



# A Lifetime of Helping Others

ACTOR AND VISIONARY AWARD RECIPIENT JOE MANTEGNA MAKES HIS MARK IN MANY WAYS, INCLUDING ON VETERANS' CAUSES

BY ALEX BEN BLOCK

**N**EXT MAY, Joe Mantegna, the Tony Award-winning actor and star of the CBS show “Criminal Minds,” will co-host the National Memorial Day Concert. It will mark the 15th consecutive year that he will help present a star-studded tribute to those who served in the military.

However, for a second year he will not be accompanied by a favorite uncle, Willie Novelli. The World War II veteran had accompanied Mantegna to every show since the early 2000s. Uncle Willie passed away in January 2014 at the age of 91.

“He was like a second father to me,” said Mantegna, “because my dad was in ill health when I was growing up and passed away in 1971 [when he was 24]. Uncle Willie kind of filled that slot for me. I would take him everywhere, including the Memorial Day concert.”

“Joe really had a warm and healthy respect for

his uncle,” said retired Col. Dave Fabian, chief of staff for the Army Historical Foundation, where Mantegna serves as spokesman for a planned \$200 million Army museum envisioned for a 2019 opening. “He introduced him to me and his uncle was a character in his own right. But the point is Joe had great respect for him and his service. Joe then simply transferred that to other veterans regardless of where they did their service.”

That begins to explain how an Italian-American from the hard streets of Chicago, who never served in the military, has become a leading spokesman for veterans, military causes and philanthropies.

Mantegna is being honored for that work and other with the 2015 Visionary Award from the Los Angeles Press Club. It will be presented at tonight’s National Arts & Entertainment Journalism Awards.



Above: Gary Sinise and Joe Mantegna at the Memorial Day concert in 2010.  
Left: Mantegna takes pride in supporting the men and women in uniform.

Mantegna found his passion for military causes after hosting the 2002 Memorial Day Concert, an emotional telecast haunted by the memories of the 9-11 attacks the year before.



Uncle Willie and Joe in front of a Chicago neighborhood grocery.



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Mantegna found his passion for military causes after hosting the 2002 Memorial Day Concert, an emotional telecast haunted by the memories of the 9-11 attacks the year before.

“Doing that concert that year,” recalled Mantegna, “I can only describe it as one of two times in my life when I walked on a stage and felt like a bolt of lightning went through my chest.”

The first time was when at 16 he tried out for a school play. He didn’t get the part, but knew immediately that he wanted to be an actor.

The memories of the Memorial Day concert also live with him. Mantegna went onstage to read the words of three New York firemen who had lost their sons in the terrorist attacks.

“I came away with this feeling of, ‘Oh my god, Memorial Day is not only an important holiday, to me it became *the* most important holiday we celebrate in this country.’ What resonated in my mind was without Memorial Day, we have no reason to have any other holidays because we won’t have a United States.

“I realized I was one of those people that took that for granted,” added Mantegna.

“So this all kind of hit me like a ton of bricks,

and from that moment on it became a hot button for me.”

**‘Just a Mouthpiece’**

Joseph Anthony Mantegna, Jr. was born in Chicago in 1947 to a proudly Italian-American family. His mother, who is now 100 years old, was a shipping clerk, and his father worked as an insurance salesman.

He has made more than 200 film and TV appearances, and is also a producer, writer, and director. His memorable movies include parts in *The Godfather, Part III*, *House of Games* and *Bugsy*. He has voiced the part of Fat Tony on “The Simpsons” for the past 15 years.

His other TV work includes Emmy nominations for three miniseries: “The Last Don” (1997), “The Starter Wife” (2007) and “The Rat Pack” (1999), playing Dean Martin.

Mantegna has been able to incorporate his passions into his work. His “Criminal Minds” character David Rossi is a former Marine. In 2014, Mantegna directed as well as starred in two episodes built around Rossi’s commanding officer in Vietnam. The late Meshach Taylor starred as the former officer, now a homeless veteran who is able to transition on the show with help from the New Directions shelter in West Los Angeles.

Shortly after Taylor died, a third episode had

# CRIMINAL MINDS

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We love you Joe!

Love,

Erica and your CM family  
xo





Mantegna holds a card showing Fat Tony, the character he voices, with a wounded soldier and fan of "The Simpsons."

Rossi flying to L.A. for his character's funeral, which included full military honors. It featured two real-life three-star generals.

Mantegna is the honorary chairman for the Salute to Hospitalized Veterans and often visits VA Hospitals. He received the USO of Metropolitan Washington's Merit Award and has

helped raise millions for charities including the Barbara Sinatra Children's Center and Breast Cancer Awareness.

"If my position as a celebrity can help somebody by me just showing up," said Mantegna, "why wouldn't I do it?"

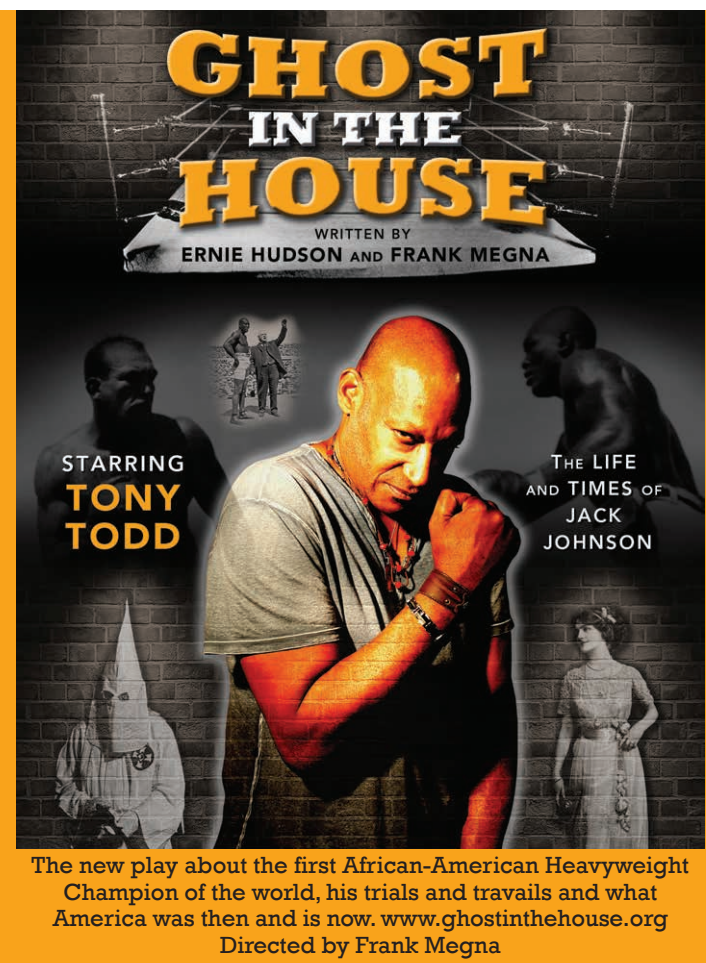
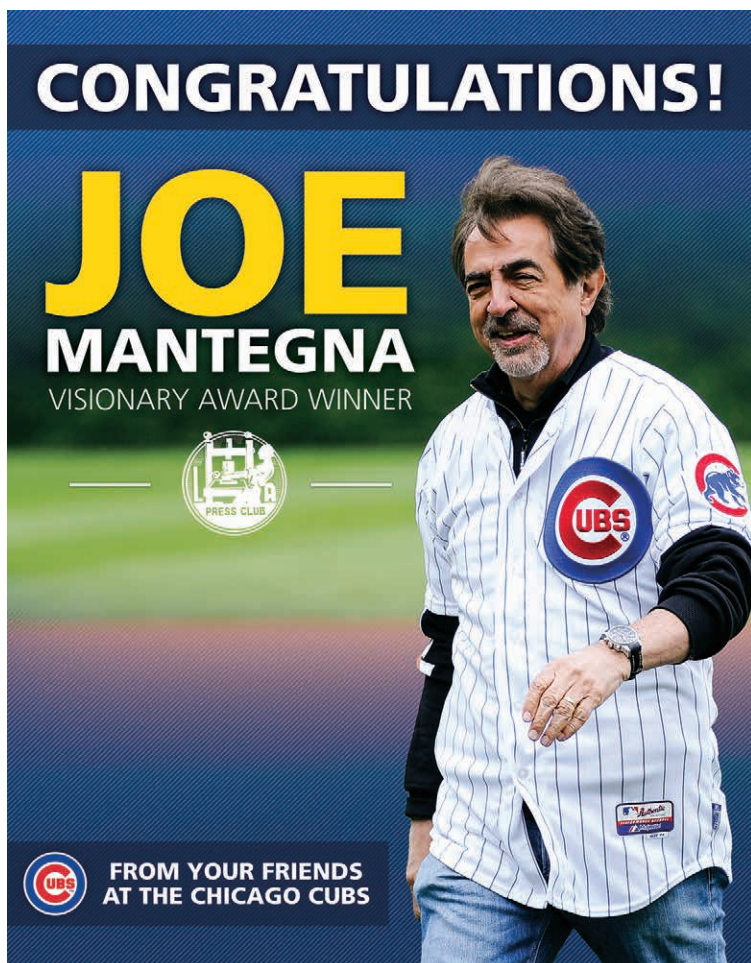
He is also a strong supporter of autism charities. His daughter Mia was diagnosed as a preschooler and today as an adult still lives with Mantegna and his wife of 40 years, Arlene.

"That touches me on a whole other level," said Mantegna, "because I can relate one on one to what the families that have this go through."

Mantegna also is a partner in a production company. One of his projects is the documentary *Choc'late Soldiers*, about African American soldiers sent to fight alongside the British in World War II. It is due for release in 2016.

Mantegna recognizes that his celebrity allows him to shine a light on worthy causes, but he doesn't accept glory for the role.

"I'm just a mouthpiece, a symbol of the work," insisted Mantegna. "It's like I'm the general of the Army but it's all the grunts paying the price who do the work. I'm just the face guy who gets the accolades."



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