

**TAVP Visions After Violence Interview
Interview with Maggie Luna**

Interviewer: Marci Marie Simmons

Narrator: Maggie Luna

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Location of Interview: Texas - Joined via Zoom

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Summary:

Maggie Luna discusses her 20 years spent with a drug addiction, in and out of prison, and her path to regaining the rights to her child.

MARCI MARIE SIMMONS: Hello, my name is Marci Marie Simmons, I'm with the Texas after violence project. I'm here with Maggie Luna. Today is May 18th at 12:30 p.m. Thank you so much for joining me Maggie and agreeing to share your story. I appreciate you very, very much.

MAGGIE LUNA: Hi Marci. Thank you, thank you for having me.

SIMMONS: So let's just jump right in Maggie. Tell me, where do you feel like your story starts?

LUNA: Well, it's funny because I've told my story so many times but there's like different pieces. And so, I think the story that I would share today – starts, I guess right before I got sober. So, I spent 20 years in an addiction on heroin and meth, and it was the only thing that ever meant anything to me in my world, at all. And so throughout my addiction, I had lost everything, including my pride and my self esteem, my self worth, everything, you know. And in 2015, I ended up – well let me backup. So in 2008, I got pregnant with my oldest daughter and I couldn't stop using. I didn't – I used throughout the entire pregnancy, but it was opiates and I don't know, maybe it was just the time of it was, you know. But I was able to continue to use, saying it was my pain medication, and even the doctor, like, gave me like this justifying moment when he said, Well, if you're on Vicodin, it's more harm for the baby for you to quit, then it is for you just to maintain. And so, that was like my permission to continue to use. And so I used throughout the entire pregnancy and then in 2018, I mean not 2018 in 2008, she was born, no '06, she was born. But in '08 I got CPS in my life. They showed up and there was no way I was going to pass a drug test, but I was going to try. So I went and got somebody's clean pee, taped it to my leg. And they had picked up my daughter from daycare, and they said, I could not have her back until I passed a drug test. And I didn't know my rights at all – at all, you know? So when I walked into the office, it was a mouth swab. And so I couldn't fake that. And so I went out to the car afterwards and I just fell apart – was like, you know, it's – that's it. So they ended up taking my daughter from me. It was removable and I was so terrified to get scared – I mean to get clean, but I was also scared of losing my child... So it was just, I had only had one child at that time.

Anyway, I went into treatment voluntarily and they kept telling me, Oh well, this isn't, it doesn't matter. You know, there's so much history here. You'd been in and out of jail and all that. You're never going to get her back. Well, I stayed in the treatment center for nine months, got my own place and all of that, and ended up staying sober. (Speaks off camera) So anyway, I went to treatment, I got my own place, they ended up returning custody. They closed the case, and –

SIMMONS: It's okay.

LUNA: Okay. Lucy Lucy. There's another dog here, so –

SIMMONS: Okay, it's extra. Yeah, yeah, don't worry about any of that, Maggie.

LUNA: (To dog) Hush. Sit down. Yeah, okay.

So anyway, they ended up returning her to me. I never really lost my parental rights. They just closed the case and I stayed sober and then I got pregnant again with somebody in recovery. And so I thought, This is going to be perfect, you know, I have my little family back. I was so madly in love with this person because I didn't have drugs for 20 years, I mean – I had drugs for 20 years and I had nothing for 18 months. So when I met this man, he became my drug – everything to me. And so, just like I lost everything throughout my addiction, I ended up losing everything with this man. I had two children with him, and we were never stable. And my oldest daughter was there the whole time, you know, and was unstable with us but she was always with me. She saw a bunch of abuse and drug use and things that she should not have – no child should be introduced to. I had three children. My youngest was about six weeks old and, no – not six weeks, [inaudible] in 15 so she was 4 years old. Whenever she was six weeks old, I was on the run. Okay, so my – my youngest was born in 2010. And, right after that – right after she was born, I got an indictment for tampering with government documents because throughout my addiction, I had been making these checks and cashing them. And anyway, it finally caught up with me. I had thought that it was – it was gone, you know, like it's over, I'm not doing that anymore. And so I was out. This is when I was pregnant with my youngest – I was out.

I got a phone call that said that we needed – we need you to come talk to us and answer some questions. I didn't know my rights with CPS and I definitely didn't know my rights with the law. So, I've been going in and out of jail and just thinking – I mean like really having no idea the system, you know. Whenever she called me and said, We need you to come and answer some questions, I was trying to do the right thing at the time because I was pregnant with my third child and I was like, I can't just run from this. So I went in. My mother drove me to the DPS and they were asking questions. I did not have an attorney – I did not know anything. All I knew is that she was telling me the case that they were building and they had a picture of me at the mall. Then they had the check that I cashed at that mall, but they didn't have anything because I didn't sign my real name. But I didn't know. I thought, Oh my God, they got me, you know? And so she tells me, Now, I know you're pregnant – cause I was big and pregnant – and she was like, Well, if you give me a statement, I will make sure that you do not have this baby in jail. To me, that thought that she was going to work with me and I just needed to cooperate and everything's going to be okay. So I filled out a statement and fuckin' sealed my own indictment. I walked away from there thinking, Okay I did the right thing. They're not going to arrest me. About 10 days later, I got a phone call that said, There's a \$50,000 bond out in a warrant for your arrest for tampering with government documents. And I was like, oh my God, I hadn't – I didn't even see it coming. So, I had my baby and then she was six weeks old... My oldest child's father – I had been speaking with him about everything that was going on, and the younger two's father was non-existent, chaotic, you know... Anyways, so the oldest child's father, we've been in communication this whole time. The younger two – their father was just gone in the wind somewhere and so he told me, Just bring them all to me, you handle whatever you need to handle.

When the baby was six weeks old, I took all three of my children to East Texas to live with my oldest child's father and his wife and all that. I had to walk away from my baby at six weeks old and not know what was about to happen. And instead of going and turning myself in, I went on the run for a year – about a year. I ended up getting into a car accident in my addiction and broke my back. I knew I was on the run. So when the ambulance showed up – Well, first of all this was like a drug deal that had gone very badly. I do not know what was going on. I was in the passenger seat sitting with my legs up on the seat – crossed, and I was texting and the person that

was driving gets out and comes running back and is like, They're going to shoot us. I had no idea what was going on. He takes off, and we end up running into something, and my glasses were broken. My shoes were knocked off. But all I knew was that he said, Run, and so I get out of the car, and I ran until I couldn't run anymore and that was at a school. And the school shuts the entire place down – like put it on an alert, called the cops. I couldn't move, and they were just like, You have to get up. And I don't think – I cannot, but I ran for two blocks. So I get to the hospital and they're like, Oh, you have a shattered vertebrae. And the doctor was like, There's no way that you ran. And was like, I did. Like I did – I don't know what happened. I was in fear, you know. Anyway, I was in the hospital for a week, and they released me straight to Harris County. There were two giant police officers sitting outside my door I had no idea about and they put me in a wheelchair and then the officers came in and handcuffed me to the wheelchair – with a shattered vertebrae. I was like, sitting down in this back brace and they were like, You're going to jail. And they were acting like they had just made this major catch, like I was some big-time mafioso or something, you know. I'm – I'm in a wheelchair. They have me handcuffed, two officers behind me, and I'm just like, this is ridiculous, you know. Yeah, I was on the run. So anyway, I ended up getting arrested and I got bonded out then I ended up signing for two years. That was in 2011 – I did time for two years. My children were still in East Texas with my oldest daughter's father.

When I got out on parole, I paroled out to East Texas and there was nothing there for me. I went – I started using again and just went right back into this vicious cycle, and I ended up bringing my three children back to Houston. I got CPS called on me again. So I paroled out in late 2012. By 2015, I was already back – insane cycle, completely out of control. I lost custody completely. CPS came in, they took, completely terminated my parental rights and at this time I was trying to – like when they came and took them the first time I was trying to find a job, trying to stay sober, trying to do something, but it was like everything that I did, there was something up against me. The only job I could get was working at Sonic but I was so dedicated to that. They moved me up to management within a month. And I, I was doing so much work for \$10 an hour because it was all I could do. I just wanted my children home, and I wanted to provide for them. The system was telling me, This is what you need to do in order to get your kids back. It doesn't matter that you have felonies and a drug addiction and all of this, I don't care about that. I just want you to

show me that you can do this. I mean I had everything going backwards and I just couldn't get it together. So, they ended up terminating my rights. And at the time, I believed the system is there for a reason, and my children – Yeah, I have this bad addiction and I cannot provide for them what they need – their basic needs. You know, they were never living on the streets. They were never – you know, but they lived in chaos with me. If I was – if I didn't have anywhere to go, my family was there, but it was always at a cost. I would go stay with my dad and he would just berate me the entire time. It was just a really terrible feeling to have three children that are dependent on you, and then you wake up every single day with this addiction that you cannot fight but you want to so bad. You know, I remember mornings, I would just wake up and say, I just want to wake up and not want to want to get high. That's all I want, you know? And people would say, If you would just quit using – and it was baffling to me. Like, if I could just I would you know but it's been my only constant for the last 20 years.

I ended up losing custody – completely gone, so then I went completely out of control. I started – like my family didn't hear from me for two years until I was arrested again in 2016 for a possession. By that time, I was ready to just die. I did not care about anything and I always say this, when I – I became a woman with nothing to lose, I couldn't get a job, I didn't have children, nobody was going to give me a chance. So why would I make any effort to be a contributing member to society? No. I'm going to take what I can while I can and I was dangerous, you know. And some of the things I – today I would be terrified, you know? But I didn't care at the time, I had no feelings towards the world at all except hate. When I got arrested in 2016, I thought – I mean, I don't care, it's over, you know, I'm going to get back out and I'm going to go until it's over. My kids were gone. They were split up. It was closed. I was not allowed to have any communication with them at all.

So when I got in to do my one year at Plane State, I was like, Okay. Well, this is just a year. I can do a year. A year's no problem. When I get out, I already have everything set up to go right back to – I wasn't even thinking about rehabilitation or anything. They put me in the drug program, just because of my charge. But even that was a joke, you know? So I was still just like, whatever this is not – It wasn't helping me to want to stop using really. Just made me want to get out and get high. But what happened was, during my stay there, my mother ended up bringing my oldest

daughter to come visit me because she was have – going through some things, and my mom was like, She needs her mother. And so my oldest daughter was visiting me in prison, and it was just like – when I got arrested, I thought my children are gone, it's over. So having her come to see me was, like, that's a little bit of hope that maybe there is a chance, you know. The day that they terminated my rights, I went from being a mother every day and that being all I cared about to – okay, you walk away. We can't – you don't even know where they are. So it was just like, how do you go from that? How do you go from – So I had shut that part of me down. And so, having her come back kind of opened it back up. Like, okay I do still have children out there. Anyway, one visit she came to see me she was very visibly upset. She was sobbing, and I've never seen my daughter sob like this, you know, like she was, completely lost it. Her dad had overdosed. And he's the one who took all three of my children. He's the one who – he was her father, you know. When I saw that, I was like, that was supposed to be me, you know? Like I should not be here. He was a good man. He cared about them, I was nothing, you know, but anyway, that – that just kind of sparked something in me that – the way she is right now, if I go back out and use, she's going to lose us both. I knew I had to do something different, but I didn't know what and I didn't know how. I knew prison wasn't going to help me. I knew this wasn't helping me because I knew when I got out, I still wasn't going to have anything. I didn't have anything when I went into prison, I didn't have a job, I didn't have a car, I didn't have anything. Everything I had was in a hotel room that they raided, and I couldn't just say, Hey, could you put that stuff in storage for me? So it was all gone.

But it ended up one of the ladies – one of the groups that came inside to see us was a peer support lady, and she came in and she was just like real, you know. One of the problems that I'd always had was like these, these groups that came in and was like, these women were like, Oh yeah, I drank some alcohol – and I'm like, I just came from the depths of hell, you know? I've been through things, I've seen things that you can't even imagine, you know, so I couldn't relate to these people. But this one lady came in, and the way she talked, and I just felt like this connection, like she knows it, she gets it, you know? And then she told me – and that was in my bunk A121. And I was like, Oh my God, she was here and look at her now, you know? And so I went up and talked to her afterwards. The meeting one day, and I was like, I don't know what I want to do. I don't know, I don't know how I'm gonna do it, but I don't want to come back. She

gave me her phone number and she was like, Let me see what I can do. And then she helped me get in straight from prison into treatment.

I thought that it was like – it's like I've already been sober for a year because I've been in prison, but I didn't realize that I was just sober, you know, because once I got into this treatment center and started working on myself and realizing, Oh my God, the drugs are gone, but I still have no idea how to live life, you know? And so, I went through so much intense therapy that, and it was just like, I was able to focus only on myself because I had no children at the time because my life had been falling apart. I wasn't responsible for anybody but me, and my bills were being paid because I was living in a shelter, a treatment center. And so I was able to just focus on healing and realizing that there's a bunch of things that I did and I did it – I did it. I cannot continue to just be shameful and feel guilty – like, it happened. Now, what am I going to do with it?

So, I've met this one lady and we were talking and you know, one of the biggest things that was bothering me was that I did not know where my two youngest were and I don't – I mean going to bed every single night not knowing. Are they crying? What do they think about me? What do they think? Do they think that I just left them? You know, like that was the hardest thing to do, and to stay sober through that was really difficult for me. One of the sponsor ladies told me that I had to accept it or I was not going to heal and so I finally just came to this acceptance that was like, Okay, well maybe I was just the vessel to get them here, you know? And they're going to do great things but I'm not part of that. I did my part, you know? Anyway, that was what helped me to make it through those days where I just did not know where they were and I didn't know what they were thinking. I didn't know if my kids were crying and needed their mom, you know? It's a terrible feeling, but um, anyway – so I was able to do just accept it. Maybe I'll, you know, I'll just have to wait til they turn 18 and maybe they'll never find me. But if so, if they do, I want them maybe one day to read about me and see that I never gave up on them, you know? Even if I have to write these journals to them and they'll find them one day if I never get to see them. That was just, like it became an obsession for me. Like, I have to be – I can't be dead in a dumpster or sitting in prison when these kids come to find me. Then I started hearing stories of people who are like, you know, don't give up like, all of this stuff.

I ended up getting sober in 2016. I got my own place – well not my own place. It was like a little SRO in 2018. A single occupancy – whatever. And it was in the middle of cracktown. There were, there was crack being smoked literally on the floor above me. When I went downstairs, people were like, Hey, you got a dollar? When I was riding the bus, there were people doing dope, you know? But it was like, I had come to the point that it didn't even bother me anymore. It was like, I know where that goes, you know? And even if I have nothing today, but my little bitty house, I have peace and I hadn't had that before. That was where I started just finding people who were telling their stories and using them for good. And it was such a great, perfect time because I was looking for a job. Every single day I was riding Houston Metro in the rain, in the snow, in the 110-degree weather, you know. I was out there trying to find something because I needed to work. My mom was letting me borrow \$20 a week and making me feel guilty about that. That was very humbling because I, I had people reaching out to me on Facebook and one person had sent me a picture of himself with like a hundred dollar bills and he was like, It's all yours. And I'm like, and I'm begging this lady for \$20 just to make sure that I have cigarettes, you know?

So anyway it was very disheartening and it was, it was – I almost felt defeated at times because I could not find anything. I would get to the third interview and they would be like, Oh yeah, we do work with felons, but not yours. We can't, we can't work with your felony. Like it sounds a lot worse than it, really is, you know? But they would not work with me.

I was going to meetings, and I found Anthony Graves and Anthony Graves was a death row exoneree. He spent 17 years on death row for something he did not do, and he was standing up there smiling and had the most beautiful spirit I've ever ever felt. He offered me – like he was like, Here, apply for this and we'll see if we can get you in there. And it was a speaker's bureau. It was at TSU and I had to ride three buses to get there, but I got accepted and I had to ride three buses to get there every Saturday. So I would ride the bus there, be all sweaty by the time I get there, but I get there early so I can go into the bathroom and clean up because everybody else had cars and everything and I just felt like really just less than, you know? But it was a 12-week speakers program. I did not know anything about speaking in front of people. I did not know anything about policy. I didn't know anything about anything at all, and I felt about this big

(pinches forefinger and thumb together to gesture something small) walking in there and they were talking about all of these things that I had no idea. Anyway, it was just it – every time I went in, I felt like it meant something, you know? I needed, I needed that. I needed to be able to use everything that I went through for the past 20 years. Cannot be for nothing, you know? I have to have made it through that for some reason. And then I heard Anthony say, And those people don't know anything that we've been through. They just know how to make the laws to put us there. And I was like, Well, we need to tell them, you know, need to tell them what they're doing to us.

And so, I just started volunteering everywhere I could possibly go. If they needed somebody, I was there just trying to learn – learn policy, learn advocacy, learn anything because it just – it was just I knew that was something that I needed to do. Then I got a job working at a hotel folding towels in the spa for \$10 an hour. I was so grateful, but then I was also so humiliated – like this is not my passion you know? I don't want to be folding towels like – and I know that I'm worse than you are even though, like on paper, I don't look like that. I know that this is not where I'm supposed to be and so, I mean, thank God, somebody gave me an opportunity to apply for a fellowship and through that fellowship, I was connected into this major network of amazing people, who have been through the same or more than what I've been through and are using those things to make meaningful change. And although...

Yeah, someone offered me the fellowship – or to apply for the fellowship, and even the application process was intimidating. But I had created this community of women who believed in me and helped me to fill out the application, do the paperwork, you know, all of that. And I got the job here in Austin. They moved me here, and that was another thing that just gave me another validation. Like, yes, I am worth it or they would not have invested in me to move me from where I was. And everything just started working because I was using what I've been through as an asset, instead of a barrier. That just opened up like my whole world and throughout that – this whole past three years is in 2020 – was, when I started 2019 was my first legislative session where I had no idea what was going on and I walked up in there and I heard all of these people lying and I was able to go up there and say, I don't know what they're talking about because I just left. Just that whole situation, to see that legislators were looking at me and they

were like – and they called the other business people back up, and they were like, Are you telling us the truth? Because this person was there and saying that what you said was not true. And so that was like, Oh my God, this is what we need. We need everybody who was there to be here and to tell them, You know that just because this man is up here saying, everything's fine, nothing to see here. It's not, and we need to be here. I mean that just lit that fire within me. Like we need all of, all of us at the table, you know?

And so yeah, that's the advocacy that I've been doing, and in 2021 we pushed for a law that –

Okay, so in Texas, there's no pathway for a parent after their term – their rights have been terminated to ever have custody again. That's it, it's over. And CPS kept reminding me of that. Every time I would call to say, Okay, my son is not adopted. Can I at least have visitation or anything? No. Miss Luna, your rights have been terminated. No, Miss Luna, your rights have been terminated. So in 2021, HP 2926 was passed which gave me a pathway to file for reunification with my son since he had not been adopted. And now as you can see, he is home, and he does not let me forget that he's here. So I mean, I think that's the story that I would really focus on today, because that's what I'm living right now is going from not even knowing if I'd ever see him again to now being a mom again, and I went from not being a mom at all and having nobody, to now having to do everything a mother does. I remember these things like this morning, I took him to the doctor and I forgot that I needed his information, like his social security number and all that and I was like, Oh my God, why are they asking all of these questions? But yeah, it's part of my life now and... My youngest is still out there, but I know one day when she does find me, I'm hoping that she'll know that I didn't just walk away. I didn't just give up on her. I wish that we could have all of us together, but one day.

SIMMONS: Sorry, you're amazing. I – you know I've always thought that since I first met you and I just knew little portions of your story and now I'm just even more, right, even more amazed by you. And I didn't have to ask any questions, you laid it out for us and you can tell that you have told your story before, for sure. I'm just thinking about is – if there was anything in particular while you were incarcerated – and mostly just because that's kind of the basis of my project – that you can remember? Any stories that you want to tell about your experience with incarceration?

LUNA: Yeah. One of them that I didn't tell you was – so this last time I was in there and sitting there through the heat of summer in 2017, and I had a bunkie who was – I don't know how old she was, but I know that you can see all the wrinkles in her face. And I'll never forget this. She would walk around and just be like, Are we gonna make it out? And I was like, I don't know. And one day it was so hot. We were just waiting for the sun to go down and I looked across and she had her shirt up and her hair was soaking wet, and she was like, I don't want to die in here. I'm like – I got so angry because like there's officers out there with fans and nobody was bringing us water and I was like how can people be treated this way? And like, it's okay? And so, I was thinking, we've got to tell somebody and, you know, she says, I'm gonna write a grievance. Nobody cares. You know, I'm gonna do this. Well, nobody cares. I'm gonna call the Ombudsman. Nobody cares, you know. And just to see that. I was in there thinking that maybe if we did this it would change, and nothing ever changed.

When – while I was in there, I was on blood pressure medicine, which I am on now, which is like a water pill. And so, some of the worst days that I had in there were because I had to go to the bathroom so bad and I did not have toilet paper. It was humiliating and it was uncomfortable. And I – one day we were at the chapel and we got locked in for count and I had been on my blood pressure meds. We had already been in the chapel for two hours, so I was just waiting to get back to my dorm. And once we got locked in for count, I was at – the restroom was right there. Like, I could see it, and I'm asking the officer, Can I please use the restroom? No. Are you serious right now? And she was just like, No. And then kept talking to her little homie. And they were just like, laughing and I was livid. Like this, these people think that I'm just a nobody, you know? Because what – she makes \$8 an hour and has a key to let me out? I finally I was like, I am about to pee right here, and she's like, Go ahead. You got to clean it up. And I mean, it was just so humiliating, so humiliating, I started crying, like, because I – you can't say anything to them. They have all the power, you know? And so I was sitting there, like, my whole face – everything was just like I wanted to explode and she finally, laughing, was like, Girl go. Take your ass in there. And it was just like, I cannot believe this. I could see there. I could have run to the restroom with that. I probably would have gotten beat down, you know? But, you know, these are – ugh. These are stories that really pissed me off and give me the drive.

When I do go up to this, to the Capitol, like you don't know how these people are treated in – First of all, you don't. When I went to on medical chain, the freaking doctor was so rude to me. I had to go for a liver scan and it was like, they just automatically assume that I'm just whatever, I don't know, I'm just supposed to believe – and so whatever – they didn't want explaining. I'm asking questions. They are ignoring me but talking to each other and it's just so humiliating. But I know that just like I was in there, and I'm a human. There's a million other people in there and they're all humans too and they're all being treated the same way. One time I did not have toilet paper. We weren't going to get toilet paper til Friday. I walked out to the picket and the picket you can see to the window that they have a wall of toilet paper, and I'm like, okay, this person is going to be human and see that I'm about to go to the restroom. And so I was like, Please. I take water – I took my prescription out there, too. Like, I take these pills, can I please get– Like, no. You need a prescription for extra toilet paper or something like that. And I was like, I can see it. Can you just give me some? Nope. What do you do with yours? I – what? Like I eat it. You know, that's – What the hell do you think that I could do with it? Sell it. But anyway, I mean, those are the things that just really–

SIMMONS: It kind of sounds like – it kind of sounds like stories like that definitely motivate you for your work now. And yeah, definitely turned your story completely around, and I think that everybody in your life can see that you are making a difference for people. I want to ask one final question, Maggie. If you could go back in time to young Maggie, before you kind of started getting involved with illegal substances, what would you have to tell her?

LUNA: I don't know. I don't know. I know that – it's, it is, that's something that I think about a lot, like, cause they always say, Give your child what you think you would need... But you know, when they say give your child what you think you would need, and when I see sometimes myself in him, I don't know what I would have needed, you know. I see myself doing the same things that my family did. And so, I mean that's really something that I'm working through right now. Like, I don't know what I would have needed, but I know that what I had was not it, you know. It was no happiness. When I found drugs, that's

what made me happy and so, I guess I would tell myself that I was worth more. And I was worth it. Yeah.

SIMMONS: Maggie. Thank you so much for being so open and willing to share your story. I really feel like it's going to help so many people. I'm going to stop the recording now.