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Mending through mitzvah

by Malina Saval



Joshua Neidorf became a “buddy” to veteran Louis Dahlman through the UCLA Operation Mend program and gave him a special engraved medal at his bar mitzvah party luncheon. Photo by Tracey Landworth Photography

Many bar mitzvah boys sit around post-celebration counting checks and dreaming up stockpiles of Wii games to buy. Not Joshua Neidorf.

He marked his entrée into Jewish manhood this past September by donating \$13,000 to UCLA’s Operation Mend, a groundbreaking program with the Brooke Army Medical Center and VA Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System that provides returning military personnel with severe facial and other medical injuries access to the nation’s top plastic and reconstructive surgeons, as well as comprehensive mental health support for the wounded and their families.

“It’s really important to me to help out the people who have kept us safe and protected our country,” the 13-year-old from Westwood explained.

A seventh-grader at Crossroads School in Santa Monica, Joshua chose Operation Mend as the focus of his required mitzvah project at Temple Isaiah religious school. He managed to raise \$6,500 for the organization, while a private foundation, the Conrad and Christa Burke Fund, matched that amount.

“I knew I wanted to give [Operation Mend] a good percentage of my bar mitzvah money,” he said. “I wanted to donate something that would really make an impact. I didn’t want it to be \$1,000 or some modest amount. I wanted to donate enough to make a positive difference in the lives of these soldiers.”

The costs of the specialized program, established in 2007 through a partnership envisioned by Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center board and executive committee member Ron A. Katz and his now-deceased wife, Maddie, are immensely high — an average of \$500,000 per active-duty soldier or veteran.

“From the phlebotomist that needs to be experienced with patients with severe burns to expert designers of prosthetic ears, from airfare and accommodations to psychological services, we provide these soldiers with the excellent care that they deserve,” Katz explained. “They have done something extraordinary for us. We owe it to them. To not give something back is just not right.”

Joshua and his mother, Nanci Neidorf-Christopher, have been involved with Operation Mend since its inception, when Neidorf-Christopher’s parents (friends with the Katz family) volunteered them as a “buddy family” to Army Sgt. Louis Dahlman. The 27-year-old veteran of the Iraq War sustained catastrophic facial injuries when his jaw was blown off by a roadside bomb.

“When we were paired with Louis and his family — which now includes his lovely wife, Laura, and their adorable, almost-2-year-old daughter, Stella — we had no idea what would come of this connection,” said Neidorf-Christopher, an actress, writer and owner of Sugar & Stilettos, a baked goods company.

“Joshua and I thought that maybe I would bake the family some of my treats from time to time and that we’d go to dinner occasionally when the family was in town. What grew was a relationship that has touched our hearts in ways we could never have imagined. The Dahlmans are part of our family as though they were born to us.”

Dana Katz, Ron Katz’s daughter-in-law, heads the buddy program, which she describes as a “strong support system” for soldiers traveling to Los Angeles for medical treatment.

“Every patient and every patient’s family structure is different, so what they need in a buddy family is going to be different,” she explained. “One thing that’s beautiful about the Neidorfs is that they are an intergenerational buddy family. His parents, his grandparents — they took it on together.”

“That’s the magic of the buddy program,” Katz added. “Everybody gets involved.”

It was Joshua’s close friendship with Dahlman, who flies from his home in Texas to Los Angeles for surgeries and follow-up doctors visits, that inspired the newly minted teen to do as much as he could to raise awareness for Operation Mend and the plight of American soldiers.

“Louis is just a really great person,” Joshua said. “From the first minute I met him, he was just this really nice and sweet person, and I tried to become his friend as fast as I could so we could hang out. He’s kind

of shy, but after I started connecting to him, our friendship really grew. And I became passionate about doing whatever I could to help him and others like him going through similar experiences.”

Enclosed along with Joshua’s bar mitzvah invitation was a special card explaining his goals for his mitzvah project, his relationship with Dahlman and providing the Operation Mend Web site (operationmend.ucla.edu) so people could make a donation.

“We were lucky to have Louis and his family in town the week of the bar mitzvah,” Neidorf-Christopher said. “Josh had made a short, five-minute video that chronicled Louis’ journey, his injuries and recovery, and a bit about Operation Mend, and we screened it for everyone at the bar mitzvah party luncheon.”

After the video, Joshua presented the courageous 6-foot-4-inch veteran with a special engraved medal.

“Everybody stood and gave Louis a standing ovation,” Neidorf-Christopher recalled. “There was not a dry eye in the house. There were tears streaming down Louis’ face. It was a moment no one will ever forget.”

For Dahlman, adjustment back into civilian life has come with its expected roadblocks and challenges. He admits to thinking, “Why did I survive? It should have been me that died.”

Joshua’s beneficence was beyond anything in his imagination.

“I never would have even dreamed that he would give that much money,” he said. “I didn’t expect it at all. It means so much to me. It’s just amazing. Nanci and Josh are so great. They are always there for me. She’s always baking for us. She takes us out to dinner. She plays with my little girl. Whenever we come out there, she and Josh are there to help.”

Katz believes that Joshua’s act of generosity can be an inspiration to teens all over Los Angeles.

“For Josh, I think that donating in this way to Operation Mend was a major moment of growth development in his life,” he said of the budding philanthropist. “And now he can inspire other kids in L.A. to fund mitzvah projects and to give tzedakah. He’s set a tremendously good example for other teenagers about what it truly means to do service.”

As for Joshua, he has every intention of continuing to help Operation Mend wherever and whenever he can in an effort to ensure that other soldiers like Dahlman receive topnotch medical care.

“These people have been through hell,” he said. “They should all have the best medical help in the world.”

A version of this article appeared in print.