

★ HOMES FOR ★ THE BRAVE

GIVING BACK TO THOSE WHO KEEP US FREE & SAFE

BY DOMINIQUE PAUL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ADAM SANNER
& PROVIDED BY THE GARY SINISE FOUNDATION

When I asked actor Gary Sinise how his work for our nation's heroes has changed him, he let out a small laugh. "I've been doing this so long, it's hard to remember what I was like before," he offered. "Once I started doing it and I could see that showing up for somebody was having a positive impact, I went back and did it again and again. And then I just kept wanting to do it. So, it's given me a lot of purpose."

Sinise, of course, famously portrayed Lieutenant Dan Taylor in *Forrest Gump*, a character who shifts from a proud soldier to a man confined to a wheelchair, struggling with the indignity he feels as a disabled veteran in a society that doesn't know how to see him as anything other than his wounds. On the walls of the Gary Sinise Foundation headquarters in Franklin are two paintings: one depicting Lt. Dan before he goes to war and the other after he returns. The contrast is stark, and echoes what many of our veterans experience in service of our country: the definitive Before and After. Gary founded his organization in 2011 out of love for our nation's veterans and first responders and a desire to make a difference in their lives.

For the past thirteen years, the Gary Sinise Foundation has touched the lives of countless military veterans and their families through events, services and programs created to meet their needs. Gary's band, The Lt. Dan Band, frequently visits military bases in the United States and abroad, performing close to 600 concerts to date. The Soaring Valor program has flown nearly 1,500 WWII vets to the National WWII Museum in New Orleans, where they are treated to a hero's welcome and paired with students who record their oral histories, ensuring that what they witnessed and experienced will never be forgotten. There's also Snowball Express, which, among other initiatives, takes surviving spouses and children of fallen heroes to Walt Disney World each December for five days of remembrance and new memories. These programs demonstrate that Gary and his foundation intimately understand the needs of the community they serve. After seeing the devastating effects of the post-9/11 wars on our troops, the foundation's R.I.S.E. program was created

to construct specially-adapted smart homes for our nation's most severely wounded heroes.

Standing for Restoring Independence Supporting Empowerment, this initiative predominantly supports post 9/11 defenders who were injured in combat operations or during training while performing their duties. These 100% mortgage-free smart homes are meant to ease the daily challenges faced by these heroes and their families who sacrifice alongside them. To date, the program has built ninety-three homes for wounded vets, including three in our area. They are about to break ground on a fourth Tennessee home for Retired U.S. Army Captain, Leslie Smith, who volunteered to deploy to Bosnia one week after 9/11 as part of Operation Joint Forge. During her deployment, Leslie was exposed to a chemical agent or toxin, causing her to lose her left leg and the majority of her vision. Gary's face lights up when he tells me Leslie is finally getting a home.



GARY LINFOOT, CW5, U.S. ARMY, RET.





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"I've known Leslie almost twenty years, and I kept telling her, you know, when are you going to let us do something for you? She had a service dog for the longest time. This beautiful relationship with the dog, Isaac, and Isaac died, and she just went into a deep funk. But she's finally made a decision and has decided to live right out here, so she's going to be near us." Gary's voice trails off, and I notice he is pausing for a moment to let the emotion that is welling inside him dissipate. "She's just the most wonderful girl. I get choked up when I talk about her because I love her so much."

Gary's deep connection and abiding affection for our nation's heroes is apparent in everything he does. During our photo shoot, he joked and horsed around with Retired U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer Five Gary Linfoot and Retired U.S. Army Sergeant Bryan Anderson as though they were old college buddies. "Gary texts my husband all the time," Mari Linfoot told me. "He truly cares about these vets and their families."

In 2008, Gary Linfoot was paralyzed during a helicopter crash in Iraq while conducting operations on his 21st combat deployment. "My husband went from being a top leader to being someone who needed help with almost everything," shared Mari. The Linfoots lived in



BRYAN ANDERSON, SGT, U.S. ARMY, RET.

a wheelchair-adapted home for twelve years before they received their custom home via the foundation in 2019. Having a home with level flooring, clothing that is within reach, being able to turn around in the pantry—all things we take for granted—have been game changers for Gary. "Getting a lift up has allowed us the time and energy to start a foundation of our own," Mari said. She and Gary founded American Mobility Project in 2019 to provide equipment, resources and adaptations to enhance independent living for people with disabilities. "We help the

non-veterans that the Gary Sinise Foundation isn't able to."

Purple-heart recipient Sgt. Bryan Anderson served two tours of duty in Iraq. In October 2005, Bryan was injured by an IED that resulted in the loss of both legs and his left hand. He is one of the few triple amputees to have survived his injuries in Iraq. When Bryan, who is from Chicago and loves to travel, learned he would be awarded a smart home through GSF, he chose Tennessee as his permanent home. "I love it here," Bryan told me. "The people are awesome, it's beautiful, and it's not flat!" Bryan's home is situated on twenty-three rolling acres. "I'm living the American dream," he says. When I asked Bryan how his home has improved his life, he said, "It's a little thing, but it's the biggest thing: Peace of mind. I'm not worried about hitting walls or having to figure out how I'm going to use the bathroom or reach something on a shelf. Before, everything was an issue. It's a huge weight off my shoulders."

I covered the Walls of Honor ceremony for Retired U.S. Army Sergeant Joshua Hargis' smart home in Nolensville back in June, which is scheduled to be completed by Veteran's Day. I was struck then as I am now by the grit and resilience these vets have shown throughout their lives—indeed, their ability to take the hits and keep moving forward. It's a tale I know well as the daughter of a Purple-heart recipient who served as a LRRP in Vietnam: *Life is tough, but these guys are tougher*. During our conversation, I asked Gary what his organization is doing to help our heroes who are struggling with wounds we can't see.

"Mental wellness is a big part of what we do at the Gary Sinise Foundation. So many of our service members, they won't acknowledge



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