

The miracle maker

Doc puts smiles back on faces of maimed G.I.s

BY STEPHANIE GASKELL
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

ARMY SGT. DARRON Mikeworth was driving to Balad Air Base in Iraq on April 29, 2005, when he saw the suicide bomber approach his convoy. Next came the explosion that changed his life forever.

"I about had my head taken off," said the 31-year-old father of two young boys. "It broke every bone in my face."

The attack nearly killed Mikeworth and left him terribly disfigured. He lost his nose, left eye and use of his right arm.

Now with the help of one of the top plastic surgeons in the country, he's getting his face — and his life — back.

Dr. Timothy Miller, chief of plastic surgery at UCLA Medical Center, has teamed up with the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Tex., and philanthropist Ronald Katz to create Operation Mend, a program that provides reconstructive surgery to injured soldiers.

"It's pretty much a godsend," said Mikeworth, stationed at Fort Polk, La., but recovering from his third plastic surgery at Brooke.

"Dr. Miller is just a miracle worker. He's given me hope that I can move on with this entire in-

OPERATION MEND SOLDIERS' FRIEND

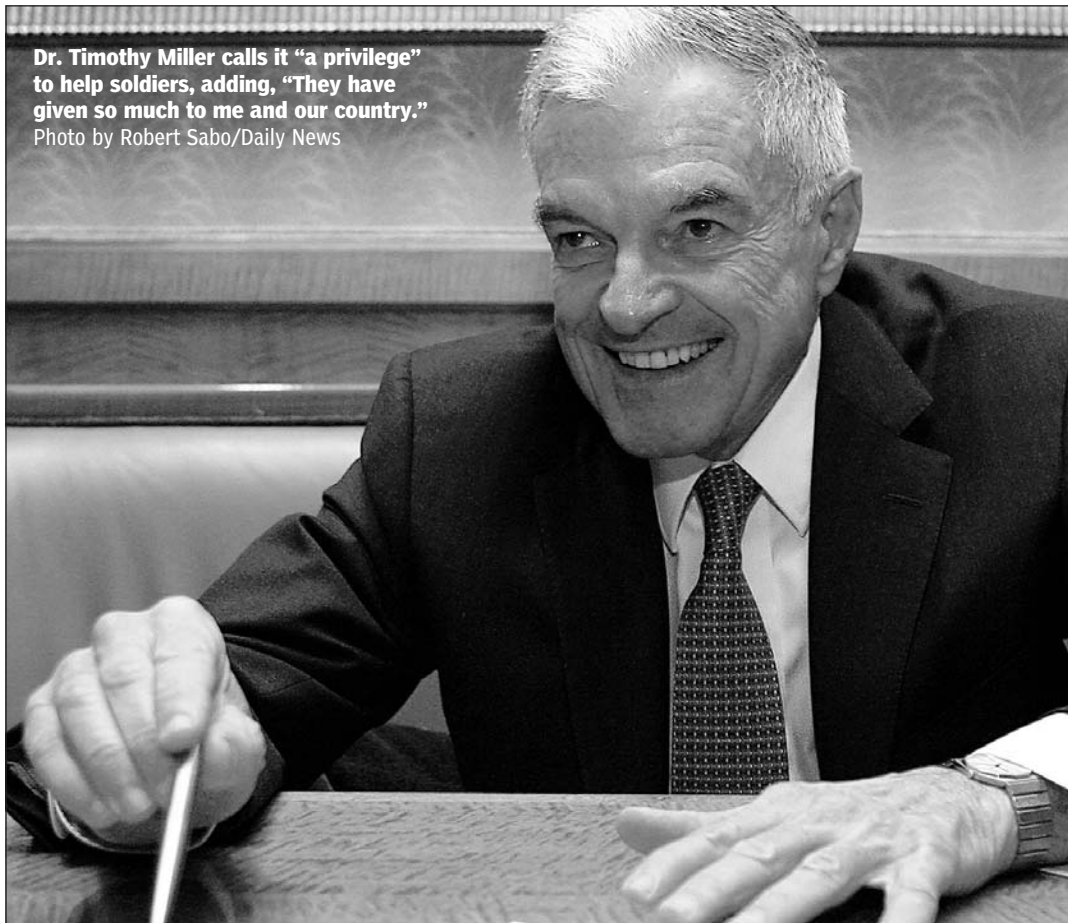
OPERATION MEND provides advanced plastic surgery to soldiers who have been severely disfigured by injuries suffered in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The surgery is provided at no cost by some of the nation's leading plastic surgeons, including Dr. Timothy Miller, chief of plastic surgery at UCLA Medical Center. The operations can cost up to \$500,000 per soldier.

The Katz Family Foundation in California has funded the initial efforts of Operation Mend. The Intrepid Relief Fund pays for soldiers and their families to travel to and from UCLA Medical Center.

To learn more or donate money to the fund, visit the UCLA Web site at giving.ucla.edu/plasticsurgery.

Stephanie Gaskell



Dr. Timothy Miller calls it "a privilege" to help soldiers, adding, "They have given so much to me and our country." Photo by Robert Sabo/Daily News

cident and move on with my career."

Operation Mend has provided reconstructive surgery for four soldiers. Two others will be added next month. The program relies solely on donations to pay for the surgeries, which can cost up to \$500,000.

"We're trying to make these young men look as normal as possible," said Miller, a Vietnam veteran. "No matter what people feel about the war, there's not one person who doesn't want to help these people."

"We recognize the sacrifice they've made for our country."

Marine Sgt. Octavio Sanchez was blown up by a makeshift roadside bomb in Ramadi on June 16, 2005.

He suffered third-degree burns over 70% of his face and body and lost his right hand.

"I didn't have a problem with the way I looked," said the 27-year-old father of four who lives in San Antonio. "I'm not ashamed of what happened to me. I'm actually proud of what I've done."

"But I took a step back and said, 'Well, if they can help me out and reconstruct my nose and take some attention from me, I saw it as a plus for my children. It hit them pretty bad when I got hurt.'"

Sanchez has had six operations. Miller was able to take one of his ribs and construct a nose on his forehead. Once the blood supply was in place, Miller lifted the new nose from his forehead and moved it to its proper place.

"It's amazing the work that

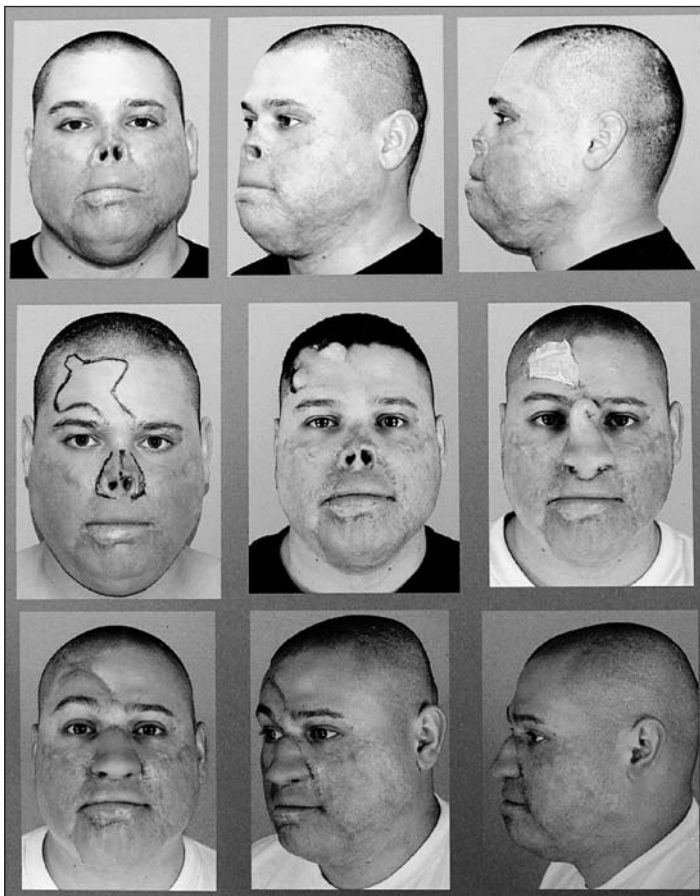


Photo chart shows progress of surgery on Sgt. Octavio Sanchez. Dr. Timothy Miller fixed Sanchez's face after growing new nose, using piece of rib, on Sanchez's forehead, then grafting it into place.

he does," Sanchez said. "He's been blessed."

To hear Miller talk about his work, it's easy to see how fulfilled he is by treating the soldiers. "For me, it's a privilege," he said. "They have given so much to me and our country. We're grateful to be able to operate on them."

Katz, a UCLA Medical Center board member, said it's important for the private sector to get involved.

"The soldiers need to have access to not only the best the military has to offer, but also the best the private sector has to offer," he said.

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Partygoer shot dead

A 26-YEAR-OLD man was gunned down early yesterday on a dead-end Harlem street shortly after he left a party at a community center, police said.

Curtis Jackson was among a few hundred partygoers at a bash thrown at the Hansborough Recreation Center on W. 134th St. and exchanged several "hard looks and words" with another reveler just after 4 a.m., a police source said.

Jackson left the party but was unable to escape his assailant, who followed him to the end of the street, pulled out a gun and started shooting, police said.

Jackson was hit in the chest and back, police said. An unidentified friend drove him to Harlem Hospital, where Jackson died at 5:15 a.m., officials said.

Jackson, who lived in the Bronx, had five prior arrests for drugs and robbery, but it was unclear if his criminal past was connected to the shooting, the police source said.

The gunman fled the area on foot and remained at large late yesterday, police said.

Jonathan Lemire

Man critical in Queens car flip

A BMW flipped over after it hit a light pole while exiting a Queens highway, leaving a 33-year-old man in critical condition, police said yesterday.

Natasya Kontonis, 23, was behind the wheel of a 1994 BMW 325i driving west on the Grand Central Parkway at 8:15 p.m. Friday when she tried to take the off-ramp at 94th St., police said. The car hit the pole, spun out of control and flipped over, police said.

Kontonis suffered minor cuts and bruises, but her passenger, Michael Abate, was taken to Elmhurst Hospital Center with severe injuries, police said. Abate was in critical condition yesterday, officials said.

The cause of the crash was under investigation. No charges have been filed against Kontonis.

Jonathan Lemire

That's a gem of a car wash

ST. PETERSBURG, Russia — Car cleaners at a Russian firm got a surprise when they cleaned out a vacuum cleaner last week: a diamond pendant worth up to \$475,000.

"I didn't know how much it was worth at first, so I got a jeweler to come around," said Vladimir Shapiro, owner of the car cleaning firm in St. Petersburg.

"When I heard the value, my jaw dropped to the floor," he said.

"You would have to notice losing something like this."

He said he was not going to disclose much about the pendant so that he could return it to its owner.

Reuters