

Med centers team up with donor to heal deep scars of war



Doctors at UCLA Medical Center and a philanthropist who serves on the hospital's advisory board are helping to heal wounded American soldiers through a unique partnership with a military medical facility in San Antonio, Texas.

"Operation Mend," a collaborative project between UCLA Medical Center and Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC), provides reconstructive plastic surgery for U.S. military personnel wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan. The project is the brainchild of philanthropist Ronald A. Katz, whose Katz Family Foundation is funding all non-covered costs, including travel and housing, for soldiers and their families during treatment.

The first soldier to participate in Operation Mend — U.S. Marine Cpl. Aaron P. Mankin, 25 — has already begun a series of facial reconstructive surgeries at UCLA. The combat correspondent was injured in Iraq in May 2005, his face badly scarred by injuries resulting when an improvised explosive device went off, burning more than 25% of his body.

Mankin was taken to BAMC within 48 hours of being wounded, and for the next two and a half years he endured multiple surgeries, including skin grafts and other lifesaving operations. Last month he arrived at UCLA, where a medical team led by Timothy Miller, professor and chief of plastic surgery, has already begun the process to reconstruct the young soldier's face. Mankin underwent the second stage of reconstructive surgery on Oct. 2.

"That UCLA and others have opened their arms, and opened their eyes, to the fact that we are here, and the way they have treated me and my family gives me great hope," Mankin said. "Not just what to expect for myself, but what to expect for the service members to follow."

Mankin and his wife, Marine Lance Cpl. Diana Mankin, and their 8-month-old daughter, Maddie, are based at BAMC but are staying at UCLA Tiverton House while Mankin undergoes surgery.

The idea for this unique pilot program began last November when Katz saw Mankin being interviewed on CNN.

"I saw Aaron's face, and I thought it would really be wonderful if something could be done," Katz said. Three months later, Katz attended the opening of the Center for the Intrepid at BAMC and saw many other soldiers with facial disfigurements. "I committed myself at that point in time that we were going to do whatever we could to make Aaron and others who suffered that same type of problem better," he said.

Katz approached Gerald S. Levey, UCLA's vice chancellor of medical sciences and dean of the Geffen School of Medicine, who immediately got on board. Within six months, Operation Mend was born.

Mankin has been a very popular patient, and at a press conference Oct. 1 he received a special gift from his case manager, UCLA clinical nurse specialist Patti Taylor. A member of Patches Fabrics, a community group in Reseda that creates "quilts of valor" for wounded soldiers, Taylor presented Mankin with a colorful quilt made of fabric covered in American flags.

More soldiers are already scheduled to follow Mankin to UCLA as part of Operation Mend. "I knew of the spectacular, world-class capabilities of UCLA's plastic surgery team, and I thought, if we could only avail these kids of that kind of superb capability, it would be a change in their lives," Katz said. "It's going to change Aaron's life. It's going to change these others. And it's such a joy to see it happen."

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