

## Vietnam Vet Converts Friendly Gestures to Donations

Ric Ryan gives 25 cents for each wave he receives to a UCLA program that provides reconstructive surgery for soldiers injured in Iraq and Afghanistan.

<http://centurycity.patch.com/articles/vietnam-veteran-converts-friendly-gestures-to-donations>

- By [Laura Clark](#)
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What a difference a friendly gesture can make.

That's what inspired Vietnam veteran and retired Marine Ric Ryan to walk all over his hometown of Murphys, California, wearing a bright orange vest painted with the letters "USMC." For every wave he received in response, he donated 25 cents to veterans in need.

Over three years, Ryan logged more than 3,300 miles and raised \$5,500. He presented his donation to representatives of [Operation Mend](#), a UCLA program that provides free reconstructive surgery and other medical procedures to service members and veterans injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. Shannon O'Kelley, chief operating officer of the UCLA Medical Center, also contributed \$1,000 to Operation Mend.

Ryan said he started walking and raising money in 2008 after hearing about Operation Mend on CNN. He wanted to help an organization that improves the lives of military personnel, something he could relate to as a veteran himself.

"I wanted to walk for the young vets who had been injured and needed surgery," Ryan said Friday at the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center. "I wanted to walk for them."

Started in 2007, Operation Mend is a partnership between UCLA Health System and Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. Ronald A. Katz, a member of the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center board and executive committee, founded the project.

"I was watching the Lou Dobbs show, and a young Marine was on there and his face was truly destroyed," Katz said. "But he had this incredible spirit, and at the end of the interview the interviewer said, 'What's next for you?' and [the Marine] looked into the camera and said, 'Gotta fix the beautiful part.'"

“And my wife said to me, ‘Do something about that.’ ”

Enlisting the help of Dr. Timothy Miller, chief of plastic and reconstructive surgery at UCLA's David Geffen School of Medicine, Katz spearheaded a program that has funded 183 surgeries on nearly 50 patients—or wounded warriors, as they are called by Operation Mend team members—who come from all over the country.

A Vietnam veteran himself, Miller pointed out the sacrifice made by these young men and women.

“They’re giving a great deal for our country,” Miller said, “so we feel, and I personally feel, very obligated to do everything we can to make them appear and function as well as they can.”

Program costs, which include the surgeries, transportation and housing at UCLA’s Tiverton House, can run as much as \$500,000 per patient.

“It costs the service member nothing,” Katz said. “All the expenses— living, airfare, surgery— everything is paid.”

The rest of the funding comes from donations like Ryan's. Ryan achieved some local fame for his fundraising: He is known as “The Walking Man of Murphys.”

Not every wave is worth 25 cents, either.

“I had one person stop [on the road], him and his wife, and they gave me a hundred-dollar bill, put it in for the veterans,” he said.

“That started it, and counting my waves,” Ryan added, “so it worked out pretty good, I think.”



Ric Ryan (left) wears his orange "USMC" vest as he stands with Operation Mend founder Ronald A. Katz. Credit Laura Clark



From left: Dr. Timothy Miller, Ric Ryan, Ronald A. Katz, Shannon O'Kelley, Melanie Gideon attended a press conference at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center on Friday. Credit Laura Clark