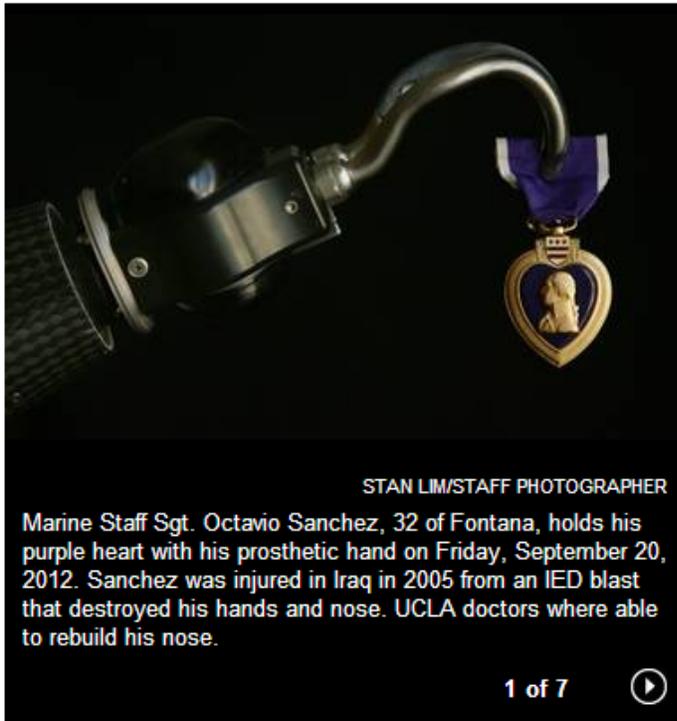


FONTANA: Surgeon restores a soldier's face



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Octavio Sanchez had gotten used to not having a nose.

“I was pretty much happy with the way I looked,” said the former Marine staff sergeant, who suffered deforming burns in a roadside bomb blast in Iraq in 2005.



It was the reactions his kids had to endure when he went out in public — stares and finger-pointing that drove his oldest son to tears on one occasion — that made him decide to have the surgery to restore his face.

There is a noticeable bump at the bridge of his nose and a pencil-thin scar that sneaks down the side, but otherwise there is little evidence that Sanchez's nose is not the one he was born with.

His other injuries from the explosion are more noticeable. His right hand is missing. Only three fingers remain on his left hand, and they are fused and not much use. The skin covering much of his body is a subtle patchwork of skin grafts. Tattoos he had before those surgeries are now in different places.

But it was the absence of the lower half of his nose that used to draw looks from strangers. That changed in 2008 when he began a two-year journey involving a dozen surgeries. He was one of the first patients to be part of a fledgling program at UCLA, Operation Mend.

Started in 2007, the program is a cooperative effort between the Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas, and UCLA. The focus is to improve the appearance and function of military personnel whose faces have been severely damaged, usually as the result of burns.

Dr. Timothy Miller was the first surgeon involved at UCLA and the man who operated on Sanchez's face. He said building new faces for injured veterans is a transformative process not only physically, but emotionally.

"If you imagine, you were in college and you had a bad pimple on your nose and how much you worried about that," Miller said. "Magnify that about a million times. You don't have a face. This is a very, very tough thing to live with."

BUILDING A NOSE

The process typically involves a series of surgeries. As the process nears completion, he said, many patients who may have shied away from people become socially engaged once more.

"Their outlook is different," he said. "They have a much more optimistic view of their future."

Sanchez's nose was constructed using a skin flap from his forehead, skin sections and cartilage from his ears, and rib cartilage. The nose was initially constructed and grown on his forehead, over his right eye.

"Once everything was healed," Miller said, "we brought the entire nose down and (using) portions of his eighth rib, which is cartilage, built a structure that would hold the nose up, giving it a profile."

Miller and his colleagues are experimenting with methods of cutting down on the number of surgeries such patients might need by growing human ears and noses on host animals in the laboratory. Using stem cells and proteins that make those cells create specific tissues, Miller said, such products may be available in the not-to-distant future.

The experimental work "is moving rather quickly," he said.

Sanchez isn't complaining that he had to grow his own nose.

"I'm very happy I went through with this," he said. There are still burn scars on his face, and color variations in skin grafts give it a mottled look, but his most striking injury, the missing nose, is in the past.

'ADRENALIN TOOK OVER'

He's had to adapt to his other injuries.

As a member of the 1st Battalion, 5th Marine, Sanchez was part of Charlie Company when he deployed to Iraq in May 2005. He was in a unit that patrolled the Ramadi area daily, either in vehicles or on foot. On June 16 the unit was checking an agricultural area where weapons had previously been found. They had determined that it was clear.

On the way back to base, the Humvee carrying Sanchez ran over three improvised explosive devices linked together. The blast hurled the vehicle 40 feet. It came to rest upside down.

Two of the Marines, including Sanchez's captain, died in the explosion. Sanchez and two others were injured. Fire filled the passenger compartment as he clawed his way out of the driver's door. By the time he emerged, he was engulfed in flames.

He dropped and rolled on the ground, but it did little good.

"The IED had hit the fuel cell and I was covered in diesel," he said. "One of my Marines ran up and put me out with a fire extinguisher."

Enemy fighters were firing at the Marines. Sanchez tried to join the battle, not realizing how badly he had been burned.

"I tried to pick up a rifle, but I couldn't," he said. "I looked down at my hands and they were just kind of mucousy, kind of green, just like snot. We ran over to the triage area, I guess adrenalin took over."

Medics immediately began cutting off his clothing. They injected him with morphine. He asked one of the medics for the truth about his condition.

"He said, 'Sgt. Sanchez, you are burned, but you look good,'" he said.

Within five minutes, he was loaded onto a Humvee and whisked back to base. From that point on, his memories are spotty until he regained full consciousness at the burn center in Texas, nearly two weeks later.

'YOU KEEP ON GOING'

He was in intensive care for a month. He was so heavily bandaged that he couldn't tell the extent of his injuries. His wife, Vanette, made sure there were no mirrors in the room.

When the doctors first told her of her husband's condition, she said, she was shocked.

"All I could think was, please let him live," Vanette said.

Sanchez had lost his right hand. His left hand was badly damaged. He had third-degree burns over 69 percent of his body. Medics had had to resuscitate him on the flight out of Iraq.

By the last of his four weeks in intensive care, Octavio said, he realized he was in pretty bad shape. Doctors told him he was looking at a two-year recovery process that would eventually involve nearly 30 operations.

“I’ve been blessed to be a strong person,” he said. “It never really depressed me at all. I always stay positive. Of course, there’s always been times when you’re alone and you feel bad. But you keep on going.”

He had lots of external support, not only from his wife and children, but other family and friends. Brothers, sisters, cousins and aunts and uncles all spent time with him in San Antonio.

He met and got to know Gen. James Amos, now the commandant of the Marine Corps. Amos and his wife, Bonnie, made daily rounds at the burn center.

“Gen. Amos said, ‘Sgt. Sanchez, I’m not going to rest until you get a new hand,’” Sanchez said.

Eventually, he was offered candidacy for a hand transplant. But Sanchez decided to stick with his prosthetic hand — a device with two curved hooks that open and close, working off the nerve impulses in his arm.

“I feel good the way I am now,” he said. “I’ve adjusted.”

A transplant, he said, would mean starting over.

Miller said many burn patients get surgery fatigue. Like Sanchez, they often need to be encouraged to participate in Operation Mend’s cosmetic program.

Vanette said she, too, had had enough of hospitals.

“I had accepted the outcome of his injuries,” she said. “I was fine with it. I just didn’t want him to go through another surgery. But now I’m like, I’m so glad he did it.”

He is, too.

“I’d be lying if I didn’t say it makes me feel a lot better,” Sanchez said.

His kids are happier too, not only because of their father’s appearance, but for his greater presence in their lives. Before his deployment to Iraq, Sanchez said he worked

long hours during the week, spent time with friends on the weekend and found little time for his children.

His perspective changed when he was injured. He cherishes everything he has, he said, especially his kids.

He and his brother started Es Bueno Construction in 2009, but business is slow. Even while serving as a part-time representative for an East Coast armor company, he has plenty of time to be with his children.

“It’s all about them now,” he said.

Two or three times a year, he is asked to attend military events and fundraisers where he often runs into old colleagues.

When they see him, he said, “they’re amazed. Gen. Amos is like, ‘Every time I see you, you look better and better.’ They’re pretty much in awe.”