

# St. Cloud Times

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## Wounded Freeport veteran finds peace in sharing story, helping others

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FREEPORT — Mike Mills celebrates two days in his life: his birthday and June 14, 2005.

Serving a tour in Iraq, Mills, a Freeport resident and 21-year military veteran, was aboard a heavy military truck in Kirkuk, Iraq, when an improvised explosive device changed the lives of him and his family forever.

"I remember the explosion; I remember the taste of the gunpowder, taste of the dirt. I seen the flames. I heard it. I remember saying, 'this is going to hurt,' and when I hit the ground, it hurt," said Mills, 44. "I remember going back trying to find the driver and he was already out of the truck, remember tearing off my body armor and the truck driver behind me come running up and put the flames out."

"I remember the ambulance. The last thing I remember at the aid station (was) when they put the tube down my throat. That was the last I remember until September sometime."

Four years later, Mills is receiving recognition and being held up as an example for his efforts to help other veterans.

'So many questions'

The IED left Mills, a National Guard staff sergeant, with severe injuries: a broken scapula, broken clavicle, four broken bones in his left foot, a broken hip and burns over 31 percent of his body. Portions of his left ear and nose were missing and two fingers on his left hand were amputated.

Suki Mills, Mike's wife of 21 years, learned about Mike's injuries in a call to her cell phone 12 hours after the explosion.

"I was one of the leaders in our family readiness group, and I was constantly telling the families that you can't do anything about what happens over there (in Iraq); you can't control it," Suki Mills said.

"Little did I know that we would be the family that would have to deal with something," she said. "... My world just stopped; there were just so many questions. The first 24 hours were numb."

As Mike lay in Brooks Army Medical Center in Fort Sam Houston, Texas, the family knew their lives were forever changed. But instead of being angry or depressed about his altered life, Mike Mills and his family decided to use his predicament to aid injured veterans.

Support system

After the explosion, Mike Mills constantly fought with his emotions. It was not until he worked with a psychiatrist that he was able to cope with what had happened to him.

"It was just small talk at first," Mills said. "Then he made me realize it's not my fault and that's what keeps me going today."

Mills started the organization For the Veteran... By a Veteran, a support group for wounded, retired and deployed soldiers that gives advice about post-combat life. Mills says he has worked with almost 200 veterans from World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam to soldiers in Desert Storm and Iraq.

Mills decided to help fellow veterans after several of his friends had committed suicide.

"I always knew I wanted to continue to do something for the military, even though I couldn't continue to serve," Mills said. "This was my way of serving without serving."

On his Web site ([www.fortheveteran.com](http://www.fortheveteran.com)), Mills gives a candid look into his own thoughts and fears. Mills is also on the board of directors for Project New Hope, which offers free retreats to combat veterans and their families.

While meant to help others through similar experience, the postings on the Web site have become cathartic for Mills.

"The more I talk about it, the more I heal," Mike Mills said. "The doctors can heal the physical wounds, but they can't heal the mental wounds.

"Only talking to fellow veterans, to families... and putting my thoughts down on my Web site helps me heal."

A community united

Paul Hetland, Freeport's treasurer and city clerk, met Mike Mills shortly after he returned to the city after the explosion. Hetland had an idea to help the Mills family through a small remodeling project.

"He was deployed and his family was so busy on other veterans issues, helping vets and their families, that the house was the last thing on their list," Hetland said. "In the spirit of the (TV show) 'Extreme Makeover,' we decided, let's start to look at some kind of help to their house."

Hetland, the vice president of the Freeport Lions Club at the time, decided to help the family by installing new windows. But the remodeling project grew.

"Windows turned into siding turned into shingles and then turned into a renovation to their cabinets and most of the interior in the house, paint, you name it," Hetland said. "It was a project that brought the community together like no other project before or since."

Initially, Mike wanted no help in fixing his home.

"My response to Mike was 'you did your job, let us do ours,'" Hetland said. "That sort of became our mantra."

Face for camera

Having gone through 32 surgeries to treat his burns, Mike was presented with a unique opportunity in October 2008 to repair the damage to his face.

"We were contacted through my old case worker down in Texas, she called me and told me, 'We have a new surgeon; I would like you to meet him,'" Mike said. "My first words were, 'How much is this going to cost?' She said, 'It's free.'"

The family decided in late December to meet Dr. Timothy Miller at the University of California-Los Angeles. UCLA heads an effort called Operation Mend to treat military members wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Mike's son Aaron, 19, and daughter Kenzie, 14, were cautious about their father going back in for surgery.

"The kids were like, 'Dad, why would you want to put yourself through that?'" Mike said.

"His body acts kind of goofy (under sedation)," Suki said.

The family ultimately decided to go ahead. During his time at UCLA, the family was contacted by The Learning Channel about documenting Mike's progress. Initially a documentary on Operation Mend, the show was shortened and became a program called "Rebuilding Faces." TLC filmed the family at UCLA, at Fort Sam Houston and at their home in Freeport.

Mike was skeptical about putting himself on national television.

"We sat down and we talked about it, and at first we thought, 'Do we really want to have our face, my face, out there in the public,'" Mike said. "But when we made it out to California, we knew it was the right thing to do."

Mike has had three procedures done to his face with a fourth operation scheduled in January. So far, Mike has been satisfied with the results. But more important to the Mills family, it gives light to helping other veterans and burn survivors in general.

"Just showing that this organization is out there, Operation Mend, and of course Mike's organization," Suki said. "Letting (other veterans) know that it's not a painstaking, horrible thing to go through."

Baseball and rock

On a day Freeport mayor Matt Worms proclaimed Mike Mills Day, he received an award from the American Patriot Program — the first Minnesotan to gain the honor. The award goes to wounded combat veterans who maintain a positive lifestyle.

On Tuesday, Mills, his son Aaron and Hetland hopped into Mike's truck to accept the award in Columbus, Ohio.

The ceremony had a unique twist.

Along with his award, Mike also received two customized baseball bats, a Minnesota Twins mini helmet, an autographed baseball signed by retired Twins pitcher Bert Blyleven and a customized St. Paul Saints baseball jersey.

"The founder of the award is a baseball fanatic," Mike said. "The American pastime for the American heroes is how he refers to it."

During Mike Mills Day, he also received awards from the Freeport Black Sox and the Freeport Softball Club.

Mike has been invited to throw out the first pitch at the Saints' home opener. The Alexandria Beetles and St. Cloud River Bats of the Northwoods League have also offered him the chance to throw first pitches in 2010.

During his recovery, Mike was given an autographed acoustic guitar from rock-and-roll legend Ted Nugent. The Mills remain in contact with Nugent and his wife, Shemane.

Keeping upbeat

According to Suki, the family has coped with Mike's tragedy by laughing.

"We chose to do the humor part of life," Mike said. "There's never a dull day around this house, ever."

During the filming of "Rebuilding Faces," Mike and his daughter Kenzie sword fought with wooden dowels in the background while his son Aaron was being interviewed by TLC.

"That's Mike's hallmark; he doesn't get involved into the pools of self-pity," Hetland said. "He is a positive man all the way around."

Now five years after the IED explosion that changed his life, Mike has adapted to his new life.

"At first it was very uneasy; over the last two years, things have gotten back to a new normal," Mike said. "I've had to learn how to do everything all over again. Everything I do now I've adapted to my new way of life."

Over Mike's ankle, a tattoo with a Purple Heart says "June 14, 2005. A New Beginning." It is a constant reminder of what he's been through, and where he's going.

"He's the genuine article," Hetland said. "He certainly is a genuine, real American hero. You don't meet too many of those people, but he really is."

## Additional Facts

If you watch...

What: "Rebuilding Faces," featuring Mike Mills.

Time: 9 p.m.

Date: Sunday.

Channel: TLC-

The Learning Channel (Channel 42 on Charter).