

# Salute

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## SUPPORTING SERVICE

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with Distinguished Service Award

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**HEROES<sup>®</sup>  
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## SUPPORTING SERVICE

Nonprofit, Heroes Linked, Assists Veterans, Military Families; Honors Actor **Gary Sinise** with Distinguished Service Award

By DONNA BOYLE SCHWARTZ

I am a grateful American” declares leading actor and military advocate Gary Sinise, adding, “And I am grateful for many reasons: I am grateful I have a beautiful family; I am grateful I live in this country; I am grateful for many friends, and I am grateful for the men and women who protect us and defend us each and every day.”

Sinise’s unwavering commitment to humanitarian efforts on behalf of the nation’s veterans, service members, first responders, heroes, and defenders propelled him into a long-standing relationship with Heroes Linked, a non-profit organization committed to aiding veterans, military spouses, service members in transition, and Gold Star family survivors. The nonprofit provides many services to veteran

and military families, including professional development, secure housing via the new Heroes Home Repair Program, and grant-based assistance for the college-bound children of Gold Star families, as well as access to a network of mentors, all at no charge.

Heroes Linked, formerly known as the MVAT Foundation, selected Sinise as the 2023 recipient of its prestigious Distinguished Service Award, presented in November at the organization’s annual gala in Beverly Hills, CA, attended by a number of esteemed military figures, including Medal of Honor recipients Col. Jack Jacobs, CSM Gary Littrell, SPC Jim McCloughan, MSG Leroy Petry, SSG Ryan Pitts, and LTC William D. Swenson, along with Major General (Ret.) Mark and Carol Graham. The award was presented to Sinise by 2022

recipient, actor Joe Mantegna.

According to James Colbert, executive director of Heroes Linked, the purpose of the Distinguished Service Award is to publicly recognize those individuals or entities that have made a significant positive impact on the lives of those who serve or have served in the U.S. Armed Forces.

"There is perhaps no living American who has done more for those serving in America's military, veterans, and their families than Gary Sinise," Colbert states. "Gary Sinise is not only a renowned Hollywood figure but also an advocate dedicated to the well-being of our nation's heroes. Through his tireless efforts, he has become a beacon of support for veterans and active-duty military personnel, leaving an indelible mark on the hearts of those he serves."

Regarding the award, Sinise commented, "I am grateful for the many organizations that I have been privileged to support over the years, and one of those is MVAT (now Heroes Linked), and for having been blessed to be in the presence of so many resilient and courageous families who show us what perseverance through challenge really is and how to face those challenges, and how to overcome them.

"That has been something for me that I never knew I needed until the past few years with our own family challenges," Sinise continues. "I've learned so much from the many Gold Star families I've had the privilege to be in the presence of; the many families of our wounded service members over the years; our incredible Medal of Honor recipients, so many of them I can call personal friends; and so many others who have dedicated their lives to supporting the men and women who serve our country. I've learned so much from all of them."

Sinise and Colbert both pointed to the numerous challenges faced by troops, military families, and veterans, especially those transitioning from active service into civilian roles.

"Transitioning to the civilian sector is one

of the most difficult things," Sinise explains. "Because let's say you're a 30-year service member, and maybe you went in when you were 20 years old, you've been in there until 50, and you know the military system. Then, all of the sudden, you're out of the service and transitioning to the civilian sector, and that can be a difficult transition. Organizations like Heroes Linked are helping with that transition, and I've been involved with other organizations and other efforts doing the same and those can be very, very beneficial to somebody who's trying to make that move from military service and military life to the civilian life, and that's what's great about Heroes Linked."

Colbert agrees, noting, "For some of the 200,000+ service members who separate or retire from the military each year, it's no secret that transitioning to civilian life can be difficult. One of the biggest disconnects between transitioning service members and potential employers is that few people have any idea how to translate military skills to the corporate civilian world.

"Every month, we reach nearly 80,000 veterans, those currently serving, and supporters who have subscribed to receive actionable information related to post-service career building," Colbert continues. "Nearly 2,500 veterans and advisors are engaged in the Heroes Network's mentoring platform. The program leverages the advice, guidance, and mentoring of the advisors for personalized post-service career success."

Heroes Linked also oversees a number of different multi-faceted programs that are each specially designed to provide specific help to address the variety of challenges veterans face. These include:

- Heroes Network: a free online platform ([myheroeslinked.org](http://myheroeslinked.org)) that securely connects heroes with a national network of advisors and immediately actionable resources like jobs, other veteran organizations, government offices serving veterans, and veteran-friendly employers.

- Heroes Home Repair: enables service-disabled veterans to safely remain in their homes by providing essential repairs.

- Gold Star College Care: a new program launching in early 2024, helps Gold Star Families with financial support to help them afford the many costs associated with higher education.

- Medal of Honor Program: provides public platforms for recipients of our country's highest award for valor in combat to represent the values of courage, commitment, integrity, sacrifice, citizenship, and patriotism.

"Each of the programs was created because existing efforts were not maximally successful and did not meet the specific and evolving needs of our veterans, active-duty military service members, and Gold Star Families, so we sought to remedy that and provide more help to improve heroes' lives in a variety of ways," Colbert relates, noting that the organization is closing the gaps to ensure that veterans have the resources they need to thrive after the service.

Founded in 2018, the group has close ties with the military community. "Heroes Linked maintains strong connections to the military primarily by providing programs that benefit those serving and those who have served," Colbert says. "The organization counts retired service members and veterans on its boards of directors and advisors, including four recipients of the Medal of Honor. The Heroes Network program is a U.S. Army 'Soldier for Life'-approved transition resource."

Sinise first became involved with Heroes Linked through a personal relationship with founder Don Schwarz. "With so many veterans in my own family, I started supporting them in different ways, and it pretty much grew into a full-time mission," he remarks. "Part of that was supporting a lot of organizations along the way that were doing good work – MVAT (Heroes Linked) was one of those. I found that going to events like the Heroes Linked gala – and fundraisers and galas for organizations that are

doing good work – is another way I can help support people.

"At the Gary Sinise Foundation, my team and I work to serve our nation by honoring our defenders, veterans, first responders, their families, and those in need," he continues. "We do this by creating and supporting unique programs designed to entertain, educate, inspire, strengthen, and build communities. Through our R.I.S.E. (Restoring Independence Supporting Empowerment) program, we build 100% mortgage-free specially adapted smart homes for our most severely wounded heroes, and provide home modifications, mobility devices, and adapted vehicles to our injured, wounded, ill, and aging heroes. Our Relief & Resiliency program aims to ensure our defenders and their families stay strong through hardships by offering complete support in times of need. These programmatic initiatives help our nation's heroes and their families find the strength to persevere and heal. Our Community Outreach & Education program bridges the gap between our defender and civilian communities, and our First Responders Outreach program provides funding for essential equipment, PPE, emergency relief, and training to ensure our first responders are able to perform to the best of their abilities. Through these programmatic initiatives, we honor America's heroes both past and present and inspire the next generation to do the same."

Sinise adds that both his Foundation and Heroes Linked have the same goal: "A successful positive happy ending, that's the story that we want to see for everybody struggling with a disability, for everybody coming home from war that might be struggling, especially with a physical injury. We want them to push on, to push beyond the battle, and succeed in life. That's what we do at the Gary Sinise Foundation, and what Heroes Linked does, to try to help them through."

## In Their Own Words

**H**eroes Linked has nearly 2,500 veterans and advisors engaged in the Heroes Network's mentoring platform, and the program is generating success stories throughout the country and in various industries, including the ever-popular video gaming business. Here is one story:

"It's a straightforward fairytale from our point of view," comments Shawn F. Piatz, retired U.S. Army Chief Warrant Officer and currently Chief Operating Officer, ORE System, a next generation block-chain technology for the music, movie, gaming, and NFT markets. "Our journey unfolded quite seamlessly as we embarked on the quest for exceptional creative talent to enhance our team. At the forefront of our endeavors was the development and promotion of our game, 'With Them: Frontlines.' In our pursuit, we were fortunate to have colleagues who generously shared their personal stories and allowed us to feature their faces as characters within the game, which showcases the real-life narratives of military heroes.

"In our quest to find a skilled individual who could contribute to the creative process of bringing these heroes' stories to life, we reached out to Hero's Linked. Swiftly, within a mere day or two, our collaboration led us to the remarkable Devin Reeve—an accomplished Hollywood actor, producer, and writer. Devin's multifaceted expertise positions him as the driving force behind the upcoming mini documentaries that will seamlessly integrate into our game. As

we expand the campaign mode, our aspiration is to not only showcase these documentaries within the game but also publish them on our website, accompanied by detailed biographies of the extraordinary men and women who served in the military.

"In essence, Reeve will play a pivotal role in weaving together the compelling narratives of these heroes, providing an immersive and authentic experience for our audience. Our ultimate goal is to offer a platform where individuals can learn about the remarkable achievements of these military icons through our website, forthcoming documentaries, and by actively engaging with their characters within the gaming landscape."

Reeve is now creative director, for the "With Them" video game, based on the stories of veteran heroes. "From a Hero's Linked advisor perspective, I was intrigued by Hero's Linked and what the organization was striving to achieve," Reeve comments. "I was extremely honored when David Tenebaum reached out to me and asked if I would be interested in being an advisor. It was only about a week after Hero's Linked posted my advisor video that Shawn connected with me, and from there we began our journey which started over a year ago. Not only has Hero's Linked allowed Shawn and I to bring value into our professional relationship, but I feel that I've made amazing lifelong friends who have accepted me into their tribe and with that I'm grateful for Hero's Linked."

Colbert points out, "Our goal at Heroes Linked is to serve and connect an increasing number of veterans and spouses with mentorship through the Heroes Network's mentoring platform, and for the program to provide actionable information to more than 150,000 Heroes on a monthly basis by 2025. To achieve this goal, we will need to increase awareness of our programs, and public support for our efforts.

"We are an example of what happens

when dedication and commitment are harnessed for a positive mission," Colbert continues. "The boards of directors and advisors are volunteers who dedicate considerable time and effort to fulfilling our mission; they very much represent the best of American volunteerism. With dedicated volunteers, very few employees and a modest budget, we're proud to have reached many heroes already, and as we grow, we hope to reach and help thousands more."

