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Lieutenant Dan: A Close Look at Actor Gary Sinise's Longstanding Support for Veterans

Ade Adeniji | December 11, 2023



ACTOR GARY SINISE, FOUNDER OF THE GARY SINISE FOUNDATION

Gary Sinise, 68, is best known for playing Lieutenant Dan Taylor in the 1994 classic “Forrest Gump” opposite Tom Hanks. The actor received an Oscar nomination for the role and subsequently went on to feature in movies like “Apollo 13,” “The Green Mile” and “Ransom.” Sinise also has plenty of theatrical and television credits, including the leading role as Detective Taylor in the long-running CBS series “CSI: NY” and as Special Agent Jack Garrett in “Criminal Minds: Beyond Borders.”

Sinise’s fortune has been [estimated at some \\$50 million](#), an example of the kind of wealth that can be amassed in entertainment. In recent months, I’ve profiled other “glitzy givers” like [Stephen and Ayesha Curry](#) and [Selena Gomez](#). Like them, Sinise has put some of his wealth toward philanthropy, establishing the [Gary Sinise Foundation](#) in 2011, which supports military veterans, first responders and their families. But as it turns out, Sinise was digging into veterans issues well before, dating back to the 1980s.

While some might associate celebrity and athlete philanthropy with glitzy galas and fundraisers, Sinise’s escalating giving is a good example of the more serious philanthropy that can take place. To take one example, the Gary Sinise Foundation operates programs

like R.I.S.E. (Restoring Independence Supporting Empowerment), which builds adapted smart homes for severely wounded service people.

I recently interviewed Sinise to find out more about his foundation. I also connected with Andi Mandell, a lawyer who recently joined the foundation's board, and Jose Armenta, a veteran and a beneficiary of a new R.I.S.E home. In our conversations, I got the full story on why Sinise became such a champion for veterans, the range of work the Gary Sinise Foundation does today, and what's in store for the future.

A lifelong champion of veterans

Born in 1955 in Blue Island, Illinois, Gary Sinise was just short of the window where he could have been drafted out of high school to fight in Vietnam — combat operations ended the year he graduated. He describes the late 1960s and early 1970s as a complicated time. On the one hand, he was just a high school kid with high school worries. But then the realities of what was going on beyond his hometown hit home. He first met his wife of over 40 years, Moira, and then her brothers, around this time. Those brothers fought in Vietnam. “They made me start thinking about what I was not thinking about when I was in high school, which is what they were doing in Vietnam when they were just a little bit older than I was,” Sinise told me.

Sinise also was surrounded by members of his own family who served, including his father, who was in the navy, and his grandfather, who served in World War I. By the early 1980s, Sinise already started supporting local veterans groups. And a decade later, he just so happened to play wounded Vietnam veteran Lieutenant Dan in “Forrest Gump” and connected with Disabled American Veterans, founded in 1920 to help World War I vets. “They were the ones that I initially interfaced with back in the '90s when I played Lieutenant Dan,” Sinise said.

At Disabled American Veterans, he describes running into American veterans from every major war since World War II, including the Korean War and the Gulf War, which ended a few years before “Forrest Gump” came out. Sinise recalled the power of veterans coming together in this way to receive care in a community.

Then 9/11 happened, and Sinise started doing “handshake tours” with United Service Organizations (USO), meeting a new generation of men and women coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2003, Sinise, also a longtime guitar player, formed Lt. Dan Band with Kimo Williams in Chicago to perform at USO shows, entertain troops and raise money for disabled veterans. More than two decades later, these shows are still going strong. “The more I did, the more I wanted to do. Putting my boots on the ground. Going to the war zones. Going to the hospitals. Going to the events that would support [veterans] in different ways,” Sinise said.

“The perfect timing”

In Sinise's 2019 book, [“Grateful American: A Journey from Self to Service,”](#) he includes a chapter titled “Perfect Timing” in which he describes his move from film to television and his starring role in “CSI: New York.” The Gotham crime procedural was a big hit, and ended up netting Sinise quite a bit of money just as he wanted to start ramping up his philanthropy. He estimates that he was supporting 25 to 30 charities prior to starting his own foundation.

“I had done pretty well in the movie business. But when you're on television for many seasons, you know, that can be very lucrative. And it can also give you a public plat

You know, you're on television all the time. [So] I could use that platform so I could do some good," Sinise said. "The resources it gave me played into the kind of work I wanted to do."

In 2011, Sinise formally started the Gary Sinise Foundation. Why then? That goes back to the idea of timing. Sinise said he truly felt like he had the experience and reputation at that point to do good work in the military support space. And he felt by putting his name on the charity, he was truly putting his money where his mouth was and going all-in for this work. In addition to the personal funds Sinise has contributed to the foundation, he's also asked others to donate, both with their money and their time. That includes everyone from Sinise's close friends to big-name sponsors like Amazon and American Airlines.

Because of his engagement with so many nonprofits in the veterans and first responders communities, Sinise has also been able to tap those spaces to help lead the foundation's 15-member board of directors, which includes General Vincent K. Brooks and pioneering female Lieutenant Patricia D. Horoho.

A veteran talks tragedy, recovery and his new home

One of the Gary Sinise Foundation's signature programs is R.I.S.E., or Restoring Independence Supporting Empowerment. The program builds specially adapted smart homes for the most severely wounded veterans, including quadruple and triple amputees, and covers home modifications, mobility devices and adapted vehicles for them. Sinise raised money for R.I.S.E. by picking up his guitar again and playing fundraising concerts with the Lt. Dan Band. This program is primarily targeted at those who served in a post-9/11 context. A statement on the program's webpage reads simply: "1,000,000 heroes have returned from Iraq & Afghanistan bearing the mental and physical wounds of war. Who will ensure their care?"

One of the most recent beneficiaries of a R.I.S.E. home is Los Angeles native Jose Armenta, who now lives in San Diego with his wife and family. "I grew up in some of the rougher parts of L.A. My plan was always to change my environment and do something different from what I saw," he said. He joined the Marines after high school, became a canine handler and then went to Afghanistan, where tragedy struck.

Armenta recalled a time in 2011, when he was in the desert town of Sangin, Afghanistan, which he said was one of the most dangerous parts of the country at the time. Out there for three months with his advanced infantry unit, the goal was to disrupt enemy activities including by defusing landmines.

"We went on a lot of foot patrols. I was a dog handler. So my job was to walk in front with my point man. We had a metal detector and we would search for landmines to make sure none of us stepped on it," Armenta said. Before one patrol, they had received intel that most combatants had either left or fled the area. But the enemy had left a huge swath of landmines behind and Armenta soon stepped on 10 pounds of homemade explosives, which exploded under him and his bomb dog, Zenit.

From there, some of Armenta's memory fades. In a state of shock, he recalls seeing that both of his legs were mangled. To make matters worse, it took two hours for the medevac chopper to reach him. "It's called the golden hour," he said. "If you don't get somebody in a chopper within an hour, then their chances of surviving go down... I was already seeing the light."

After several procedures abroad, Armenta eventually arrived at the Navy Medical Center Balboa in San Diego, where he began a three-year process to learn how to walk again. And one day in the fall of 2011, before Armenta received his prosthetic legs and began physical therapy, he walked Gary Sinise. The room was filled to the brim with severely injured veterans and Armenta said Sinise spent time with each one. "I told my wife and I'm like, 'Hey, that's Lt. Dan! That's Lt. Dan!' I don't remember our conversation. But it took him like an hour to get through because he would talk to every wounded warrior for like 10 to 15 minutes."

Once Armenta moved back home with his family, however, challenges remained. While his home now had wheelchair ramps, his home was not fully accessible, leading to falls. One of these falls happened when he was carrying his infant son. "It's a lot of small things that I think the typical person doesn't think of, like reaching a dish while you're in the wheelchair... the kinds of freedoms that you lose when you're severely injured," he said.

Then, in the spring of 2022, Armenta received a personal call from Gary Sinise that he would be receiving a R.I.S.E. home, of which the foundation has now built nearly 90. And on Veterans Day, Armenta received the keys to the home where he now lives with his wife, three children and dog Zenit. (That's right: the Armentas adopted the brave pup, who also survived.) By "keys," it's really an iPad, where the Armentas can access features like smart home lighting and shading controls, accessible countertops, and a heating and cooling system that can manage multiple temperature zones throughout the house. That last bit might not seem all that important, but it is. These days, Armenta runs hot, blasting A/C while the rest of the family might be cold. "I'm a double amputee, I lost most of my legs. I'm guessing [it's] the change in body volume."

The power of storytelling and building connections

The Gary Sinise Foundation has offered up opportunities for both veterans and non-veterans alike to connect and get involved. Its newest board member, tax lawyer Andi Mandell, first started working with Sinise in 2012. While working at a hedge fund, she crossed paths with Walt Fricke, a former mortgage guy who started the Veterans Airlift Command, providing free flights for combat-injured veterans. Two of these veterans were offered R.I.S.E. homes. "Everyone knows Gary, but they wanted to make sure it was real and genuine. We spent some time vetting [the foundation] and it was such an amazing organization," Mandell said. And when she went on to work at Schulte Roth & Zabel, she brought the Gary Sinise Foundation along with her. Today, Mandell has done the legal work on virtually every R.I.S.E. home.

Gary Sinise's long tale of supporting veterans has a way of coming full circle. Decades ago, he was the artistic director of Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, which he started with some of his friends in the 1970s. On the hunt for material that he could direct that would speak to the Vietnam War veteran's experience, Sinise combed through newspapers and magazines around the country. In Los Angeles, within the pages of the "Drama-Logue," a long-running actors trade weekly, Sinise discovered "Tracers," a play written, directed and acted by a group of Vietnam veterans. In 1980, he took a flight to Los Angeles to see it.

"It was so powerful. I went back the next night and saw it again," Sinise said. "Only a couple of them were theater guys. The rest of them were just Vietnam veterans who read about the idea that this one guy wanted to bring some guys together and make a play. I'm watching these veterans on stage tell their own stories."

The troupe did not immediately hand the reins over to Sinise. They initially felt it was a story only they could tell. But eventually, Sinise gained their trust. He brought the play to

the Windy City and made Tuesday night at Steppenwolf free for those who served. Word of the play started to spread within the veterans community, so much so that every night, Sinise said, the audience was packed with 150 to 200 veterans. Sinise calls the post-show discussions “magnificent.” He recalls one time when a wife heard her veteran husband speaking on a microphone about things she never heard and never knew he even experienced. “All of a sudden, he’s opening up to his room full of fellow veterans in the audience and these actors who just portrayed those stories on stage,” Sinise said.

Fast forward to today. Sinise spoke about an Afghanistan veteran named Scott Mann who wrote a play about his experiences, “[Last Out: Elegy of a Green Beret](#),” and then started performing it. Mann read Sinise’s book and related to Sinise’s story about what he saw at Steppenwolf. The two connected and Sinise encouraged Mann to continue to perform this play and have those same post-performance talkbacks where true healing can begin. The Gary Sinise Foundation has now sponsored “Last Out” tours in nine cities around country, culminating in Topeka, Kansas. “We want we want our veterans to tell their stories and not hold back,” Sinise said.