

Walls of Honor

WELCOMING A HERO HOME

BY DOMINIQUE PAUL

It's a beautiful spring morning in Nolensville, as throngs of people work their way up a mud and gravel path to a home still under construction. A small crowd gathers inside the house and spills out onto the front porch, waiting for the ceremony to begin. Suddenly, Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." begins to play and American flags are hoisted into the air by Vietnam-era veterans as they begin their procession towards the home. Over the loud speaker, a member of the Gary Sinise Foundation's leadership team announces the man we are here to honor.

Retired U.S. Army Sergeant Joshua Hargis, his wife, Taylor, and their two sons, walk the now flag-lined path to the home's front porch and are greeted with an eruption of applause from the crowd. They are an undeniably beautiful family, and it takes a moment to notice that Josh's legs are missing; to register that he just walked up to the home on a pair of prosthetics.

We are gathered here today for the Gary Sinise Foundation's Walls of Honor ceremony, which marks the half-way point of construction on a newly-built smart home for the Hargis Family as part of the foundation's R.I.S.E. program. It's the third home built by GSF since they relocated their headquarters to Nashville in 2022. Sergeant Hargis was nominated for the home by a fellow Army Ranger who works with the organization, calling Josh "the most selfless individual I have ever had the privilege of working with." Hargis was then chosen by a panel of advisors that includes other veterans.



Sergeant Josh Hargis served four deployments in Afghanistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom, after graduating the Army's premier leadership course, Ranger School, and serving as a K9 Handler within the 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment. It was during Josh's last deployment, while conducting operations in the city of Kandahar, when tragedy struck.

On October 5, 2013, Josh, his dog, Jany, and thirty-six other rangers, were on a night raid mission to capture a High Value Target when they were drawn into an area littered with IED's. Their targets had concealed explosive vests underneath their clothing, which they then detonated as Josh's



team moved in. “Our unit sustained catastrophic injuries,” explained Josh. “Four members of our team died. My K9 companion was killed. Another soldier and I suffered battlefield amputations, and countless others suffered severe injuries.”

As a result of his injuries, Josh lost both his legs, one above the knee and the other below.

Just a week before his devastating injuries, Josh learned that his wife Taylor was pregnant with their first child. He was determined to live, to get back to his wife and unborn son. But he was also afraid of facing his wife in his broken state. But Taylor’s mother, Jennifer Griffith, told us, “The minute Josh was injured, Taylor went from zero to a hundred. There has not been a day since then that Taylor has not been by Josh’s side, fighting for him, advocating for him.”

During Josh’s Purple Heart ceremony at his bedside, while bandaged and connected to breathing tubes, Josh, who was believed to be unconscious, somehow gathered enough strength to salute his Commander when he entered the room. The video of Josh’s salute from the hospital bed quickly went viral, earning the title “The Salute Seen Around the World.” Of her husband’s viral moment, Taylor Hargis said, “I was overcome with pride and emotion and... I think it just brought a sense of pride to the nation.”

Instead of going through traditional physical therapy after becoming a double amputee, Josh was given the option to try sled hockey as a means



of recovery. Hargis soon realized he was excellent at the sport, and that it helped improve both his physical and mental health. He has since gone on to represent the U.S.A. in two Para Ice Hockey World Championships and joined the U.S. Men’s Sled Hockey Team in 2018.

While Josh’s strength and tenacity are apparent to all who come in contact with him, the effects of his life-altering injuries are ever-present. “These guys are cut from a different cloth,” says Josh’s father-in-law, Scott Griffith. “They don’t complain. They take the hits and just keep moving forward. But, without his prosthetics on, Josh basically can’t go from place to place without crawling. It’s been very hard.”

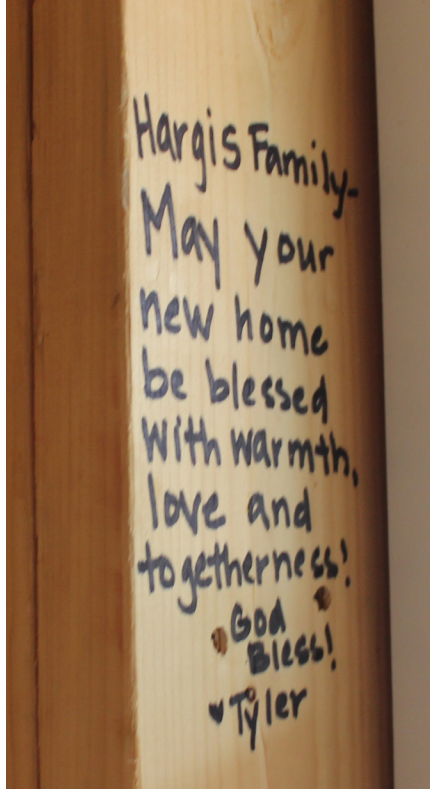
But through Gary Sinise Foundation’s R.I.S.E. program, eleven years after Josh was injured, the Hargis family’s life is about to change once again. Standing for Restoring Independence, Supporting Empowerment, R.I.S.E. builds brand new specially adapted, mortgage-free smart homes for our nation’s most severely wounded heroes, that allows them to regain their freedom and independence. These new smart homes feature smart technology, low tables, wide hallways and additional amenities that help make each home completely accessible. The builds are made possible through the generous monetary and in-kind donations from various national partners, sub-contractors and the American public.

Approximately 430,000 veterans currently live in Tennessee, making it the state with the largest percentage

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of veteran population in the nation. The mission of the Gary Sinise Foundation, founded in 2011 by Academy Award nominated actor, Gary Sinise, is to serve our country by honoring our defenders, veterans, first responders, their families and those in need. Of the organization's move to our area, Gary Sinise says, "Our new Nashville headquarters will give us a stronger national presence and the chance to engage more easily with the communities we serve." The foundation recently gave a \$100,000 grant to Maury County Fire and Rescue after the devastating EF-3 tornado that struck the area in May, underscoring GSF's commitment to our nation's first responders as well as military servicemen.

While the Hargis home is scheduled for completion in November, just in time for Veteran's Day, this past May's Walls of Honor ceremony, is a time for friends and supporters to come together to write personal words of gratitude for Sergeant Hargis and his family on the walls of the home before the sheet rock is put up. After opening remarks and a beautiful rendition of the National Anthem by local songstress Teresa Suber, attendees dispersed around the house and wrote notes for the family on the framing. Above the front door, Sinise himself wrote, "The messages contained within these walls



are written to fill your new home with the love and appreciation of a grateful nation... Your sacrifice will never be forgotten. God Bless You!" A fellow ranger, who was with Josh on that fateful night in October 2013, wrote, "We fight together. We die together." Now, those affirmations and blessings will forever live in the walls of the Hargis' home, surrounding them with the peace and comfort they are so deserving of as they move forward into their next chapter.

When addressing the crowd at the ceremony, Josh told us that while being injured was terrible, it was also how he learned that he was a part of something so much bigger than himself. And that, he says, has made the journey worth it.

Throughout the construction of each specially adapted R.I.S.E. home building project, the Gary Sinise Foundation encourages participation from the local community through the foundation's "Buy a Brick" program, where community members can

purchase an actual brick that will be inscribed with their personal message to the family. The brick will then be incorporated into the home's flagpole base. Visit donate.garysinisefoundation.org or call Jen Dicker at 615.575.3566 for more info.

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