

Marine inspires wave of help

Healing the wounds of war, one quarter at a time



Vietnam veteran Ric Ryan walks Friday along Highway 4 just west of Murphys. Ryan, a former Marine, donates a quarter to Operation Mend for every time someone waves at him. Operation Mend, based at UCLA Medical Center, helps with plastic surgery for soldiers disfigured by injuries suffered in Iraq and Afghanistan. CRAIG SANDERS/The Record

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MURPHYS - Ric Ryan is healing war wounds.

It happens every time someone in a passing car waves at Ryan as he takes his regular walk along Highway 4 between Murphys and Angels Camp.

Ryan always waves back. He keeps a count. For every time he waves, he donates 25 cents to Operation Mend, a University of California, Los Angeles, Medical Center charity that surgically rebuilds the disfigured faces of soldiers wounded in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Operation Mend

Learn more about Operation Mend at operationmend.ucla.edu.

"He is one of the most amazing human beings I have ever met," said Becky Mancuso-Winding, the UCLA Medical Center staffer who processes Ryan's donations.

"His donations now total \$16,000, and he sends checks regularly," Mancuso-Winding wrote in an email.

The wounds Ryan is helping to heal aren't just those of the soldiers whose faces were melted by roadside bombs.

Ryan, 67, served in the Marine Corps in Vietnam. He has a few invisible wounds of his own.

And he also sees the way wars over the decades have damaged the relationship between an entire society and its soldiers.

"When I came back from the 'Nam, we couldn't even wear our uniforms," Ryan said.

Now, Ryan, 67, proudly and publicly displays his status as a veteran. The initials "USMC" are across the back of the reflective vest he wears during his walks.

Ryan, who is retired on an iron worker's pension and Social Security, started walking regularly in 2008 because he decided he needed the exercise. About the same time, he saw a television news story about Operation Mend. He decided to donate any time someone waved at him.

But his mission to help returning troops didn't stay a secret long. Ryan is well known in Angels Camp and Murphys. He coached soccer for many years at Bret Harte Union High School. He's been active in the Lions service club and served on the board of the local veterans memorial district.

People started pulling over and giving him donations during his walks. Some hand him \$10 or \$20. Some give checks for hundreds of dollars. The single largest donation was a check for \$2,500. That one brought tears to Ryan's eyes.

Meanwhile, Ryan is also trying to heal himself. He attends Veterans Administration classes on post-traumatic stress disorder and anger management.

He's learned his limits.

"I can't watch war movies anymore," he said.

He also avoids fireworks displays, even on Independence Day. "It reminds me too much of a firefight."

The long walks also help. His regular loop is from Murphys to just west of Red Hill Road and then back. It takes him about 2 1/2 hours to walk 8 1/2 miles.

Typically in that time between 40 and 70 people will wave at him. That translates into a donation of \$10 to \$17.50 per walk. If he doesn't get at least 34 waves, then he instead donates \$1 per mile walked.

Ryan also collects recyclables and goes through the vacuum bins at a car wash for change. All that is donated to Operation Mend.

Ryan doesn't walk every day. Often enough, however, that he is known as The Walking Man of Murphys. Often enough that he sends hundreds of dollars a month to rebuild the faces of his fellow soldiers.

"We have to do as much as we can for the young men and women coming back from these wars," Ryan said.

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