

OPERATION MEND TO BE HONORED AT UCLA-CAL FOOTBALL GAME ORGANIZATION HELPS MILITARY MEN AND WOMEN WOUNDED DURING SERVICE IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN.

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By Amy Hughes

Any Division I football game is full of recognitions during the breaks in action. Quarter breaks could see a sponsor recognition, while halftime could see an NCAA Championship team being recognized for its achievement.

In addition to the usual homecoming festivities, Saturday's 4 p.m. football game against California at the Rose Bowl will feature a very special recognition of a truly special program housed right on UCLA's campus.

Operation Mend is a unique partnership between UCLA Health System, Brooke Army Medical Center (BAMC) in San Antonio, Texas, and the VA-Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System. It has been established to help treat U.S. military personnel wounded during service in Iraq and Afghanistan. Its vision is to provide the absolute finest in patient care by collaborating with military medicine to jointly provide servicemen and servicewomen with the best technology and medicine available by both the private and public sectors.

Operation Mend's Surgical Director, Dr. Timothy A. Miller, and Medical Director Dr. Christopher Crisera will be honored on the field along with seven Operation Mend patients: Retired Army Sergeant Rick Yarosh, Retired Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Michael Lammey, Navy Chief Petty Officer Robert Bruce, Army Specialist Javier Rivera, Marine Gunnery Sergeant Lawrence Salcido, Retired Army Specialist Joey Paulk, and Army Staff Sergeant Juan Amaris.

The program was founded by Ron Katz, who will also be honored on-field, along with his son and daughter-in-law, Todd and Dana Katz.

"Operation Mend came to the athletic department's attention thanks to Ron Katz," said UCLA Senior Associate Athletic Director for External Relations Mark Harlan. "Ron and his family are very close to Athletics and are long-time supporters. There was a feeling that this would be a great way to really shed light on the program by integrating it into some of our elements, specifically having a special day around a football game."

The Katz family has been critical to Operation Mend, with Dana Katz organizing the "Buddy Family" portion of the Operation Mend experience.

"Every single patient that comes through our program is connected with a buddy family in Los Angeles," said Operation Mend Program Manager Melanie Gideon. "Through the Buddy Family, they have home-cooked meals, they get to go sightseeing, they get to do all sorts of things and it's all because Dana pairs them with an amazing family in LA."

Since its inception in 2007, Operation Mend has provided care for 53 patients from all branches of the armed forces, with the exception of the United States Coast Guard. It has encompassed 191 surgeries, 863 appointments, 3,876 days of stay at Tiverton House, and a total of 1,085 flights have been greeted.

"We go through airport security every single time they get off of the plane," said Gideon. "We've gone to the airport over 1,000 times to literally stand at the gate. It's a three-hour operation every time, but we don't want them to feel like they are alone. They get off of the plane and someone is there to give them a hug, take them to baggage claim and take them to the hotel. It's a very VIP service because they deserve it more than anyone."

The on-field recognition is just a small portion of the experience the Operation Mend group will have at Saturday's football game.

"These families are coming from all over," said Harlan. "They are coming in on Saturday and will be honored in the pre-game tailgate area, honored on the field and then will go up to the suites and experience a football game like they've never experienced before."

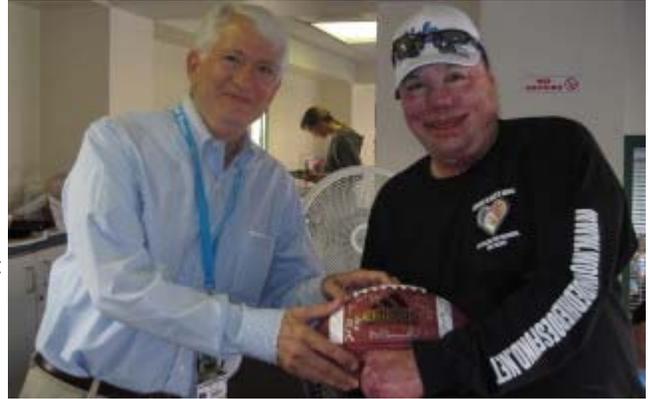


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An iconic venue in American sports, the Rose Bowl is an exciting destination for most sports fans in the United States.

"Going to the Rose Bowl adds to the extreme excitement of the day," said Gideon. "The football game is always what brings us there, but it has the family feeling of UCLA and the united feeling of a big happy family. Everybody is there for the same thing, to cheer for UCLA and be a part of UCLA.

"I think our patients are truly honored to be recognized by UCLA because they know how big of a deal the Rose Bowl is and they also like knowing that they are giving back to Operation Mend by being able to go out there and meet people and tell people about their experience. Being down on the field really puts a visual in people's minds of what sacrifices these men and women have made for our country. They go down on the field because they are proud of what they have done and they are proud to be a part of a program that is giving back."



Chancellor Gene Block with TSGT Del Toro at the 2010 UCLA-WSU football game

Operation Mend has expanded from its initial focus of plastic surgery into many other facets of patient care for the wounded warrior population. Some of these services included orthopaedic reconstruction, urology, and otolaryngology to reconstruct severely damaged limbs, examine and treat reproductive issues, and repair airways. Additionally, Operation Mend broadened its services in the Maxillofacial/Dentistry Department, where several patients have had new prosthetic ears designed for them.

Patient care may also include the services of the UCLA Brain Injury Research Center and use of the program's mental wellness program, which can incorporate neurologic, neuropsychiatric, and psychiatric evaluations and treatment plans.

"It has grown a lot," said Gideon about Operation Mend. "It's no longer only for facial reconstruction. We've opened up the health system to be able to provide specialty services that these extraordinary men and women may not be able to get at any other places. It's all free for the service members and their families. They don't pay for anything, thanks to our generous donors.

"The whole goal of Operation Mend is to not only help change the function and physical appearance but also to give [the patients] hope that things can get better," Gideon continued.

As Operation Mend is recognized at Saturday's game, the impact of their work spreads far beyond the patients they service on a daily basis.

"Last year, I had a chance to go down to the suite and visit with them for quite a while," said Harlan. "These guys were just smiling and laughing. One of them came up to me and said 'Mr. Harlan, this is just incredible being at the Rose Bowl!' It was one of those things that we are so fortunate to do in this business. It's the definition of a win-win. They're having a great time and the University gets to talk about a really great program."

"You see a young man with a prosthetic leg and his face is completely burned, but he's still smiling," said Gideon. "He's still the same person inside. It reminds you that you're really lucky. I haven't met a single person who has met one of our patients and hasn't been reminded how fortunate they are to live in a free country. It makes you think."

As Operation Mend continues to serve America's wounded warriors, its network of specialists continues to grow. The program has grown in leaps and bounds since its foundation four years ago.

"We're always wanting to help and attract more patients," said Gideon. "If people know someone who could use our help, they can visit our website or call me directly."

"This has become one of the premier combat recovery programs in the nation," said Harlan. "We are so honored to have them [at these football games over the past four years], but they were even happier to be there. It's a really neat thing and we're looking forward to this weekend and doing it again."

To support Operation Mend, [click here](#).