

Sinise says role of Truman inspired him to humanitarian efforts

By BRIAN BURNES

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Gary Sinise's personal foreign aid policy began in part with Harry Truman.

The actor on Thursday received the Harry S. Truman Good Neighbor Award in Kansas City. At the award luncheon, he described how his international humanitarian efforts began largely after his appearance as the former president in a 1995 HBO film, much of which was filmed in this area.

"It was one of the great challenges and great acting moments of my life," said Sinise, adding how he was impressed to learn Truman's "amazing life story, coming from his simple background to rise to become president of the United States. I truly admire the man."

Sinise said it wasn't long after portraying Truman in scenes filmed in the Truman Library's Oval Office replica that he began to pursue his own international relief initiatives. Those efforts brought him back to Kansas City to work with People to People International.

The nonprofit organization administers Operation International Children, the aid agency co-founded by Sinise. He was honored for his children's relief efforts and efforts on behalf of veterans and active military members.

Earlier Thursday, Sinise appeared at a North Kansas City warehouse to announce a new initiative that will send school supply kits to more than 2,500 children in Haiti. The program will be part of a larger relief effort coordinated by the U.S. Southern Command after the 2010 Haiti earthquake. Troops will build and renovate schools, clinics, roads and water wells.

Sinise described at the luncheon how enlightening it was to accompany American soldiers in Iraq as they worked on relief projects such as renovating schools.

"I could see the interaction between the troops and the children, and how positive that was," Sinise said. "And I wanted to reinforce that in some way."

Sinise then began efforts to send school supplies to Iraqi children. A sequence of contacts led Sinise to People to People International's president, Mary Jean Eisenhower, whom the actor identified as "another good neighbor."

"He's a true patriot," Eisenhower said of Sinise after the ceremony. "I have seen him take the most wounded of individuals and put happiness into them just by being himself."

About 380 people attended the event at the Kansas City Marriott Downtown. It also honored international students from many countries.

Eisenhower, a granddaughter of former president Dwight Eisenhower, will receive the annual Harry S. Truman Public Service Award from Independence at 7 p.m. tonight at the Truman Library.

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