

Walking Man of Murphys honored in NYC parade



Courtesy photo

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Murphys resident Ric Ryan waves, as always, in the New York City Veterans Day Parade.

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Walking Man of Murphys honored in NYC parade By [Charity Manesscharity.calent@gmail.com](mailto:Charity.Manesscharity.calent@gmail.com)

As the sun rose over New York City's Fifth Avenue on Nov. 11, the crowds began to gather along the route of the mile-long 95th annual Veterans Day Parade. Vietnam veteran and Murphys resident Ric Ryan could not believe he was truly there, doing what he loves most – walking to support the troops.

"I was so proud to be there, so nervous," said Ryan, known throughout the nation now as the Walking Man of Murphys. "There were thousands of people."

Ryan paraded down Fifth Avenue alongside the wounded veterans, surgeons and staff of Operation Mend – a University of California, Los Angeles, program that restores the faces and limbs of the nation's most severely injured and disfigured military service members.

Ryan was invited to walk in the parade with Operation Mend as recognition of his grassroots effort to raise funds for the program.

The seed for that grassroots effort was first planted in 1968 when he was hunkered down in a muddy foxhole in the jungles of Vietnam. It was there that Ryan vowed that if he got out of the war alive, he was going to make a difference in the world.

But coming home was not the welcome he envisioned. The disregard so many civilians showed for his uniform that he had worn with pride caused him to hide his service, hide his pain and worse, bury his dream of giving back.

Forty-three years later, with a loving wife and three grown children by his side, Ryan decided it was his time to give back.

He always dreamed of visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall but the financial feasibility was a different story. So Ryan set out on a quest to walk to Washington, D.C. His sons, armed with persuasive graphs, statistics and maps, explained why this was not practical. Ryan opted to do the next best thing – walk that many miles locally, to prove he had it in him.

Soon people recognized this walking man about town and on Highway 4 and began to honk and wave.

Ryan had recently watched a show on Operation Mend and the difference the organization made in the life of U.S. Marine Corps Staff Sergeant Octavio Sanchez, who had suffered burns over 70 percent of his body and face from a roadside bomb. Sanchez then had surgeries performed by UCLA to give him back a more normal appearance. Ryan decided he would donate 25 cents of his own money for each wave to Operation Mend.

On a fixed Social Security income, Ryan had no idea just how many waves he would begin to receive.

Within months, Ryan had reached his mileage goal and had exceeded any dreams of monetary funding with people stopping him along the roadway handing him \$20s and \$100s, thanking him for his efforts to help wounded vets returning home and, at times, telling their stories.

As time wore on and donations continued to roll in, Operation Mend, wanting to meet this unsung hero, invited him to visit its facilities and meet some of the vets Ryan had helped.

“Ric is one of the most generous, loving, purposeful men I’ve met,” said Dana Katz, founder of the UCLA Operation Mend Buddy Program. “He is a very special part of our Operation Mend family.”

After that visit, Ryan’s energies were renewed, and as word of his efforts spread, donations came rolling in from corporations, citizens and veterans.

To date, Ryan has walked 6,200 miles and raised over \$48,000 through gifts he inspired and an additional \$19,000 from his wave fund and community donations.

Walking in the parade was more than a dream come true for Ryan.

“I was honored to walk with the other vets, so very proud to walk with them,” said Ryan, who walked, waved and handed out lanyards to the children who crowded the parade route.

But when he walked by the grandstand, his breath was taken away.

“As I walked by the grandstand they announced my name, ‘Ric Ryan of Calaveras County, the walking man of Murphys.’ And I began to cry,” he recalled. “Since I had just come from a Fox News interview earlier and still had some of the makeup on so I jokingly turned to my wife and asked, ‘Is my makeup running?’”

It was a moment he’ll never forget, and he enjoyed many other fond memories as well from his trip to the Big Apple.

“I met so many people. But the best was when Octavia got up in front of everyone, hugged me and said he loved me. He is my hero,” said Ryan.

Octavia returned the sentiment, saying Ryan “is the stamp of a true American hero.”

Ryan even had a little one-on-one time with Fox News’ Lou Dobbs.

“At the end of our conversation, he told me he was going to make a donation to Operation Mend,” said Ryan.

With the whirlwind calming down and the TV and news interviews slowing a bit, Ryan and his wife find themselves happily adjusting to life back in Calaveras County, though “my wife thinks she may need to buy me a bigger hat after this trip,” said Ryan with a smile.

As time goes on, walking does become harder for Ryan. But he plans to continue as best he can.

“I have a hip replacement surgery scheduled for Jan. 20,” he said. “I told my wife I would be out walking by the 22nd. She told me I would not. So I guess I’ll slowly work up to it. ... I will walk when I can. And God bless our troops.”

Operation Mend has begun its own wave program #wave4operationmend, in hopes of helping other communities launch grassroots “wave” campaigns to support Operation Mend.

For more information about Operation Mend visit operationmend.ucla.edu/.

To support Ric’s efforts, mail checks to Ric Ryan (payable to Operation Mend) at P.O. Box 1674, Murphys, CA 95247.