



Last week, *Lowcountry Weekly* had the privilege of participating in the third annual Lt. Dan Weekend as media partners. Translation? In exchange for our help in publicizing LDW3, we got to hang out with some of the people involved, many of whom are genuine, bona fide heroes. Last week, those heroes saved another life – mine.

Okay, so I'm being dramatic. My life was not actually in jeopardy. My spirit, however, was in pretty bad shape. For me, Election Season is kind of like water boarding – it feels like drowning, and if it's not torture, it's very close. I've been thinking about why that is... about why I have such an extreme reaction to something that, for *normal* people, is only mildly irritating.... or even fun and exciting. I think it has something to do with the fact that I'm a moderate – my political convictions are shallow and shifting – surrounded by friends and family whose heels are dug in deep on either side of the fence. It's hard being both a Hatfield
and

a McCoy – and, at the same time, neither. It's hell watching people you love rip each other to shreds – however vicariously – over principles, platforms and promises you no longer put much stock in. Most excruciating, for me, is the sound of the pundits spinning away... the droning, grating, increasingly hollow soundtrack of our age. Sometimes, while watching the news, I can actually feel my soul shriveling, like a balloon with a slow leak.

Then along comes LDW3, and, boy... what a perspective adjustment! The people I met over that extraordinary weekend never once mentioned Mitt Romney's personality flaws or Obama's party with Beyonce. There were, however, a few measured references to the ongoing violence in the Middle East. How refreshing to find there are still some who see that as bigger news than Kate Middleton's... overexposure.

Jennifer Griffin MC'd Saturday's Lt. Dan Band Concert in Waterfront Park, and we got to meet her earlier that afternoon. Griffin is a stage 3 breast cancer survivor, a mother of three young children, and the national security correspondent reporting from the Pentagon for Fox News. At least half of you will now write her off, and that's a shame, because she's an absolute force. She is beautiful, whip smart, obscenely accomplished, and could not have been more gracious. Consider me a new fan.

And what can I say about Gary Sinise that isn't totally obvious? What you see is what you get – a quiet, unassuming guy who's every bit as nice as you imagine. When he walked up to the press gathering, he and Jennifer Griffin hugged and seemed genuinely thrilled to see each other. During the conference, they shared a microphone and finished each other's sentences like a couple of old friends. I assumed they were. When the interview ended, I heard Gary tell Jennifer, "I'm a *huge* fan. Seriously. I'm not just saying that." She replied, "I'm a huge fan of *you* *rs!*"

It was so great meeting you!" (What fun watching two stars be star-struck!)

Sinise, who's still holding down his leading man gig on *CSI New York*, spends most weekends performing with his band for enlisted troops or at Wounded Warrior events. "I can't stop!" he told us. "It's impossible to explain how much energy and inspiration I get from these injured veterans. I think I do it as much for myself, now, as for them."

Griffin agreed. "When I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I drew so much strength from these guys. Watching them – their extraordinary courage and determination – is what got me through." She says her employers at Fox News are very supportive of her efforts with veterans. When the latest rash of violence in the Middle East broke out right before LDW3, Steve Danyluk of the Independence Fund called her at work, expecting she'd have to cancel her trip to Beaufort in order to man her post at the Pentagon.

"I told him... 'You know what? I'm coming! This is all part of the same story. My bosses get that.'"

Sinise says he's also blessed with understanding employers who support his unorthodox "hobby." The day we spoke with him, he'd left the set of *CSI New York* a day early for a three-day series of Lt. Dan Band concerts. "They put up with that sort thing... well, almost every weekend," he laughed.

We asked what he plans to do when his TV show – now in its 8th season – comes to its inevitable conclusion. More TV? Movies? Maybe return to the Steppenwolf Theatre Co. that he helped found 30 years ago?

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Honestly, the only thing I *know* I want to do is more of this. More playing with my band. Other than that... we’ll see.”

So, here I am, talking to these two wildly successful, big-deal celebrities, and I’m getting the distinct impression that both value their inconvenient, unglamorous work with injured veterans far more than anything they’ve got going on at “the office.” And I’m thinking... wow, there are people like *this* in the world!

But I haven’t even told you about Dale Beatty yet, have I?

The day before the press meeting with Sinise and Griffin, we met with some of the guys who were playing that night at Vetapalooza. About ten minutes into the press conference, a latecomer arrived to fill the empty chair I’d been wondering about. He came walking up with a profusion of apologies, a really great smile, and two metal legs attached below the knees.

Dale Beatty lost both legs in 2004 while serving in Iraq. He was here in Beaufort to play drums with his band Outlaw 21; they’ve been together since high school in the mid-90s. Beatty says it was about 48 hours after he woke up in the hospital without his legs that he picked up the phone, called one of his buddies in the band, and said, “I think I’ll be ready to play again soon.”

“After that, they knew I was gonna be okay. I did it for them as much as for me.”

Now’s the time when I have to confess – somewhat shamefully – that I’ve had a lifelong fear of amputation. I guess you’d call it a phobia, actually, because it’s completely irrational, borderline insane. I couldn’t even take my daughter to see “Soul Surfer”! She had to go with a friend. (Thanks, Charlotte.) But I am happy to report that the little bit of time I spent with Dale Beatty

has cured me. I am no longer afraid of losing a limb.

The guy is simply amazing to me. Not because he can play the drums with no legs. Not because he's a devoted husband and father of two. Not because he turned his tragedy into something wonderful by founding [Purple Heart Homes](#), a charitable organization that fits houses for wounded veterans. Not even because he's a war hero.

All that stuff is impressive, but what really amazes me about Dale Beatty is that he's... *fine*. He's absolutely fine. He woke up in a hospitable bed to find he'd lost both his legs... and he's over it. He's happy and laughing and cracking jokes and playing music.

"You seem so *fine*," I told him, almost incredulous. "Are you really as fine as you seem?"

"I am," he said, smiling his terrific smile. "But it's been eight years. It took a while to be fine."

Not only is he fine... he's not even bitter. I asked him, after the press conference, how his mom took it when she learned of his injury. (Always thinking of myself, of course, and my own nightmare scenarios!)

"My mom's a nurse, so she was used to dealing with trauma. But let's put it this way – she hates George Bush now even more than she did before," he laughed. "I love the guy, myself. He's a good man and a good American. He did what he thought was right. The problem was that he had Darth Vader for a Vice President." More laughter, and again with the unforgettable smile. In that smile I saw what forgiveness looks like. I saw peace.

This is as close as we got – any of us – to talking "politics" all weekend. My spirit? The balloon with the slow leak? It's re-inflated. For now. But Election Season has a long way to go. Wish me luck. Wish us all luck.

Me & My Heroes

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