

# Kathy Griffin Honored at Fifth Annual Heroes Celebration

8:47 PM PDT 5/9/2013 by Arlene Washington



Kathy Griffin

Hollywood and veterans came together for the gala, which also honored UCLA's Operation Mend founder Ronald Katz.

Hollywood showed its support for veterans at the 5th Annual Heroes Celebration on Wednesday at the Mr. C Beverly Hills Hotel. Comedian **Kathy Griffin** and UCLA's Operation Mend founder **Ronald Katz** received awards for their commitment to veterans and their families. The event was hosted by Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA),

IAVA member and *Dancing With the Stars* champion **J.R. Martinez** served as the master of ceremonies for the evening. He spoke of the challenges veterans often face after serving, such as bouts of unemployment and unstable healthcare. He said he hoped the event would bring awareness to the fact that everyone, including those without military connections, can participate in supporting a veteran's transition from military to civilian life.

"We don't come home to a Willy Wonka golden ticket and everything's perfect," Martinez told *The Hollywood Reporter*. "We have a lot of issues that we face and we need the help of the American people."

**Kathy Griffin**, a longtime supporter of veterans and the daughter of a World War II vet, received the 2013 Leadership in Entertainment Award. She shared her experiences from her USO tour to Afghanistan, and joked the IAVA should work on making travel easier, starting with giving out dramamine for the flight.

"Honestly I would fight for better seating," said Griffin. "That should be really your number one cause."

Griffin, who provides veterans with free backstage passes to her stand-up shows through the Veteran Tickets Foundation, said she found it rewarding to have real conversations with the soldiers during her visit overseas. She said that laughter is truly the universal language and that her most memorable experiences were making the soldiers smile.

"I was looking like I was performing for kids getting ready for prom, and here they are in this really dire situation," said Griffin. "They would say sit down, listen and hear somebody's story and make them laugh and that's really what I enjoyed the most."

Ronald Katz, founder of **UCLA's Operation Mend**, received the 2013 Community Leadership Award for "making miracles" in helping heal more than 82 severely wounded U.S. military personnel. Through Operation Mend, which gives vets access to top plastic and reconstructive surgeons, Katz has healed the injuries of a veteran who was once told he would never be able to walk, talk or see again. He also has given a soldier who lost his hands in an explosion the opportunity to throw out the first pitch at Dodger Stadium.

IAVA founder and CEO **Paul Rieckhoff** said he is proud of the collaborations forming between veterans and Hollywood. He said it's important for veterans to be viewed as an investment instead of a charity case.

"In this town it's amazing that the same surgeons that are now doing facelifts and boob jobs are now reconstructing the faces of marines," said Rieckhoff.

He added that some veterans have found work in the entertainment industry.

"We've seen veterans working across this town working on set design, as screenwriters and even actors," Rieckhoff said. "They're not only great people, it's great stories and I think that's what this town is about -- telling great stories."

With the support of celebrities including **Bradley Cooper** and **Minka Kelly**, IAVA provides over 200,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans across the country with resources to help them overcome the hurdles of re-integrating into their communities. Rieckhoff, who served in the army from 2003-2004 recently led a group of 45 veterans to Capitol Hill to advocate for the end the VA backlog, in which many veterans do not receive their VA disability benefits for more than 125 days.