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Kearney-Area News

Anne's story is TV movie

By KIM SCHMIDT, Hub Staff Writer 01/17/2009 Updated 01/19/2009 01:06:02 PM CST

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MANITOBA, Canada — She was taken against her will, repeatedly beaten, assaulted and humiliated, yet Anne Sluti pressed on, leaving police clues to her whereabouts and eventually helping to negotiate her release.

Now, nearly eight years after the then-17-year-old was kidnapped from Kearney's Hilltop Mall, Anne's story will air Feb. 15 for the first time as a made-for-TV movie on the Lifetime Movie Network. (changed 1-19-09 11 a.m.)

Lifetime is Charter Channel 24 in Kearney.

"If Anne can survive 6½ days of severe circumstances, it gives us a model to strive toward, or certainly to try to persevere through with grace, whatever our personal situations and challenges are," said producer Charlene Blaine-Schulenburg of Los Angeles.



Photo courtesy Rebecca Sandulak, AMedia Vision Productions James van der Beek, left, plays Tony Zappa in the television drama about the 2001 kidnapping of Anne Sluti from Kearney's Hilltop Mall. Canadian actress Sara Canning plays Sluti.

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Filed in Manitoba, Canada, the 88-minute movie is based on the true story of Anne's April 6, 2001, kidnapping. It focuses on her six-day survival: How she outsmarted her captor, Tony Zappa of St. Paul, Minn.; how she left evidence for law enforcement along the way; and how she kept her wits to ultimately help negotiate her safe release.

Filming for "Taken in Broad Daylight" began Sept. 22 near Winnipeg, Manitoba, and wrapped up Oct. 16.

Anne's parents, Don and Elaine Sluti of Kearney, say the movie has been in the works since 2002.

"It's based on Anne's story, but it's not going to be exactly her story," said Elaine. "We all know it here in Kearney, those of us that were here at

the time."

Blaine-Schulenburg first learned of Anne Sluti's story through news sources broadcasting the teen's safe return to Kearney. The movie is based on Blaine-Schulenburg's interviews with Anne and on extensive research.

"I found Anne's story to be rare and hopeful with a wonderfully, positive ending to a horrible situation," she said. "The classic storytelling model is normal people faced with abnormal situations."

But of the more than 100 law enforcement officers between Kearney and Montana involved in Anne's case, there are only two fictional characters — FBI Detective Reynolds, and a detective and hostage negotiator Mike Timbrook, played by actor LeVar Burton — portrayed in the drama.

"This was one of the great challenges, and as a writer, using all research material I could find, I had to concentrate on making the story simple enough to follow in a 90-minute format and tell the meat of the story,"



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Blaine-Schulenburg said.

Don and Elaine Sluti were allowed to read the script during production and make a few changes. Anne Sluti was also offered the script, but hasn't read it.

"There were a few things in that script that I didn't want in there," Elaine said. "Things that were just hype and sells on TV."

In one scene, Elaine said, writers portrayed her as relying on medication after the initial abduction. A nurse, Elaine was furious at the implication.

"I told them, "That's just not how it was.""

Blaine-Schulenburg reassured viewers that Anne Sluti is portrayed as she truly was: "A brave, smart, clever, tenacious, young heroine."

The movie was filmed in Manitoba for two reasons: the cost and Manitoba's physical attributes.

"Manitoba offered the ability to replicate the four states within relatively close proximity," said producer Kent Ulrich of Winnipeg. "We have certain terrains where we can do Nebraska, South Dakota, Wyoming. And through movie magic, we can replicate almost all of the locations within a very condensed area."

Anne Sluti, now 24, graduated from Rose-Hulman Institute of Technology in Terra Haute, Ind., in 2006, and is a quality engineer at Boston Scientific in Indiana where urology medical products are manufactured.

Zappa, now 38, received a life sentence for the kidnapping and weapons violations. He is in federal custody near Tucson, Ariz.

Although Anne's parents haven't yet had a sneak peak at the movie, they say they'll probably watch it.

"We almost have to. In a lot of ways, I would just as soon not, but we probably will," Elaine said.

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When and Where

"Taken in Broad Daylight" will air Feb. 15 on Lifetime, which is Charter Channel 24 in Kearney.

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