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By Kathryn Rogers and Judy Lin

Nathanson Center a 'circle of care' for thousands of families

A veteran recently back from a two-year deployment in Iraq, Michelle was struggling with PTSD and memory loss due to a combat-related traumatic brain injury while raising her three kids alone and in the midst of a custody battle with her abusive husband.



The last thing she wanted to do was take her kids to a crowded, noisy L.A. Dodgers game, where her PTSD could send her into a tailspin.

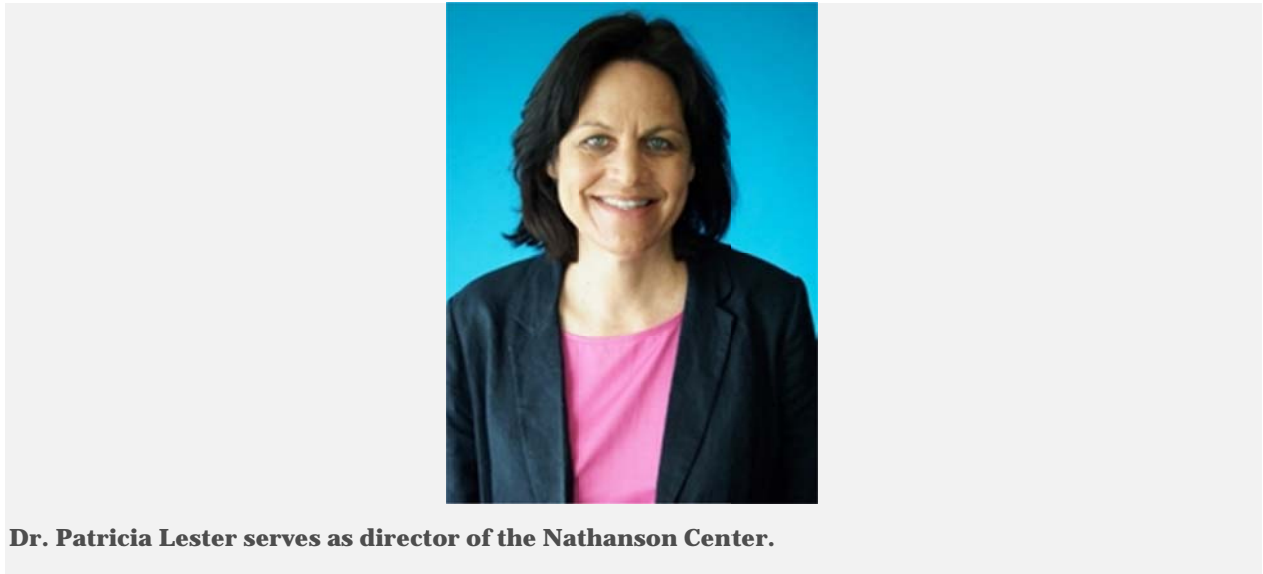
But team members from UCLA's [Welcome Back Veterans Family Resilience Center](#) — whose mission it is to decrease the negative effects of deployment for Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom warfighters and their families — persuaded Michelle and her children to join them at Dodger's Stadium. The day was a game-changer.

"It was hard," Michelle recalled. "I actually began to sweat when I thought about going and sitting in the stands, but I took a few deep breaths and was able to overcome it."

That triumph led Michelle and her children into the center's FOCUS Family Resiliency Training program, where they learned valuable skills for dealing with feelings, communicating and building strong relationships with each another.

"We are getting out more, I trust people more, and it's easier now to take my kids to crowded places," said Michelle.

"I'm always telling people about the program ... People are proud of me and the things that I've been able to do."



Dr. Patricia Lester serves as director of the Nathanson Center.

The Welcome Back Veterans program is offered by the [Nathanson Family Resilience Center](#), which is part of the [Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior](#). The center was founded in 2003 by philanthropists Jane and Marc Nathanson, whose ongoing support reflects their vision and passion for eradicating the stigma of mental illness. Now in its 10th year, the center has seen more than a half-million children, family and community members benefit from its myriad of services.

The [FOCUS \(Families OverComing Under Stress\) program](#) that Michelle and her family took part in is one of the center's key offerings. Playing a primary role in the development and continuing evolution of FOCUS, which helps military families build on their strengths and face adversity together, is [Dr. Patricia Lester](#), the Jane and Marc Nathanson Professor of Psychiatry and the director of the Nathanson Center. In collaboration with the U.S. Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, the program has expanded beyond the UCLA campus to some two dozen Navy, Marine, Army and Air Force installations, and an interactive, online version of the program will soon be available.

"Our team at the Nathanson Center is dedicated to working with families facing many types of challenges," said Lester. "Our nation's military and veteran families make an incredible contribution to all of us through their service to our country— too often they return with both physical and psychological issues that can impact the entire family. So it is our privilege to be able to support their transitions through the FOCUS and Welcome Back Veteran's program."



Parents learn how to take good care of themselves and their children in the Family Development Project.

Among other Nathanson Center offerings are [Project STRIVE](#), a program that teaches runaway youth and their families important skills for communicating, problem solving and conflict negotiation, and the [Family Development Project](#) works with families with infants to support each other and meet the needs of their infants. These and other programs, along with some of the people who benefit from them, are profiled in a series called Circle of Care on the center's website and are currently running in the Jewish Journal. Profiles include a Marine and his family who pulled together in FOCUS in the aftermath of a combat explosion that left him badly burned over 40 percent of his body, and two young brothers traumatized in an auto accident who found help healing their emotional scars at the [Family STAR \(Stress, Trauma And Resilience\) Clinic](#). See the complete [Circle of Care series here](#).

Learn more at [UCLA Nathanson Family Resilience Center website](#), and find additional resources on the [center's Facebook page](#). Read about FOCUS in these UCLA Today stories: [Helping military families find peace in times of war](#) and [Injured vets, families learn to heal hidden wounds of war](#).