

MASTERS Audio Club, December 2013
Gary Sinise: Actor, Film Director, Musician, Humanitarian



Gary Sinise has stood as an advocate of America's servicemen and women for over 30 years. His portrayal of Lt. Dan Taylor in the landmark film *Forrest Gump* formed an enduring connection with the military community. Since September 11, 2001, his dedication to our nation's active-duty defenders, veterans, and first responders has become a tireless crusade of support, service, and gratitude. Interviewed by **Winn Claybaugh**, this beautiful, humble, and kindhearted actor, musician, and humanitarian is the ultimate mentor on what it means to have a servant's heart.

Winn: Hi everybody, Winn Claybaugh here, and I just have to say right off the bat that I've done more preparation for this interview than any interview I've done in eighteen years. I've lost more sleep over this interview than any interview I've done in eighteen years. I've got sheets and sheets of paper here to prepare me, but I've also never been more honored than to be sitting with an incredible, beautiful man that I'm with right now. Welcome, Gary Sinise, to MASTERS.

Gary: Thank you so much, Winn. It's great to be here. Thank you.

Winn: What a kind, generous man you are to open up your vacation home to me to be able to come down here and interrupt your wonderful time with your wife to be able to do this interview. I love the format of this because it's—first of all, it's audios not videos so you and I can look the way we look, all casual here.

Gary: Let's not talk about that too much.

Winn: But the good thing is I think this will go places. People can pop this CD in and listen in their car. They can listen to it while they're at the gym. They can play this in staff meetings. They can listen to it on their computer, but it's going to have a life all of its own for people to learn about the great works that you do through the Gary Sinise Foundation and the other organizations that you're involved in.

Gary: Thank you.

Winn: I'm honored.

Gary: Thank you so much.

Winn: I'm also going to be emotional for this, so just bear with me through that. The excuse that I give people is that my daughter is eighteen months old, and so I'm still hormonal from her birth. So we'll just leave it at that. And you have a daughter, Sophia, as well.

Gary: I have two, but mine are a wee bit older than yours, 24 and 21, and then I have son who is 22 as well.

Winn: Your daughter Sophia is a hairdresser.

Gary: She is. She's a graduate of the Paul Mitchell School, which is great, and now she's working and it's terrific.

Winn: It's always good to have kids that grow up and work, right?

Gary: I'm very proud of her, yes.

Winn: Everybody knows you from your TV work. I can't believe it's been twenty years since *Forrest Gump*.

Gary: Yes, we were shooting that right now twenty years ago, and then it came out. so, in September of '93, we were shooting, we began shooting, and then it came out in July of '94. So, its twentieth anniversary is coming up pretty soon.

Winn: And, then *Apollo 13*, another one of my favorite, favorite movies.

Gary: I did that one I think right after *Forrest Gump*. Ron Howard was casting that movie when *Forrest Gump* came out.

Winn: Wow. You're a Golden Globe and Emmy Award-winning actor, but I have to read this because again we know you through your acting and your movie roles and your celebrity, but the reason why we're here today is because of the incredible work that you do with military families, and I'm going to read this because I want to get it right.

Gary Sinise serves as a spokesperson for both the American Veterans Disabled for Life Memorial Foundation and Disabled American Veterans and was instrumental in raising funds for the Pentagon Memorial in Washington, the Brooklyn Wall of Remembrance in New York City. You serve as an executive counsel for the Medal of Honor Foundation and the USO, advisory board member for Hope for the Warriors. In recognition for your humanitarian work, Gary Sinise has received, on behalf of the troops and veterans, many distinguished awards including the Bob Hope Award for Excellence in Entertainment from the Medal of Honor Society, the Spirit of the USO Award, the Ellis Island Medal of Honor, and in 2008 recipient of the Presidential Citizens Medal.

This list goes on and on. To hear this, in addition to the awards that you received as an actor, does weigh more and have more impact on you, on your heart, on your soul, than the other?

Gary: You know, you work hard and so many people work very, very hard and do great things and they're never recognized for it. To be recognized for it from time to time for doing what you love to do, that's like icing on the cake and it's very humbling and we all just do our job and go out there and do our work and we don't do it for those reasons, but of course, it's nice that the work is recognized.

The thing about what I do on the military front is—part of what I do and I'm able to bring to the men and women that serve our country and have sacrificed for our country is awareness of what they go through because I am in the public eye. So, if I'm recognized for doing something on behalf of the men and women, to me it's shining a light on me so that I can help shine a light on them, and I want the American public to know what they're going through and to be aware of things and to think a little bit more about that, and if you're out there serving our country and you're in a trench and you're getting blown up and sometimes people don't even know that you're going through those things, and you have to go through the difficult challenges of the residual effects of those types of things for the rest of your life. If someone or some organization can help support that and shine a light on it to help your life be a little bit more joyful as you go on from the battle wounds of war, then that's a way that I can serve and I feel that's a reward in itself.

Winn: I remember hearing you speak where—I can't remember what it was for—but, you were being honored and you were being called a hero, and probably because of a movie role, and yet in your mind what you were saying was, "Wait a minute, you're honoring me as a hero?"

Gary: I know a lot of extraordinary people who've done very heroic things in their lives. They inspire me. I'm an actor. I go out there and play parts and learn lines and sometimes the days are long and sometimes they're tough, but then I get to dust myself off at the end of the day and take a nice shower and have a nice meal and go on with life. The men and women who serve our country and sacrifice, our first responders, the people who go into harm's way on a daily basis, they have a difficult job. Our police officers—who wants to drive around in a car all night long? What do you do? You're looking for trouble, bad guys. Going off to war is a difficult challenge, obviously, and our first responders on the fire front where they run into buildings to try to get people out. That's heroic stuff.

In California, these massive, massive giant fires for miles and miles and miles with thousands of firefighters out there sweating and living out there, they're just trying to put out the fire, and those are real heroic actions to me. What I do is just simply try to shine a light on people that don't get a lot of publicity for what they do.

Winn: What do you think it was about your Lieutenant Dan character in *Forrest Gump* that people resonated with so much with, that especially in the military community?

Gary: Well, in the military community, I think that was an interesting one because Lieutenant Dan was a Vietnam veteran, and we remember, you and I remember quite well what happened to our Vietnam veterans when they came home from war. It was a terrible period in our history where the country was divided and people—and Vietnam veterans got the brunt of the blame of everything. They had to go into hiding. It was terribly tragic. We had over

300,000 wounded in that ten years of war, 300,000. We lost 58,000 on the battlefield. And then you go off to war, you serve your country, and you come home and your country spits on you. That's pretty bad.

Winn: Literally.

Gary: Yeah, literally, and even worse from some of the friends I've talked to about what happened when they got off the plane. So, I was motivated a lot by the Vietnam veterans that I know, and I found that Vietnam veterans really responded to that role. And then, beyond that, just veterans who were injured in battle and had catastrophic injuries responded to the role.

As time went on and we started deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan and we started having men and women come back injured, catastrophically injured, the more I found that they seemed to relate to that character. I'd walk into a hospital room, and somebody would look at me and say, "Hey, Lieutenant Dan, look at me," and there they are missing their legs for real.

What the role did, it was kind of a door opener for me. I could easily walk into a room. Somebody might not even know who I am, what my real name is, but they would recognize me from the film because so many people have seen the film, and it began a dialogue. They automatically thought, hey, if you're laying in a hospital bed missing your legs, that I understood what they were going through just simply because I played the part.

I never could have predicted at that time that it would lead into a full-time commitment to our disabled and wounded veterans and be so much a part of my life. At the time, I really wanted to play it because I had known so many Vietnam veterans, but did I know that it was going to take on this life beyond the movie role, the funny guy in the movie that Lieutenant Dan was and sort of heart-breaking aspect of it? No, I didn't know that. And so be it. I accepted that a long time ago that the movie role was a little bit bigger than just a part.

Winn: Which, I want to get back to the other role that you've taken on. But today, the country is divided with what's going on in Iraq and Afghanistan and yet why is it different today that when our heroes come home, our military personnel come home, they are welcomed, they are embraced differently than after the Vietnam war? What's changed?

Gary: Well, I think we still have our anti-military folks. They're never going to like military. They don't understand it. They think anybody who goes into the military does it because they can't do anything else and stuff like that.

Winn: I thought that was about hairdressing, that they go into hairdressing if they can't do anything else.

Gary: [laughs] No.

Winn: I guess we all get that one.

Gary: They certainly get that, and it still exists. There are still people that are kind of ignorant about what a military person actually is, what motivates them and everything. So we still have that but there is a big difference because we did

learn some hard lessons from Vietnam about how not to treat the warrior, the defender.

And after September 11th, we saw what happened when motivated and committed terrorists with box cutters got on a plane and how much damage they could do with a simple box cutter. It's a scary world out there, and I think people recognize that it is a scary world, that we need a strong defense. If the United States doesn't have the best equipped, best trained, strongest military in the world, then that means someone else will. And the other powers that are vying for that spot are powers that we don't want them to have the strongest, most devoted force in the world. So I think people recognize that we have to stand behind our men and women who serve, whether you like the reasons that they're going to war or not. I think we learned those lessons in Vietnam, thankfully, and that's something that I try to just highlight and promote. Nobody likes war. Nobody wants to send the men and women to war. But every president, if you look at our history, whether Democrat or Republican, has sent the men and women into harm's way at some point. It's just a fact that we live in. So we have to keep these people strong. We have to do what we can to let them know that we appreciate the freedom that they provide.

Winn: You're going to educate us about that because I have a lot of questions about what more we can do. You said that you walk into a hospital room, and maybe they don't know the name Gary Sinise but they know the name Lieutenant Dan, which you turned into a whole big campaign. People now know you as a musician as well because of what you've done with the Lieutenant Dan Band, which didn't exist really. You played around with some friends but you didn't really create a band called Lieutenant Dan to go out there and do performances.

Gary: No, no. I mean, back in the late '90s I started playing again. I played as a kid and I played all the way up in my early twenties.

Winn: You played the bass, right?

Gary: Bass and guitar and I was in bands through high school and everything and into my early twenties, and then I got so busy with my theater company. I started a theater company in Chicago, Steppenwolf, with my pals there. We got so busy with that that I just didn't play for a long time until late '90s I picked it up again. And then after September 11th, I just knew there was a role for me to play in supporting our men and women so I volunteered to start visiting them overseas in Iraq, Afghanistan, around the world with the USO, and I'd shake hands, take pictures.

Winn: You volunteered. I heard you begged to be able to do these USO tours.

Gary: I think at the time—remember, I wasn't on *CSI: New York* at that time. So, again, I had only done—I'd done some pretty big movies but I wasn't a big star or anything like that. So I remember calling the USO several times and leaving messages. I don't think they actually knew who I was until they said, "I'm the guy that played Lieutenant Dan." Then they kind of got it. I said I wanted to go out and support our men and women and do some tours.

So I would just go out and take pictures with them and sit and eat and chat with them, and visit. Eventually, the USO allowed me to take my musician pals with me. It was really a ragtag sort of garage-band effort at the point, but I called it Lieutenant Dan Band, and I had partnered up with some of my Chicago pals. One guy, Kimo Williams, was a Chicago composer and he brought in some other local musicians that he knew. I started setting up tours with the USO, and we started going. We're in our tenth year now, and I realize because I—and wherever I was going in the military, they were calling me Lieutenant Dan. So I just said, when I started taking the band, we need a name. We're going to call it Gary Sinise and the Lieutenant Dan Band, and ten years later, we've played all over the world several times and done hundreds and hundreds of shows, and we continue to this day. I leave tomorrow to go do another one in New York.

Winn: I hear you're doing like 40 or 50 concerts a year?

Gary: It's between 40 and 50. It has averaged out to that, somewhere around that.

Winn: Those are all to raise money, correct? Or are some of them just to go for morale purposes, to go and sit with the troops and meet with the military personnel, correct?

Gary: Yeah, all the USO shows would be in the spirit of Bob Hope. You go—and great entertainers who have entertained over the years. You go and you play for the troops wherever it is. We've played in Afghanistan, Guantanamo Bay, Germany, Italy, you name it. We've been all over the world. Asia and all around this country on military bases. I average about twelve USO shows a year. I think I've done—since 2003, the band has probably done 150 USO shows, just USO shows. It's always been a non-for-profit effort for me. I've donated my time. In the beginning, I donated my personal money to be able to go out and do it. Then we were able to create some other sponsorships, and now through my foundation, ways to fund all the troop support, but it's a nonprofit part of my foundation. The Lieutenant Dan Band is a program part of my foundation to serve and honor and entertain military veterans, raise money for our wounded, first responder events and occasionally probably, you know, maybe six or seven of those shows out of the 45 will be corporate sponsored shows where we actually make my corporate rate, which is substantially more than what I might charge a charity or have to break even on a charity or something like that. And the money from the corporate rate goes back into the fund and it helps support the charitable donations of the band. So it's really, I donate all my time and never made any money on it. It's all part of the mission of the Gary Sinise Foundation and Gary Sinise personally to go out there and do what I can to support our men and women. We've beat up this military in the last dozen years and they need some help.

Winn: I went to the website, Gary Sinise Foundation, and just at the USO tours, and it just scrolled and scrolled and scrolled all the appearances that you've made, that the band has made. It was incredible.

Gary: Yeah, there's a whole series of USO shows, which is, like I said, upwards of 150. And then there's another just big history of just appearances and charity

concerts and that kind of thing. It's been great. I mean, we've raised a lot of money and I've just been out there helping a lot of different charities, and now I have my own charity and other folks like Paul Mitchell School and great companies and everything are recognizing some of the work that I've been involved in over the years and wanting to support that. So I'm very grateful to everybody who supported.

Winn: You mentioned that in your first visits, you wanted to go meet with the military personnel, meet with the troops and have a conversation with them and sit and talk with them, which I know just had a huge impact for them. And people listening to this thinking, "Well, gosh, if I was famous like Gary Sinise, of course I would go do that, too. I would have an impact to be able to use my celebrity power to make a difference," but you don't have to have a celebrity power to make a difference. Can you give a challenge or a call to action about that?

Gary: Oh, absolutely. In communities all over this country, you have military families, somebody's got a son, a daughter, a mom, a dad, brother or sister serving in the military and maybe has sacrificed, maybe Gold Star families, maybe they lost a son or daughter, mom or dad. You've got wounded. So I always encourage people. They say, "Well, what national organizations can I support?" Well, support the Gary Sinise Foundation for sure, but also look within your own communities and find out, "Are there veterans here who need help?" You might have veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, who have incredible stories of things that they have survived and things they did in their lives that nobody in town knows about because those folks just don't reveal that part of themselves very easily. I'm sure all across this country, there are people with amazing stories of heroism and sacrifice in defense of freedom that people don't even know about. So I always encourage people locally. It starts local. Help within your own communities. Yeah, there are big national organizations you can send in a check or something like that, but if you want to put your hands on the problem, and I go all over the country meeting the people that need the help, I want them to know that I'm personally involved in this. But if you want to put your hands on somebody who might need some help who sacrificed a lot for our country, look in your own town at the veterans who might be there and see if they need help.

Winn: I love that message because it's always that. People say, "Gosh, I would love to jump on a plane and go feed the hungry orphans in Africa." Well, what about the hungry in your own backyard? I'd love to go do a USO tour. Well, what about the veterans in your own backyard? What about the military personnel who are coming home now and they have specific needs? What are you doing about that?

Gary: I think that's how we meet the challenge of the problem. The VA is this big bureaucracy. Sure, it helps a lot of people, but then you always hear about the people who are just backlogged and don't get the assistance they need because there's too much there. So what about just looking for the veterans, you know, there's a local VFW. I remember in my little town, we had the local VFW. It was all the veterans of foreign wars, and I always wondered as a little

kid, who's in there? They had an old antique cannon outside the place. Do you remember those places? I always wondered, "Who's in those VFWs?" But I never wondered enough to go inside and ask as a kid. Now, as a grown-up who is very focused on our military and stuff, I look at that, and there's old veterans in there who have incredible stories, who did incredible things, who survived just unimaginable things.

I'm involved with the Medal of Honor Society, and every one of those heroes has just an incredible story of survival and sacrifice, and usually you receive the Medal of Honor, either you get killed trying to help somebody and save somebody or you survive trying to help and save somebody. Incredible stories, and there are veterans all around this country who have those stories who might need some help.

Winn: My father was a veteran from World War II. He was a torpedoman on a destroyer, and you're right. He's not forthcoming with the stories, but if you sit and talk and ask him, he can't remember what he ate for breakfast but he can relate story after story and the sacrifices and what he went through vividly.

Gary: I'm sure. And certainly World War II, when you look at the magnitude and the massiveness of what was going on at that time. We look at the challenges and the dangers of the world today and everything like that, but I narrated a piece on the History Channel called *World War II in HD*. It was a really comprehensive look at how much destruction was going on at that time in the world, just unimaginable death and destruction going on. Sixty, eighty million people killed. Entire cities just gone into rubble. Islands—thousands dead on the beaches of Iwo Jima and Okinawa and Guadalcanal and these places like that, just unimaginable things. And people survived those things. Well, we have a new generation of heroes today who have gone through just so much death and destruction. We've deployed this military over and over and over and over again, sometimes seven, eight, nine deployments through the past dozen years. If you have a little child, that mom or dad may have been gone almost the entire childhood of their kid because of the wars and the nature of the wars. So while they're not on the front pages all the time anymore, and we still do have several thousand in Afghanistan and they're still getting hurt and they're still getting killed, there are stories that need to be told and there are men and women who need help.

Winn: So, in your educated and experienced opinion, what can we do? The soldiers who fought back then in World War II and Vietnam, they still have needs today. What can we do today? Then, we're going to get into Gary Sinise Foundation and the incredible work that you're doing with building these smart homes for these wounded warriors.

Gary: Having Vietnam veteran friends, this war today has been something—it's been a new mission for a lot of our Vietnam veterans. So many of them remember what it was like to come home from war. I had a buddy of mine tell me that he got off the plane feeling great to be home, so happy to be home. He lost buddies over there, some terrible, terrible stuff, but great to be back in the US

of A, and he's walking in his uniform and somebody threw a bag of crap at him. There he is standing after a yearlong tour, losing buddies, with a bag of crap, human waste on his uniform. That's what he got. That was his welcome home.

Well, for many of our Vietnam veterans today, a new mission for them has been to make sure that our Iraq and Afghanistan veterans get the welcome home that they deserve, they get the support they deserve, and that they know they're appreciated. I've met hundreds if not thousands of Vietnam veterans across the country, and the Patriot Guard and some other organizations who look for the returning veterans, who go to the hospitals to see the wounded, who make sure that their experience in Vietnam and what happened to them when they came home—because they know what war is like—that our men and women today are taken care of. That's a new mission for us.

Winn: Did you see the news story—and I'm trying to track this guy down because there's a lot of us want to donate to him—but he has thousands and thousands of flags. And wherever he hears about a military funeral, he will line the roads for sometimes miles with these thousands of flags. He's just doing it out of his own pocket and getting volunteers and people. Have you seen that?

Gary: And has been doing it for several years. Yeah, I've seen that story. I can't remember his name, but I'm very aware. I may have even sent in a little donation to him or something like that myself. People like that are taking up the charge. They don't want what happened to our Vietnam veterans to happen to today's veteran. They want the return home that our World War II veterans got. There were World War II veterans that had—they had a slow boat home, so they had a month-long transition from their war, and it was a hellish war. Sometimes, I mean, in that war, you left and you came back when it was over. It wasn't a yearlong tour. But they had a month to transition on the boat to get home. My uncle told me about returning home from World War II and coming into New York Harbor and seeing the Statue of Liberty, like so many of us have heard, and just everybody on that—just imagine. After seeing so many people get killed and such devastation and horror, knowing that here you are. Tyranny was defeated. Freedom won. Freedom survived. And here you are coming in, pulling in after a month-long boat ride home and seeing the Statue of Liberty. Just imagine how a young guy—my uncle was 24 years old when that happened. Imagine thousands of guys on that ship just staring at the Statue of Liberty coming into New York Harbor. After all that war and all that devastation, just so moving.

Winn: I saw that film that you did. Was it *Uncle Buck*?

Gary: *Uncle Jack*.

Winn: *Uncle Jack*.

Gary: That's my Uncle Jack that I was just talking about. Thirty missions he survived over Europe as a B17 navigator, and he saw a lot of planes go down around him. They would send thousands of planes because a bunch of them were going to get shot down. Every time you went up you wondered, "Every time I go up I see guys go down in flames. Is it going to be me today?"

Winn: How do we teach the youth of today? I remember kind of a harsh reality a couple years ago. I posted a tribute to my father for his service. I posted it on my Facebook page, and I got one negative comment about it. Which just was like, what? I just never imagined somebody would send something ugly and nasty to me because of me honoring my father, a veteran. It was just this harsh wakeup call to me like, "Wow, there's people who really believe that." Yet we enjoy the freedoms that we have because of the sacrifice of those heroes in the past. How do you educate that, the youth of America?

Gary: I don't think we teach that. I work with the Medal of Honor Foundation and we have a great program called the Character Development Program, and Medal of Honor recipients will go into schools and talk about character and sacrifice and service and all these things that are kind of important to them. They don't necessarily go in and just tell war stories and stuff like that, but they talk about what means something to them. They go off to war, they have the American flag as a symbol to them of home and country, and they see it flying over a battlefield, or something like that, that has been devastated by a battle the night before. That means something. That gets them through.

The Character Development Program through the Medal of Honor Foundation wants to promote character integrity, patriotism, service, sacrifice—real sacrifice, service above self, all those things that we don't really teach in our school. So what the foundation is trying to do, the society, is trying to get that Character Development Program into schools where teachers will actually use that Character Development Program to talk about that kind of stuff. And you'd be—I don't know maybe you wouldn't be shocked at how hard it is to get schools to recognize that that stuff is important to teach.

You know, in World War II, there was no question. It was very clear. It was a battle between imperialism, tyranny, oppression, or freedom. One was going to win. Thankfully freedom won, and it was very clear and everybody knew it, and there was kind of a gratitude toward our veterans at that time because everyone had somebody overseas. Today, it's not true. We have a real disconnect between the average American and its military. It's just a small, small percentage of our citizens serve in our military or know somebody that serves in the military. So there's a disconnect between what the military does.

We all felt that our backs against the wall when we were attacked on September 11th. People got scared. All of a sudden, anthrax is floating through the mail. Now, we're, "What's going on? Are we going to be attacked again?" Suicide bombers are killing civilians on our soil, thousands of them at once. People were scared. People were nervous. People wanted something to be done with our military. But time passes and people get complacent again, and they don't think about it until the next time their backs are against the wall and who is going to do something about it? It's going to be the U.S. military, and that's our young sons and daughters. If it's not your son or my son, it's somebody else's son or daughter.

Winn: I was just in Ontario, California, and I noticed that every lamppost had a banner featuring a different military person from their community.

Gary: Fantastic.

Winn: Yeah, it was great.

Gary: Somebody who had been lost?

Winn: No, somebody who is currently serving. I thought that was just so wonderful.

Gary: That's terrific. That's like the yellow ribbon, in a way.

Winn: You're not in name only. You're not just volunteering your time and showing up here and there because it looks good for your celebrity, for your future movie roles. You started the foundation, the Gary Sinise Foundation, which again, to put your name on a foundation your name is on the line here. You've really got to perform and deliver both financially as well—and to run a nonprofit. All eyes are on you. How much of the money is really actually going to where it needs to go? I understand the nonprofit world from that perspective, too. But then also to be able to deliver the services that you do, which is phenomenal. Can you talk about the Gary Sinise Foundation? I know that things changed for you. Not that you weren't heavily involved, because you were prior to September 11th, but things changed for you after September 11th, and you got even more serious and more committed and then started the foundation.

Gary: I did. I was involved in Vietnam veterans groups in the '80s, and then after *Forrest Gump* I had some association with our disabled veterans because I played one and I got involved with the DAV. That's when I got involved with the Disabled American Veterans. But then, it was September 11th that was a catalyst to a whole other level of service. And I was scared. I was devastated by that, and then I just volunteered right away to do something and started going to visit our service members in Iraq and overseas, just to say thank you, just to make sure that they knew that there were appreciative people back home thinking about them. My Vietnam relatives and friends' experiences of returning home from war, being off at war, were a big catalyst for that, so, I wanted to do what I can. Just the thought of our returning service members who were getting killed, they were getting hurt, and I was reading in the paper all the time, coming home to an ungrateful nation was troubling to me. So I volunteered and started doing that.

Then, I started meeting all kinds of incredible people. I had never been as actively involved in the military as I am now, or first responders, but I started getting involved with all kinds of things and meeting extraordinary people. On my first trip to Iraq, I met a guy named John Vigiano. John is a former marine and highly decorated retired firefighter in New York City. He had a son who was a firefighter and a son who was a police officer, both killed when the towers came down. He spent weeks down there himself, digging through the rubble trying to find his sons as so many people were doing. He wanted to go, as a former marine and a person who had lost something personally and lost friends and everything on September 11th, he wanted to go over to Iraq and thank our

servicemen and women over there. So he was on this first big giant USO tour that I was on in June of 2003. I sat down next to him and we just started talking. John didn't know who I was. I don't know if he saw *Forrest Gump* or saw any of the movies or not. This was prior to *CSI: New York*, so he didn't really know who I was. I just sat and introduced myself. I said, "Hi, I'm Gary. I'm going over to see the troops." He started telling me his story. He gave me a FDNY hat that I wore when I was over there on that trip, and a button that had a picture of his two sons, and he told me his story. And he also on that trip, we became fast friends, and on that trip he said, "Have you ever been to a firehouse for lunch or dinner or anything like that?" And so he invited me to come to the firehouse that lost six guys including one of his sons in Brooklyn, and I went. Shortly after getting back from Iraq, I think in the fall of 2003, I went. I went back to Iraq again in November of 2003. I was doing a lot of tours at that time, but somewhere right around in there I went and John set up a meet and greet for me to come to this firehouse. I went and met all these guys. They told me the stories of all the six guys that they'd lost at that particular firehouse. I had a great dinner with them. I became fast friends with a whole bunch of them, and then I just started doing things, whatever I could to support what they needed. There was a thing called the Fire Family Transport Foundation. I just bought them a van so they could help drive sick firefighters to the hospital.

I remember sending a golfing—I said, "You guys, what do you do here when you're not training?" They said, "Well, we just sit around and watch TV." So, I bought them like a net where they could hit golf balls into the net, and I just started doing stuff for these guys because they needed some support. They lost a lot of people on that day, 343 firefighters and all these police officers and 416 first responders in New York. I ended up helping to raise money to build a memorial there, the Brooklyn Wall of Remembrance, which is a memorial that honors all these firefighters.

And that was a real catalyst. That was a real motivator for me to just continue to stay involved, and meeting these extraordinary people who had done extraordinary things who were selfless people, who now so many of these firefighters from New York City are putting all their efforts into supporting our wounded and helping our wounded. One of the foundations I'm in partnership with is called the Stephen Siller Tunnel to Towers Foundation. That's named after Stephen Siller, a firefighter who was killed on 9/11. We partnered up with them and we're building homes for a lot of our very severely wounded. I go tomorrow and I play a concert for this thing called the Tunnel to Towers Run. Stephen was off work that day, Stephen Siller, and he heard about the fire and the crash at the trade center. He drove into his firehouse. Everybody was gone. They were all at the site. So he grabbed all his stuff, threw it in his truck, and tried to get through the tunnel with all his equipment. The tunnel was jammed with cars. Nobody was moving. So he picked up 75-80 pounds of stuff and ran through the tunnel, and he was killed when he got to the site. A year later, his family started a foundation in his name, and they decided, "Let's have a run, and let's run through the tunnel like Stephen did." It's about a three-and-a-half to four-mile run, and now they get twenty-five to thirty thousand people

running through that tunnel in the same way that Stephen did and it all raises money for the Tunnel to Towers Foundation, and they are our partners, Gary Sinise Foundation partners, to support our wounded and help our military men and women who have responded to 9/11. They're the ones that went off to war in response to what happened on September 11th, and now we're trying to give back to them.

I go tomorrow, Winn, to play a concert. The run is on Sunday, and I'll play a concert. Everybody runs through the tunnel. You've got guys that come from all over the world. There will be firefighters from Australia that will come to New York with all their gear, and they'll run with all their gear like Stephen did through the tunnel, and then they all come to just at the base, you know the New Freedom Tower that's going up. Well, two blocks away and you can see it right here from the stage. We set up the stage in the street, and I play a big concert for everybody that runs through the tunnel.

Winn: Wow.

Gary: It's a magnificent event. When people run out of the tunnel, everybody runs out of the tunnel—lining the street on both sides of the street are firefighters, each with a picture of one of the fallen firefighters around their chest. It's like a banner with a picture on it, and they're lining the streets. So you run through that tunnel, you come out and there's all these faces of all the firefighters who were lost on either side of you as you run through the tunnel toward the finish line. It's magnificent. It's exceptional.

I've just met extraordinary people who have motivated me over and over and over. Why would somebody like me spend all his free time doing that if I wasn't getting something spiritually rewarding out of it, if I didn't feel that God has sort of called me to do something and use what I've been given, to do something with it?

Winn: The thing I like about that is not only is it raising money for the work that needs to be done, but it also keeps the memory alive. You can't forget. Sometimes that's what's so devastating and why we fall back to the old ways and the old thinking is we forget.

Gary: And we do that. It's human nature as time goes on to just put things behind you. Even people that are affected by it, who for a time were very, very focused on a particular day every year or everything. Maybe it even gets too difficult; they want to move on from it and they stop thinking about it. I don't think, I mean, when you let your guard down, that's when you get spanked. We've got to remember what happens when we let our guard down, and we did at that time.

Winn: So the Gary Sinise Foundation, I know you do a lot of things. One of the things that you do is you build these, what is called a "smart home." Can you talk about that?

Gary: Well, if you're a triple or quadruple amputee who lost multiple limbs in a bombing or something, you're going to have some special challenges for the rest of your life in how you live and just your daily activities. So, to have a home

environment that at least allows you to be as independent as possible, to be as free as possible, to be less dependent on a caregiver, a wife or a mother or father or spouse or something, it gives you an opportunity to make life more manageable. So we try to put this smart technology into these homes. Let's say you have—well, in Staten Island for example, we built our first home in Staten Island for the first surviving quadruple amputee who lost both his arms and both his legs. Young kid. And that's how I partnered up with my firefighter pals in New York to start building homes because after I raised money for the Brooklyn Wall of Remembrance, I was approached by the fire commissioner, Sal Cassano about getting involved in a home-building project for this quadruple amputee who was from Staten Island. I happened to have met the kid at Walter Reed because I visited the hospital quite often, still do, but I met him so I knew exactly who he was talking about. I said, "Okay, I'm in. I'll do a concert. Let's raise money and build him a special house."

Well, getting back to the smart technology, in Staten Island, land is—you can't just buy a big piece of property, so you do have to build up. You have to have a multiple story house. So this particular warrior is confined to a wheelchair. It's very difficult for him to put on legs because of the nature of his leg amputation, so he's confined to a wheelchair. Well, we want him to be able to get upstairs, so we have to put an elevator in that house. We want him to be able to get himself around the house easily, so we make the floors very manageable. We put sensors in the doorways that the lights will come on when that wheelchair goes through the door. He doesn't have to worry about using his prosthetic arm to flick a switch or anything like that. We make it so he can, with his prosthetic finger, he can hit an iPad button and he's sitting in a wheelchair, right? But you have the cupboards up here for the kitchen and all the dishes and everything like that. Well, he can hit an iPad or do something to pop a little thing and the cupboards will come down right to his level like this, and he can use his prosthetic to kind of get a cup out or whatever. We put this smart technology into these homes—toilet seats that are warm. If you don't have arms, just think of the daily activities and the things that we do every day that is going to be challenging. So we try to put all kinds of smart technology into the homes to make life more manageable for that wounded warrior.

Winn: How many of these homes have you built?

Gary: Well, we have several of our warriors. We have three quadruple amputees that are in their houses now. We have some other triple amputees and paralyzed guys that are in homes. So we have 26 projects going right now, either completed (guys are in the houses), under construction, or in the planning stages. And what I will do is I go out all around the country and do concerts for every one of these guys to raise money and awareness for each one of the warriors that we're trying to build for.

Winn: I like that you said that you like to do the concert right there in the town where the home is being built because then that brings the community out and the community can meet the wounded warrior. Now this wounded warrior has a connection to the community where the home is going to be built.

Gary: Yeah, we don't want to just build a house for somebody and then have them disappear and never come out. So I think if they know that the community is supportive, that he's kind of a local hero, somebody who—he can go to the restaurant and be supported and get a lot of community support, he can reach out to different people in the community when he needs help with something. You know, if you have no arms and no legs, there's challenges, and you want that support. He went off to fight for freedom. All the people in that community benefit from the freedom that our defenders provide, and so we're just asking the community to recognize this person is here—and that's where I come in, I can make awareness, create awareness—and then take care of them when we go.

Winn: I was reading that just one prosthetic limb can be upwards of \$90,000, \$100,000. So a double or quadruple amputee, just the expenses there, and then I was also trying to do a little research of what does the government provide for them, and I'm sure people are assuming, "Oh, well, if they lost their limbs in a war defending our country, of course our country is going to take good care of them for the rest of their lives. And yet what's actually provided for them just falls so short of what they're—not just their immediate needs, but their long-term needs for the rest of their lives.

Gary: You know, we've heard for decades and decades and decades how veterans don't get enough of what they need, right? And look, the Veterans Administration provides a lot of good services around the country, but it is a massive bureaucracy and easily, you can see, when the eye is off the ball, there's going to be a lot of people that fall through the cracks. We can always do more for our veterans. We're better at it than we were 40 years ago. We can always improve it, and we have to keep fighting to improve it. That's why it's so important to have great veterans' advocates out there and people that can draw attention to various issues and various things that have fallen through the cracks—you know, advocates, media, whoever. But it's also important that we have these great non-government organizations that aren't tied up in big bureaucratic things that can just see the needs and go to it. If they have the funding and the resources to do it, they can put their hands on particular problems. That's why I support not only my own foundation but other non-government foundations that are focused on veterans as well and try to draw attention to them.

Like I said, the Medal of Honor Foundation does a lot of great things. Hope for the Warriors is another good one. The Tunnel to Towers Foundation is a great partner of ours. American Airlines does incredible things for our veterans. They support me so much. So much of the work that I do now with the regularity and commitment could not be done without the support of American Airlines, not in the same way that I do it. I might be able to find other ways to get people around and move things around, travel here and there, but with the commitment that I have and the consistent, always-on-the-go kind of thing, moving my band from here to there, and there's sixteen people plus me in the

band. That's a lot of tickets. American Airlines veterans' initiatives is a big, big support.

Another big supporter is GE, General Electric. They support my foundation and I support their work with Get Skills to Work. They're focused on getting 100,000 veterans into manufacturing jobs by 2015. They have a great program called Get Skills to Work at GetSkillsToWork.org. It's all about retooling somebody's military skills, and they learn great things in the military, but they might not know how to apply those things to the civilian sector. So Get Skills To Work kind of retools their military skills into the manufacturing industry. And we all know we need to bring manufacturing back to the United States and we need skilled workers to do it. Get Skills To Work is a great program.

Winn: Actually, I have questions about that especially. It's cool that GE is doing that. Good for them. That's incredible. But I'm going to ask you later on about what other business owners can do, local businesses, to be able to support and help our veterans get to work. You did a concert recently, the Lieutenant Dan Band did for Taylor Morris who is a quadruple amputee. You're building him a smart home even as we speak, correct?

Gary: In Cedar Falls, Iowa, yeah.

Winn: I just want to read a story here. This is about Taylor Morris. "After graduating from high school in 2007, Taylor joined the Navy and found his passion as an explosive ordinance disposal tech. His job involved defusing bombs, disabling mines, and securing hazardous areas in advance of his fellow troops. In January 2012, Taylor was deployed to Afghanistan. In May, he stepped on an IED and nearly lost his life. Taylor remained conscious through the blast, and though he knew he was bleeding out fast, he called out to his team requesting that no one come to his aid until the area was completely secured. When the area was clear, a medic administered battlefield first aid and saved his life. A few days later, Taylor was transported to Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, DC, where he survived a four-limb amputation." It's so hard to even read it, let alone live it. "Faced with a brutal situation in which most people would despair, Taylor has met his suffering with hope, humility, and courage." So, this is one of the amputees, one of the wounded soldiers that you are supporting.

Gary: He is an amazing young guy. He's got a great young gal who's been—

Win: Danielle.

Gary: Danielle is totally devoted to him. They'll eventually get married, and we're building them a house. They're just finding their land, which has to be purchased, obviously, but all the money has been raised for them through a fundraiser that I had in Chicago and then the concert, and Veterans United came on board in supporting. And a lot of people are trying.

Our effort is to attack the very severely wounded issues. We have a lot of wounded, but we decided—because this began with a quadruple amputee, and then we had another quadruple amputee come in with the same injury when I was getting ready for that concert, so I said, "Let's do another one," and then

we had another one. And I said, "Let's build another one," and we just start attacking the quadruple amputees, and then my partners at Tunnel to Towers and I just made a decision that we were going to try to chip away at as many triple amputees and some of the traumatic brain injury cases that we have where you have a warrior that isn't capable of taking care of himself. Taylor can put on prosthetic legs and walk, and he usually wears one prosthetic arm that he can do stuff with. He can feed himself and things like that. Things that you don't think about, but just feeding yourself, combing your hair, all that stuff. And he's a resilient young guy, very strong personality, good strong character, not really letting it get him down.

Some of the other situations, you have very sad situations where you have somebody who can't take care of themselves at all. They're confined to a wheelchair, traumatic brain injury. His wife or mother or something is going to have to care for him for the rest of his life. We want to make the caregivers as comfortable and meet the challenges that they have and that they're going to face for the rest of taking care of the wounded warrior's life as easy as possible for them. So that smart technology is good.

You've got to have a home environment. It always starts at home. You're missing limbs and things like that, and you go back to a home that's maybe cramped and crowded, you can't get your wheelchair around. It's not going to do anything for your fighting spirit. So we want to give these people a fighting chance to have a happy life and pursue their happiness like all the rest of us.

Winn: I get to meet Taylor here in a couple of weeks. We're bringing Taylor in.

Gary: I heard he was going to come. You know what might be fun? There's a fun little video that you might have seen online called "Unstoppable." It's a sweet video that they put together with some friends, and it just shows his rehabilitation process and how they worked together, he and Danielle, to get through it and everything.

Winn: Called Unstoppable.

Gary: Yeah. Just put in "Taylor Morris Unstoppable" and you'll see it. It's a very sweet video that really shows his progress and just his fighting spirit and how she's just been with him all the way.

Winn: I'm glad you brought in the caretaker and what they're going through, too, because I think Taylor's story is almost just as much about Danielle as it is about what he's going through.

Gary: Very much. It's a great love story that they have, and they've been making the rounds and telling their story and I think that's important. It's important for our warriors to get out there and tell their stories because they can help other people not forget their fellow warriors who are going through similar problems.

Winn: You mentioned this organization that GE has called GetSkillsToWork.org. So, what message do you have for business owners about hiring and supporting our service men and women? What would that be?

Gary: We have something like 800,000 veterans that are seeking work and employment. They are going to transition from their military life to the civilian workforce, and they've learned discipline, teamwork, all these great things in the military that can be applied to any business, really. Obviously, there are different levels of quality and qualification within the services, but give our veterans a chance. That's the important thing. We have a lot of dedicated people that all they wanted to do, like Lieutenant Dan, was serve in the military and something might have taken that away from them, or a dozen years of war has been enough and they don't want to deploy again away from their families, but they never thought about what they going to necessarily do beyond the military. Well, we can help them with that, and I think, much like when our warriors came home from World War II and they had to think about college and jobs and all that stuff, and then all of a sudden there was this massive boom, this great development in the United States after World War II. We can use our veterans and they can help us and we can help them right back by hiring them and teaching them and training them, and they can continue serving the United States of America in different ways.

Winn: I was asked to ask you this question. If you were president of the United States, what announcement would you make on behalf of our service men and women?

Gary: You know, I always talk about the bottom line is freedom. When you go to different places around the world and you see a society like Afghanistan or Iraq, or even standing on the border of North and South Korea and you're looking north, they don't understand what freedom is up there. They don't know what it is. They're slaves to the supreme ruler up there. When you go around and experience children who have been under the thumb of a dictator or an oppressive regime where their military is there to take their freedom away and serve at the whim of the dictator and the master and keep the people oppressed, and then you realize that we don't have that. We have exactly the opposite here. We have a military that serves the people to protect the freedom of the people, to provide the freedom for the people, and we take that totally for granted. We just think freedom is just there, and it's just something that everybody gets.

Winn: Like oxygen.

Gary: Yeah, you're born and you have freedom. Well, just look at the world and the way the world is. That's not the case. There are oppressive regimes and dictators all across the globe that are keeping the people down and keeping them in check. Sad to say and scary to say, but a few well-placed nukes in the United States somewhere, all of a sudden there's anarchy and confusion and fear, and we have to have a strong military. We have to recognize that their job is to provide freedom, that's what they do. And so we have to support them, and we can't take that freedom that they provide for granted. And everyplace I go, I try to pass that message.

That person who wrote to you and said some crappy thing about your dad, what does that person think? Where does that person think his freedom came from? Years ago, when your dad was serving in World War II, he defeated tyranny with his fellow warriors. This person that decided to write to you would have a different life if Nazism, Fascism, Imperialism had won in this world, Stalinism. If we had lost the Cold War, lost World War II, what world would we have right now? We'd have a different planet. The entire planet would be different without the United States of America being the strongest military power in the world.

Is there any doubt that the Nazis or Stalin, Tojo, any of those imperialists, given the nuclear weapon first, what would they have used that nuclear weapon for? Thank God that the United States of America got that weapon before anybody else did because somebody was going to get that weapon, and we're lucky that it was the United States of America that got that weapon before Stalin, Hitler, or Hirohito because we'd all be living in a very, very different world.

Winn: I'm sure you've seen it, the bumper sticker, I've seen it. I was standing in line behind a Vietnam vet who had it on the back of his leather jacket on his motorcycle that says, "If you can't stand behind our troops, then stand in front of them."

Gary: [laughs] That's right. Well, there you go. I mean, again, nobody likes war but has the world ever been a pure Utopia, peaceful place where everybody just gets along and shakes hands? No. Look at the streets of Chicago, for God's sake. It's anarchy there. Within our own cities, we have these war zones where people are getting innocently killed. You need first responders and you need those that are willing to go into harm's way to try to keep the bad guys at bay.

Winn: You mentioned what your commitment and your volunteerism and your involvement does for you spiritually. What life lessons have you learned from these returning servicemen and women about teamwork, accountability, integrity, trust, patriotism?

Gary: Selflessness. I mean, look, the military is a big thing. There are some jerks just like in the hair business, in the acting world, and every other business. I mean, you've got people that are greedy and selfish in any field, in any walk of life, and might do some stupid things. The Abu Ghraib incident, for example, when fifteen or sixteen idiots decided to take those pictures and do all that, they became the face of the United States military when really they were just a few idiots. When so many of our other service members were in Iraq and Afghanistan doing the hard work and providing services and all kinds of things for the Iraqi and Afghan people, they weren't getting the attention. It's the negative things that happen.

So, I've met extraordinary people, and I just try to go out there and talk about them a little bit and try to express myself and, through personal experience, what I've seen, talk to somebody who might not know anything when they think they do and tell them what I've seen and what I've known and what I've experienced within our military. Look, our military is not a hundred percent

perfect. Things fall through the cracks. People step out of line. All kinds of things happen. But that happens again, like I say, it happens in every sector of life and every profession and every business. It's just with our military, the taxpayer pays for that and one bad egg can put a face on the entire system. The people that are serving honorably, so many of them that I know, they're always just as angry and just as disappointed at that as anybody else. I just try to tell stories and spread messages and occasionally I do some acting.

Winn: I think the best teachers, the best leaders are storytellers, and that's what you're doing.

Gary: Well, you learn from experience. If you have firsthand experience and you can just pass that on, well, okay, you may think you know all this stuff about stuff. Well, let me just tell you a few things that I know, talk about a few people that I've met that motivate and inspire me. I'm humbled by so many of these folks that I've met. I met, like I said, my friend John lost two sons on September 11th. He's the most giving and generous guy, and you know what John said to me? He goes, "More good came out of that terrible attack than bad," and here's a guy who lost both his sons. But he's met extraordinary, wonderful people who have done a lot of great things and took that tragic event and turned it into something positive and made things happen for people that a lot of good does come out of something. When our backs are against the wall, we press back and we won't—that's the great thing about the American spirit. We've been up and we've been down and we've been kicked around, and we've kicked some butt and we've done some things. When chips are down, people rally. Look what happened after the Boston bombing, how the country rallied there to these two terrorists that decided to blow up a bunch of people. The country rallied again and said, "Everybody focus on Boston now." We come around when the chips are down.

Winn: Gary, do you have a final message for our listeners? I want to read a quote that you said: "While we can never do enough to show our gratitude to our nation's defenders, we can always do a little more." I like that.

Gary: Well, I don't think we ever can do enough because, again, it comes back to the freedom that you had to start your business from nothing and why do you have that freedom to do that? Because you live in a country that allows that. There are so many people that don't have those options around the world. Thank God I was born in the United States. Look, there are plenty of other nice places to live around the world and all that, but I was born in the United States. I'm proud of it. I love my country, and I love what my country has given me, the opportunities that being an American citizen has given to me. And I know that years ago and over the years, many men and women have sacrificed and shed their blood so that this country can remain and will always remain free. If we don't remain free and we don't have those that are willing to do the hard and heavy lifting to make sure that we keep it that way, I don't think we'd like that world and I don't think the rest of the world would like it, either.

One final thought. Remember after September 11th, how vulnerable so many countries across the globe felt themselves when the thought of the United States being attacked and possibly weakened? How many countries across the United States felt this outpouring of empathy and support? Why did they feel like that? Because the United States is the leader of free societies in all the world, in all of history. There's never been a military or a country with the power that the United States has that has not used it to oppress the people across the centuries. So all these free societies across the world just felt vulnerable and scared themselves. Oh my gosh, if the United States goes down, what happens to our freedom? What happens to us?

So I think this is a wonderful country. It's a country worth standing up for. It's a country worth criticizing when the government misbehaves, and supporting it when it does good things. It's a country that has great citizens who have done great, magnificent things that have benefitted all the world. I tend to look at our country as a force for good in the world, and I know that we can't be a force for good without the veterans and the military and the freedom providers that are willing to sacrifice.

Winn: That's perfect. What a gift.

Gary: It's a gift to all of us that we get to enjoy the freedoms that we have here.

Winn: This time with you was a huge gift for me, and I know it is going to be the same for anybody who listens to this, and I'm going to make sure that lots and lots of people do.

Gary: God bless you. Thank you. Thank you, and thank you for your support of my foundation and the work that we're trying to do. We're going to keep at it.

Winn: It's a pleasure. Thanks, Gary.

Gary: You bet.