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Documentary Tracks Paths from Fear to Freedom

By Katharine Goodloe, The Dallas Morning News

It starts with a 911 call – a real one. Or, more precisely, it starts with the callback. A man answers, and the operator asks whether anyone at that number dialed 911. After a few minutes, the man reluctantly says yes, his wife might have. He hands the phone to her.

She tells the operator she can't talk. Yes, she says, because her husband is in the room. Yes, he's beat her.

But, yes, the man says, he'll talk with a police officer – if one is coming by, anyway.

The one-hour Lifetime documentary, *Terror at Home: Domestic Violence in America*, traces the story of a half-dozen women – all from the Dallas area – as they escape from domestic violence. We hear their 911 calls, see police try to arrest their abusers and sit with them in the courtroom when they seek a restraining order.

“I thought it was important to be as close to the aftermath of the violence as possible – to feel what it's like for someone to be so afraid,” says Maryann De Leo, the film's director and producer.

But why Dallas?

Ms. De Leo heard about The Family Place, a domestic violence shelter in Dallas, at a conference in Washington. When she got here the Police Department, the court system, the shelter and the women supported her project.

“The story started to develop there, so I stayed there a long time,” says Ms. De Leo, who won a 2004 Academy Award for the documentary *Chernobyl Heart*.

Although the women are identified only by first name, the access she got is key – the film unfolds like a cross between *Oprah* and *COPS*.

We watch Dallas police officers break in the door of a white, wooden house that Barbara and her 6-year-old son, Austin, share with a boyfriend. He promised to kill her if she called police, she says, so she called the district attorney instead.

But when officers arrive to arrest him, they find only her inside.

“He knew something was up,” she tells them.

The officers try to persuade her to go to the shelter, as planned. “We had everything set up for you,” one says. Another: “What is it going to take – you dying?”

Throughout the film, we watch the women open up, in real time. Barbara convinces herself that she needs to go to the shelter. Another woman returns to the apartment she shared with her husband to reclaim her clothes, dishes and other belongings.

But bookending the other stories, there is Nancy.

It’s her 911 call we hear as the documentary opens, and toward its middle we watch her in group therapy, a dynamic she says helped her realize “I’m not alone.” (Her husband declined to be interviewed by *The Dallas Morning News*. His attorney, Ron Massingill, said Nancy’s allegations are “false, unfounded and unproven.”)

Sharing her story with more women – and preventing them from experiencing her fear – underscored her decision to be a part of the documentary, she says.

“Instead of being fearful, I’ve decided to embrace it and realize I’ve done nothing wrong,” she says. “It’s very freeing not to have to keep it a secret anymore.”

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Terror at Home: Domestic Violence in America

10 tonight on Lifetime. 1 hour. RESOURCES

For information about The Family Place, visit www.familyplace.org or phone 214-443-7701. The hotline number is 214-941-1991.

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