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NATIONAL
MEMORIAL DAY
CONCERT

A CONVERSATION WITH CLAUDIA AND LUIS AVILA
ABOUT THE HEALING POWER OF MUSIC

The 2017 **NATIONAL MEMORIAL DAY CONCERT** will feature the story of Captain Luis Avila whose injuries from an IED blast were so severe that his doctors did not see hope. His wife, Claudia, never gave up. With extensive treatments, and the emerging technique of music therapy, Captain Avila has made remarkable progress. In the following interview, Claudia and Luis Avila discusses their family's experiences. To learn more about their remarkable journey join us for the **NATIONAL MEMORIAL DAY CONCERT**, only on PBS **Sunday, May 28, 2017, from 8:00 to 9:30 p.m.**

Q: Please share with us what happened when your husband, Captain Luis Avila, was first injured.

CLAUDIA AVILA: On December 27, 2011, my husband Luis Avila was deployed on his fifth tour near the Pakistani border of Afghanistan, leading a company in the 720th Military Police battalion. They had completed their mission and were returning to base when he was severely wounded. My sons - Luis Jr., Miguel, Jose - and I were stationed in Fort Hood, Texas, when we got the news that Luis had been in a mountain IED explosion. He had suffered two heart attacks and a stroke leaving him completely paralyzed. His leg had been amputated and he had a severe traumatic brain injury. I flew to Germany to bring Luis back home and found him in a coma and on life support. Twelve days later we flew to Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. He was home but barely alive. For forty days Luis was in a coma.

Q: What was it like after you brought Luis home?

AVILA: Luis's injuries were critical. After 30 days, and showing no signs of improvement, the doctors wanted to pull the plug on his life support. I loved this man. Despite all the difficulties, I told them we were going to keep fighting, that we were going to keep taking care of him.

Q: What was life like at that point?

AVILA: I know Luis has always been able to hear the kids and I. We played music every day and every night to try to wake him up, the Beatles, the Beach Boys and military marches. There was always music. Throughout the process, we continued treating Luis like he was always there, like he was able to hear us. We always told him the ups and downs of our days. And, every Friday, our amazing friends and neighbors helped drive our boys to the hospital to be with Luis and I. Staying with Luis at the hospital on the weekends became our new normal.

Q: When did you notice the first sign of improvement?

AVILA: On February 14, Valentine's Day, Luis finally started to show some response. He started to shake his muscles. I was extremely excited and told the doctors that Luis was ready to wake up but they told me everything that I was seeing was just reflexes. I finally convinced them and it became clear Luis was following commands. We knew that our prayers had been answered. Luis was able to give us a sign that he wanted to continue the fight. He's always been a fighter.

Q: How has music therapy contributed to Luis' recovery?

AVILA: What music offers is motivation, for Luis to get through some of the routine tasks that he needs to do to make it to the next level. He really found a way, through music and the skills he's learned in music therapy, to bridge that into his other tasks. He enjoys all kinds of music. He loves the *Army Goes Rolling Along* and *Dog Faced Soldier*, the Third Infantry Division song. And any songs that have a strong association with him from his service time like the Beatles, Jose Feliciano and different Spanish songs from his heritage. Also, he likes Gwen Stefani and some pop songs. He had a break through moment when he was working on the *National Anthem* and learning to sing it. It's the music that has given Luis peace of mind and kept him motivated when he was too exhausted to move another muscle.

Q: What does music mean to your husband?

AVILA: I think that music means freedom to Luis. He always says, "When people meet me, they have empathy for what I've been through. But when I sing for people, they don't need to have sympathy or empathy for me, because I am entertaining them. And I'm showing them that I can do this."

Q: How has your life changed over the years?

AVILA: By July 2012, Luis was at Walter Reed Medical Center, completely paralyzed but ready to start the journey back. Luis has had over 70 surgical procedures over the past five years. On February 4, 2014, he became an outpatient. We moved to our new home and started to bring Luis to therapy every day, continuing to receive physical therapy, OT, music, technology, speech, brain fitness...all to bring him back to normal. Today we're at Walter Reed from 9 to 5. It's Luis' job. He's still on active duty, after all, so he has work to do.

Q: How did your lives change when you moved into your new "smart home"?

AVILA: Our lives changed again when we met Gary Sinise. When he learned about our journey, he shared what his program had to offer to restore life for the most severely wounded service members. Receiving a "smart home" through the Gary Sinise Foundation has restored Luis' independence and provided our family with a renewed sense of freedom. Before, Luis was confined to a very limited space. We couldn't spend family moments together as we're able to now. We can cook together and try to be like everybody else...normal. It's the most beautiful feeling...it's powerful. Now we have a permanent home, our forever home, a home that Luis can freely navigate.

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Q: How do you think Luis' injuries have affected your children?

AVILA: Our military kids are part of a special community. They have one thing in common: they are resilient. Every one of our kids understand the dangers when their parents go to war. We always try to keep our families together when a family member is deployed by Facetime, a video message, a phone call, or an email. Through our journey, I have seen the tears, the fear and the hopelessness of our circumstances, but I have also seen the faith that they had that together we can do it no matter what. As long as we were together, that was the most important thing. I tell people our military kids are our hidden heroes. What they have to do to keep strong is something not everyone could handle. My kids are my heroes, my life, my everything. I love them to the moon and back as I love my hubby.

Q: Claudia, what advice do you have for other caregivers?

AVILA: I would like to say first, take care of yourself so you can take care of others. Everything starts with a good attitude. I try every day to treat everybody with the same dignity and respect that we all as human beings need and deserve. As we continue in our journey, prayers are what keeps me strong. I enjoy what I do. This is my new role. I am very happy to be able to take care of my husband. Our community and environment play a big role. I'm a true believer that Luis and I couldn't be where we are without the help of our support system that includes all of our family and friends. Some have become our family not by blood but by situation. It's so amazing how much we love them, like we've known them forever and how much we feel empowered by what they do and how we learn from one another.

I try to educate myself every day to learn how I can better care for all disabled veterans. That's the reason why I became a strong advocate and a voice not only for my family but for all service members and their families. They deserve the best. Creating awareness, sharing our stories, and our challenges, I believe we can challenge the leaders who are capable of changing or adapting the policies, laws or regulations to make our lives easier. By educating people who have never been exposed to those in our situation, they can learn that even just holding a door open can mean the world.

Q: Luis, what was the hardest part of your job? When recovery gets overwhelming, how do you keep going? What advice would you have for others who are in recovery and facing challenges?

LUIS AVILA: The hardest part of my job was being away from my family. I love the army. The only thing I wanted to do was my job. I keep going through my faith and the love of my wife and my kids. My faith is an inspiration. Our God has been awesome in our journey and our God has strained our faith through this process to allow us to understand that with Him all is possible. With hope, everything is easy. With faith we move mountains. With love, nothing is difficult and with prayers and friends and family, we rock the world. With faith, we feel invincible. I will ask everybody who has been in my situation to never lose hope, faith and friendships.

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