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Operation Mend: Dr. Tim Miller

<http://www.latimesmagazine.com/the-california-cure-operation-mend-dr-tim-miller.html>

You'll often hear Tim Miller quote a 16th-century inscription he once read on the doorway of an Italian chapel: "It is the divine right of man to appear human." It's the *raison d'être* for Miller, who—while currently UCLA's chief of the Division of Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery, a fully tenured professor at the medical school and one of the most in-demand plastic surgeons in a town, where there is a *lot* of demand—is at his core is an Army doctor.

For the past two years, Miller has been chief reconstructive surgeon for Operation Mend, a collaboration between Brooke Army Medical Center and the Ronald Regan UCLA Medical Center to treat soldiers wounded and disfigured by bomb blasts and other attacks during service in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The program, funded by the Katz Family Foundation, pays all the costs for reconstructive surgeries at UCLA that aren't covered by the soldiers' medical plans, as well for travel to and from Los Angeles and lodging for them and their families while they receive treatment. Since Operation Mend began in the fall of 2007, it has helped 29 service men and women—and counting.

The degree of skill required to reconstruct the faces of "these kids"—as Miller affectionately refers to the young soldiers who have had noses, ears, jaws blown away under enemy fire—can give even a surgeon of Miller's expertise pause: "So far there have only been success stories, but I worry. I keep thinking, *What if things don't work out?*"

Most can never look the way they once did, but that isn't the point. "It doesn't make any difference how many operations it takes," says Miller, himself a Vietnam veteran, who received a Bronze Star for his service in the army. "It is an absolute commitment to them, that we will back them up and do whatever we can to make their lives better and their appearance better, because those two things are linked. One soldier told me after his surgery, 'I am happy because I can take my kids to a soccer game and everybody doesn't look at me; my kids aren't embarrassed.' I hear that a lot. They do it in large part for their children. I think it is a whole package of getting back into life."

Miller speaks so passionately about Operation Mend that it's hard not to wonder if something else is being mended, too. Miller knows firsthand what it is to be a serviceman coming home from an unpopular war overseas. Is his dedication in part fueled by a desire to make up for the respect and care not always afforded Vietnam vets? Miller doesn't hesitate: "Absolutely. You bet." —**Samantha Dunn**