

Operation Mend offers surgery to servicemen

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After an improvised explosive device exploded near him in 2005, Marine Cpl. Aaron P. Mankin had severe burns on more than 25 percent of his body.

His mouth, cheeks and ears are severely disfigured, and only a small part of his nose remains.

But just when he finally accepted that his face would forever be marred by the scars from his injury, he said, hope came in the form of Operation Mend.

Operation Mend, a collaborative effort between UCLA Medical Center, Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio and the Katz Family Foundation, provides reconstructive plastic surgery to military personnel wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Ronald A. Katz, a member of the Katz Family Foundation, said he was inspired to create Operation Mend when he saw Mankin being interviewed on CNN and again when he saw Mankin at the Brooke Army Medical Center.

Mankin marched with other wounded service men and women for the opening of the Center for the Intrepid, a rehabilitation facility for burn victims and amputees, and Katz said he was impressed by Mankin's attitude.

"He has grit and spunk, and he's a great American," Katz said.

Katz said he met with senior military leaders and senior UCLA leaders, and within six months had Operation Mend up and running.

Mankin is the first serviceman to be helped by Operation Mend and will be undergoing surgery on his nose Wednesday.

Dr. Timothy Miller, chief of plastic surgery at UCLA, said they will cut a portion of the skin on Mankin's forehead and combine it with cartilage tissue and cranial bone to reconstruct Mankin's nose.

"I know he's got a masterpiece in mind," Mankin said of his respect and trust in Dr. Miller's surgical abilities.

Katz said he hopes Operation Mend will continue to grow and serve other servicemen and servicewomen. Several other veterans are set to receive treatment through the program and will come to UCLA when they are ready for surgery.

When it comes to choosing which veterans will receive treatment, Operation Mend allows Army officials to choose men and women with the worst possible injuries to participate, Katz said.

Participants receive treatment at UCLA Medical Center, and the Katz Family Foundation covers related costs such as travel and accommodations for patients and their families.

Capt. George Zuniga, a military science professor, said programs such as Operation Mend are reassuring to servicemen and servicewomen.

“It’s good to know there are people who care,” he said.

Zuniga said recovering from war injuries can be physically and psychologically demanding, and soldiers can have a hard time explaining what they are going through.

Programs like Operation Mend can give soldiers hope during such a difficult time, Mankin said.

Having gone through almost two and a half years of rehabilitation and surgery, Mankin hopes that his experiences with Operation Mend will provide hope for the type of treatment other service members can one day expect.

“This is rehabilitation, reconstruction and rebuilding lives from the ground up,” he said.



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Photography

Cpl. Aaron Mankin will undergo reconstructive plastic surgery Wednesday through Operation Mend, a joint effort by UCLA Medical Center, Brooke Army Medical Center and the Katz Family Foundation to help service members injured in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Photo by Michael Chen, Daily Bruin staff