Above and beyond

Gary Nutt poses in front of a C-130. He served nine years in the Air Force before leaving military service in 1995.

The lives of an Air Force veteran’s family are changed after receiving transformative assistance from DAV

When Sarah Nutt contacted DAV last May, she hoped her husband, Gary, an Air Force veteran, would be eligible for some much-needed additional compensation from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Finances had become so bleak in the years after Gary stopped working due to illness that Sarah would trim expenses by routinely cutting his hair. There was rarely cash for extra food or gas. And medical and dental insurance was a luxury they couldn’t afford.

“There was no money for anything other than the bare necessities,” said Sarah. “That’s why we were reaching out so desperately.”
What she didn’t bank on, however, was DAV helping the family obtain much more than the modest $150 per month she was hoping for, substantially increasing Gary’s VA rating and even connecting their daughter, Sadie, with educational benefits for eligible dependents.

Years before, Gary got to see the world serving as an aircraft electrical and environmental systems mechanic, traveling to Germany, Spain and the Philippines. But it was his service in the Persian Gulf War that sparked a medical mystery.

After spending just over six months at King Abdulaziz Air Base in Saudi Arabia, Gary began to experience excruciating headaches while stationed at Little Rock Air Force Base in Arkansas.

“I bent over to open up my locker on base, and after standing up, I had a splitting headache,” said Gary, a DAV life member of Chapter 7 in North Little Rock, Arkansas, “the worst I’ve ever had in my life.”
Doctors said he had a sinus infection, but the medication they offered provided no relief.

“They gave me some pills that didn’t work, so I went back and they gave me some more pills that didn’t work,” added Gary. “Nothing really seemed to help.”

Moments of intense anguish persisted after Gary left the Air Force, which led doctors to temporarily remove part of his skull, hoping to end the agony. Shortly after that, he began having seizures. As the years passed, Gary’s symptoms became worse.

The headaches continued, but other worries appeared: slowed speech and a steep and gradual decline in Gary’s reaction time. As more tasks took him longer to complete, the air conditioning repair company Gary worked for considered him a hazard to the workplace.

“They had laid me off because I got to the point where I was really slow,” said Gary. “I got there at 5 every day, I worked as hard as I could, but they said I was more of a liability than an asset.”

“Everything slowed down,” added Sarah, “to the point where I had to help him do anything.”

A stay-at-home mom, Sarah began caring for him full time, and Gary’s VA compensation at the time was not enough to cover their expenses. With Gary out of work since 2016, they slipped further into financial distress.

However, their tide turned after Sarah called DAV National Service Officer Lindsay Kinslow, who was confident she could significantly increase Gary’s overall VA rating.

“They were really adamant about the $150 that comes with aid and attendance benefits,” said Kinslow, who works at the DAV national service office in Washington, D.C. “And I said, Well,
DAV National Service Officer Lindsay Kinslow, the assistant supervisor in DAV’s office in Washington, D.C., worked tirelessly to secure a higher VA rating for Gary and educational benefits for his daughter, Sadie.

Kinslow submitted the claim last June, which opened the floodgates of VA appointments for Gary—six in two months—to reassess his health. By staying in constant communication with Sarah, Kinslow learned the scope of the Nutts’ financial anxieties extended to their home, which they were close to losing.
So when Sarah got the call last October and learned about everything Kinslow had secured for Gary, she broke out in tears.

“It was just such a huge blessing and a relief,” said Sarah.

“When [Sarah] told me Gary had to quit working due to this condition, I knew for sure that would lead to an increase,” added Kinslow.

In all, Gary became a permanent and total service-connected disabled veteran, with the special compensation Sarah originally asked about. With the increased funds, they were able to get a new vehicle, and for the first time in four years, Gary received a professional haircut.

But the most unexpected benefit the Nutts received was the VA educational benefits available to survivors and dependents of eligible veterans. With that added benefit, their daughter Sadie will be able to recoup some of the money she spent while enrolled in cosmetology school.

“We are just so thankful to Lindsay and DAV,” added Sarah. “I know money isn’t the most important thing, but it can be very hard to live.”