

# Los Angeles DAILY NEWS

## Quilting group works to patch wounded veterans' hearts

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Patti Taylor watches Sherry Johnston stitch a quilt using a quilting machine at Patches Fabrics in Chatsworth on Dec. 15, 2011. Volunteers gather at Patches once a week to make quilts for wounded servicemen and women. (Michael Owen Baker/Daily News Staff Photographer)

CHATSWORTH - Patti Taylor is no surgeon, but she can sew.

She cannot repair the ears seared off by explosives, the cartilage in obliterated noses and fingers burned so badly the remaining digits resemble claws.

But Taylor and several volunteers from across the San Fernando Valley work late into the nights to stitch, until the pieces of red, white and blue fabric they mend together become a quilt big enough to wrap around a wounded veteran in need of emotional comfort.

"We sent our sons and daughters to war," Taylor said. "We have to be a nation that welcomes them back. They served us. Now we have to serve them as a community."

For nearly five years, Taylor and several volunteers have gathered at Patches,



Volunteers for Operation Mend include Patti Taylor, left, Jenney Horst, Dawn Burdick, Mary Kopp, Sherry Johnston and Paula Hofsommer at Patches Fabrics in Chatsworth on December 15, 2011. Volunteers gather at Patches once a week to make quilts for wounded servicemen and women. (Michael Owen Baker/Daily News Staff Photographer)

a fabric store in Chatsworth, to handmake Quilts of Valor as part of an effort called Operation Mend.

The program is a collaboration of surgeons from the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center who receive the badly wounded veterans from Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. Teams of surgeons offer, for free, facial and hand surgeries to servicemen and women disfigured by improvised explosive devices and other realities of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I'm overwhelmed by the extent of the injuries," said philanthropist Ronald Katz, who created Operation Mend in 2007 after he saw an interview with Marine Cpl. Aaron Mankin on television.

Mankin had been working as a military combat correspondent along the Iraq-Syria border when an IED detonated underneath his vehicle. The blast seared the skin on his right hand and face and more than 25 percent of his body was burned. He became the first Operation Mend participant, and his story inspired others to pursue facial and hand surgeries.

"We get the most severe of the severe," Katz said.

Led by Dr. Timothy Miller, a veteran himself, the team of surgeons with Operation Mend has performed 700 surgeries on 54 service members so far, Katz said.

But despite the many advances in facial and hand reconstruction, there are other needs, Katz said.

That's where Taylor comes in.

A retired Army nurse who helped treat the wounded from Vietnam to the Persian Gulf War, Taylor could understand the veterans' emotional needs most. She retired from the military as a lieutenant colonel and still teaches nursing at UCLA.

"I think this is a great gift of life for her," Katz said of Taylor, who was Nursing Spectrum magazine's National Nurse of the Year in 2010.

"We have to do more than just fix them physically. We have to be there psychosocially. They are young people, and they really do want to live and want to have a family and do what others do."

Army Spc. Joey Paulk remembers waking up after surgery with one of the quilts over him.

Paulk, 26, was injured in Afghanistan in 2007 when his tactical vehicle was hit by anti-tank mines. The blast flipped the vehicle over, igniting the fuel tank. Paulk suffered burns to 40 percent of his body and face, and all 10 fingers were amputated.

"When I woke up, I felt warm with that quilt," Paulk said. "I was kind of looking at it, and I was like, whoa, and Nurse Patti was there."

Paulk has undergone five surgeries at UCLA, most recently a chin implant.

"It's made a world of difference for me," he said of Operation Mend. "I was sheltered and isolated (after the accident). I used to not to talk to strangers.



This photo from 2004 shows Army Specialist Joey Paulk recuperating at UCLA with a quilt made by volunteers at Patches Fabrics. His sister Sarah is at his left, mother Judy at his right.

Now I'm trying to give back as much as possible, to raise awareness for Operation Mend, because it's a nonprofit, and if we run out of money, then we run out of the ability to do these surgeries."

On a recent Wednesday evening, Taylor and several women gathered at Patches where piles of folded quilts, some with timeless designs such as the Carpenter's Square, awaited binding.

Each woman said she could claim a father, brother or son who has served in the military at one time.

"It's a tribute to my dad," said Paula Hofsommer, whose father was in the Air Force and mother worked in the Navy and Air Force during World War II. Her parents survived the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

"This work fulfills my heart," Hofsommer said. "I love to sew. I get a lot of satisfaction."

Dawn Burdick is new to Operation Mend, and didn't know how to quilt, until she discovered Patches.

"Everybody is amazing at what they do," she said.

Owned by Jenney and Bill Horst, Patches fabric shop also hosts several other philanthropic efforts. Students from local schools complete their community projects by coming into the shop, to work on a quilt or even pillow cases for the veterans, Jenney Horst said.

One of them is Anabel Monteagudo, 12.

"I thought it was special to work on something like this for the soldiers," Anabel said. "It's fun."

Horst keeps a scrapbook of all the veterans and their families who have received a Quilt of Valor.

"I didn't have any children, so all these (veterans) are my kids," Horst said.

Although they are not the only group to make quilts, Taylor said she and the others plan to endure. Though Thursday marked the official end of the war in Iraq, Taylor said the war in Afghanistan persists. In the next few months, five servicewomen injured in Afghanistan will be coming to UCLA for surgeries.

She knows that Operation Mend will be needed for years to come.

For Taylor, participating in Operation Mend seemed like a perfect fit. Born and raised in an Amish Mennonite community in upstate New York, Taylor said she had wanted to be a doctor, but her father had not allowed it. She left her community to join the Army, but it's the sewing skill she gained as a child that still brings her pleasure.

"It's been almost five years, and these ladies have not given up," Taylor said.

"I call us the 3-H club," Taylor said. "We have the heads, the hearts and the hands to heal. We'll never give up. We won't leave anyone behind."

For more information about the Quilts of Valor or Operation Mend, go to [operationmend.ucla.edu](http://operationmend.ucla.edu).



Anabel Monteagudl, 12, cuts fabric at Patches Fabrics, on Nov. 30, 2011 in Chatsworth. Volunteers gather at Patches once a week to make quilts for wounded servicemen and women. (Michael Owen Baker/Daily News Staff Photographer)