



A special program to mend wounded warriors

By SHARON COHEN AP National Writer © 2009 The Associated Press

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SAN ANTONIO — Operation Mend started with a philanthropist and an idea.

Ron Katz, a member of the UCLA Medical Center's board of directors, approached the top brass at the hospital in the fall of 2007 after seeing a TV news story about a soldier with serious facial wounds, then noticing others while visiting Brooke Army Medical Center.

Katz says he thought UCLA had the special kind of expertise to help with facial reconstructive surgery.

So far, 24 military men and women have been treated. All are referred to UCLA from Brooke, home to the military's main unit for severely burned soldiers and Marines.

Surgeries are performed over several months or more. Patients usually stay for two weeks at a time; their families temporarily live at a guest house on UCLA's campus and receive support from local "buddy" families in the Los Angeles area.

Operation Mend is funded through the Katz Family Foundation along with private and public donations. Some of the surgeons' work is done

free of charge; military insurance, Medicare or Operation Mend pay for the rest.

Dr. Timothy Miller, chief surgeon for Operation Mend, has worked on all the patients and says his background — he served in the Army in Vietnam — has given him special insight into his patients.

"You know what they were asked to do and what they did — they lay their lives on the line every day," he says. "It helps for them to know you've been to war, you know a little bit about what's going on. It's sort of a bonding."

Dr. Christopher Crisera, another UCLA surgeon, also says military men and women have a special discipline, making them ideal patients.

"I'm sure it's part of their military training," he says. "They'll do anything you tell them to do. They're 100 percent motivated."

Katz has come to know many of the program's patients, including Sgt. Darron Mikeworth, who is nearing the end of his surgeries. Katz says he is thrilled to see how much progress the soldier had made.

"I so wanted him to succeed," he says. "He's able to achieve a normal life because his face looks normal. It's just a gift to see that happen. It's just the best feeling you can have."

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