayed in the relationship for ten years with Lawrence exerting ever-greater control. She was "not allowed" to go to bed before him; she would have to wait for him and then take his shoes and socks off when he finally retired.

He followed a fitness regime requiring her to cook eight specific meals for him every day, and

would strangle her if it weren't done to his satisfaction. His shouting alone could make her wet herself with fear.

In January last year Lawrence subjected Helen to a sustained attack for the first time. He was held on remand for a week before receiving a £1,700 fine for the assault.

"He promised me he wouldn't do it again. So I took him back. I was afraid of him, but I loved him. He made an effort to be extra nice - he let me go to bed when I was tired." It was only when he was verbally abusive to her son in March that she finally left, and sought help.

**S**O WHY, WHEN her contact with Lawrence is seemingly over, has she agreed to speak publicly about her violent ex-partner? "Sometimes you have to stand up and be counted. You keep it a secret for so long, and you feel like you're the only person in the world who's going through it - and you're not."

It's a very brave decision, particularly given that Lawrence isn't in prison. Helen carries a police-issue panic alarm in case Lawrence breaches the restraining order now keeping him away from her.

But Hall acknowledges that if he's enraged by the programme and acts upon it, then, "I can't stop that - I can't control what Lawrence chooses to do. But Helen says she will feel safer after the programme has aired, when more people know about his actions." **NINA STONEMAN**