

From Playing a Veteran on Screen to **Helping** Vets Across the Country

ACTOR GARY SINISE EARNS THE LOS ANGELES PRESS CLUB'S BILL ROSENDAHL PUBLIC SERVICE AWARD BY JOHN GITTELSON

Actors transform themselves to play a character, adopting accents, gaining weight, altering their posture. For Gary Sinise, one role transformed his life.

His big-screen breakthrough was playing the wounded Vietnam War vet Lieutenant Dan Taylor in the 1994 film *Forrest Gump*. The performance landed him an Academy Award nomination. There's an indelible scene when Lt. Dan reunites with Gump, played by Tom Hanks, to join Gump's shrimping enterprise. Gump asks what he's doing.

"Well, I thought I'd try out my sea legs," Dan, whose wounds left him a double amputee, replies dryly—a study in stoicism.

Long after that role, Sinise volunteers off stage and out of the limelight to serve veterans.

Tonight, Sinise is receiving the Los Angeles Press Club's Bill Rosendahl Public Service Award,

Being recognized as Lt. Dan Taylor in *Forrest Gump*, made a connection with Afghanistan and Iraq veterans being treated in the military hospital Sinise visited. He was inspired to help veterans, first responders and their families.

The First Responders Outreach program helps to provide funding for critically needed equipment and other resources.



named for the late Los Angeles politician and Vietnam War veteran, who was often described as "the conscience of the City Council."

Decorated actor Joe Mantegna said that all the acclaim Sinise has received for acting only reveals one side of him.

"One of the things I've learned," said Mantegna, "is that a person's talent is best appreciated when their character as a human being is equal to that talent. Gary Sinise, a man I've known for over 40 years, is one such individual whose professional talents are only equaled by his stature as a person. I consider him a role model for being a husband, a father and a citizen of the world."

Sinise, 68, grew up in the Chicago area, the oldest of three children. His first ambition was becoming a rock star. His parents paid for guitar lessons starting when he was in fourth grade,



and he joined a band called the Beach Dwellers. Like many aspiring rockers of the day, he got into pot and booze. He sniffed oven cleaner from plastic bags to get high. He got busted for driving with a fake license—at age 14.

"I was heading down a dark path," he writes in his 2019 autobiography, *Grateful American: A Journey from Self to Service*.

One day when he was a sophomore at Highland Park High School, he was hanging out in the hall with a couple of long-haired band mates when the drama teacher invited Sinise to audition for *West Side Story*. He bungled his lines during a tryout, but made the audience laugh. The next morning, the teacher posted a cast list. Sinise found his name near the bottom, assigned to play Pepe, a member of the Sharks gang.

"Maybe she saw some potential in myself I didn't see," Sinise writes.



He caught the acting bug. Fresh out of high school at age 18, he co-founded the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago, where he worked with future stars including John Malkovich, Joan Allen, Laurie Metcalf and Sinise's future wife, Moira Harris. He co-starred in a 1981 stage production of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, playing George, the companion and caretaker of the simple-minded Lennie, played by Malkovich. Sinise and Malkovich teamed up again for a 1992 filmed version that Sinise directed. The production won raves for the passion Sinise brought to the project.

Sinise has had a parade of star turns. He played Tom Joad, the Oklahoma refugee, on Broadway in a Tony Award-winning production of Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. In 1995, he teamed again with Hanks, playing astronaut Ken Mattingly in *Apollo 13*. He won a leading actor Golden Globe in 1996 in *Truman*, a made-for-television biography of the 33rd U.S. president. In 1998, he won a primetime Emmy for lead actor in *George Wallace*, playing the pro-segregation Alabama governor and failed presidential candidate, who spent his last years using a wheelchair—like Lt. Dan—after a failed assassination attempt. From 2004 to 2013 he starred

Above: Gary Sinise and Joe Mantegna are longtime co-hosts of the annual National Memorial Day Concert held on the west lawn of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

Top, left: Retired SSG Bobby Dove and his family were provided a specially adapted home by Gary Sinise Foundation's R.I.S.E. (Restoring Independence Supporting Empowerment) program.

Left: U.S. Army Col. (Ret.) Greg Gadson is an ambassador for GSF in Virginia, and joined the Board of Directors in 2020.





Above: Sinise helps at a Serving Heroes meal which are provided to thank defenders on the U.S., Japan, Korea and Okinawa bases.

During a concert in Georgia, Sinise calls up to the stage band audio engineer, Tristan Beache, and recounts how Beache joined the service after going on several tours. Before reporting to Ft. Benning, the band crew took turns cutting off his waist-long dreadlocks.

The Gary Sinise Foundation supports World War II veterans. The Soaring Valor program takes them and their guardians, to New Orleans to tour The National WWII Museum, accompanied by students who learn their stories.



as Detective Dan Taylor on "CSI:NY."

"Being on the series, knowing I did not have to worry about the next acting job during that time, allowed me to travel the world in support of our defenders," Sinise writes on his website. "It gave me the resources to contribute to non-profit organizations and eventually establish my own foundation."

In 2003, eight years after *Forrest Gump* won the Best Picture Oscar, Sinise paid a visit to a U.S. military hospital in Germany, where veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq were being treated.

"I was nervous to meet these wounded service members," Sinise writes on the website for his Gary Sinise Foundation. "How should I greet them? How should I interact?"

He entered a ward with patients recovering from wounds that were mild enough that they could be patched up and returned to the battlefield.

"So many had that 1,000-yard stare," Sinise writes. "All were quiet, somber. But everything changed after a soldier looked up and shouted, 'Lt. Dan!' Their eyes lit up and they started to gather around me. Smiles now, they wanted to talk about *Forrest Gump*. They identified with my character's story in a profound way that I hadn't expected."

Sinise left the hospital a different man, he wrote. "It changed me forever."

To raise money and awareness, Sinise has performed more



than 500 fund-raising concerts with the Lt. Dan Band, which is touring military bases around the country this summer. The Gary Sinise Foundation raised \$58 million in 2021, 81% of which went to helping veterans, first responders and their families. Organization Executive Director Donna Palmer noted how Sinise inspires others.

"He is a pillar of compassion and strength for so many people around the country, and we are blessed to have a leader so engaged and so committed to helping us reach as many individuals in need as possible," she said.

Appreciation comes from even higher levels. In 2008, President George W. Bush awarded Sinise the Presidential Citizens Medal, citing, "his efforts to improve the human condition and his strong commitment to the selfless men and women who devote their lives to military service."

A theme running through Sinise's career is that of ordinary men rising to heroic heights. It's something he drew from his family history. His grandfather and uncles fought in World War II. His father served in the Navy in the early 1950s. When Sinise was a kid, the Vietnam War was on the evening news every night. His late brother-in-law, Boyd McCanna "Mac" Harris, was a West Point graduate who served two tours of duty in Vietnam. His wife's other brother, Arthur Harris, was also a Vietnam Vet. Sinise felt these veterans had gotten a raw deal, returning home to a lack of appreciation and even disapproval for answering the call of duty in an unpopular war. His mission has been to use his fame to change those attitudes and help those in need.

"I still get recognized as Lt. Dan everywhere I go," Sinise writes on his website. "By embracing that, by making it a part of my life, I've been able to help the real Lt. Dans in the world." 🇺🇸

Thank you for your leadership.

Rita Wilson and Tom Hanks