

Extra Mile

Operation Mend: Healing the Body and the Spirit

By Laura Putre

UCLA operations administrator adds a personal touch to surgical program for injured soldiers

When Operation Mend, a program that provides free reconstructive surgery for soldiers injured in Iraq and Afghanistan, launched at Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center in 2007, Shannon O'Kelley did a good chunk of the work himself. He was greeter, scheduler, tour guide, good will ambassador, chaperone and hand-holder. He also burned up a lot of time traveling to and from Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, where the severely injured soldiers were being treated.



"We hadn't hired anybody yet because we didn't know if it was going to work," O'Kelley says, noting that the program now has a seven-person administrative staff.

UCLA hospital board member Ronald Katz, an entrepreneur known for his military philanthropy, had pitched the UCLA-Brooke collaboration. It quickly earned the support of plastic surgery chief Tim Miller, a Vietnam veteran. O'Kelley spent six months persuading Brooke doctors to hand over their soldiers to a civilian hospital.

"They take care of their own, and they do a great job of it," says O'Kelley, who as the associate director of operations also manages the hospital's transplant, oncology and cardiac departments.

Early on, O'Kelley was ready with several promises: He would meet the soldiers at the door of the airplane, with wheelchairs if necessary, and take them back to the door of the plane for their return flight. UCLA would provide suites for the soldiers and their families in the hospital's guest house. And they would treat the visit like a military deployment by giving each soldier a per diem of \$63 per day—the going rate. He also took care not to swoop in as though UCLA was going to save the day.

"[Brooke has] the latest technologies and skill sets—we're in absolute awe," he says. "We just wanted to offer whatever clinical services would complement what the military had already done."

Sgt. Darron Mikeworth, the second of 30 soldiers so far to benefit from Operation Mend, remembers that when he and his family arrived in Los Angeles, they expected to be rather impersonally shuttled between the airport, hotel and doctor's office. To their surprise, O'Kelley was at the airport waiting. O'Kelly made himself available at all hours just to talk or answer questions, from what to expect at surgery to where the best beaches were.

"He'd mess around with my two boys—he's like an uncle to them," Mikeworth says. "If we showed up and one of us had the sniffles, he'd just about make the doctor's appointment himself."

Mikeworth learned of Operation Mend in September 2007 from his case manager at Brooke. He was injured in 2005 when his Humvee was attacked. Surgery was extensive: He broke every bone in his face, lost his nose, nearly lost his arm, and suffered severe damage to his left eye. All told, he had 16 surgeries at Brooke. During the past two years, he's traveled to UCLA for reconstructive surgeries on his nose, lips and lower eyelid.

Recently, Mikeworth told O'Kelley that he felt comfortable enough with his appearance to attend a PTA meeting at his sons' school. This was a big step; a few months ago he wouldn't pick his sons up at the bus stop for fear he might scare the other kids. "You really do see a transformation, not only in their appearance, but in their self-esteem," O'Kelley says. "With each one of them, I feel like I'm adding a member to the family."