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Friday, February 18, 2011

At St. Mel: Taking time and making choices to be of service

By Paula Doyle

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Early on a recent Saturday morning, more than 70 confirmation high school students at St. Mel in Woodland Hills gave up sleeping in to perform some corporal works of mercy: writing letters to injured military personnel as well as preparing, transporting and serving food to San Fernando Valley homeless.

But before they headed out in car pools to serve sandwiches to about 100 needy men, women and children assembled at Sun Valley Park, they gave their rapt attention to retired military serviceman, Marine Corporal Aaron P. Mankin, 29, who was injured in a roadside bomb nearly six years ago in Iraq.



In addition to the damage to his throat and lungs from smoke inhalation, Mankin suffered intense burns on over 25 percent of his body. His ears, nose and mouth were essentially gone and he lost two fingers on his right hand.

The Texas resident was in Los Angeles Jan. 29 for his once-every-three-months ongoing reconstructive treatment through the Operation Mend program, a partnership between Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, and the VA-Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System established to help treat U.S. military personnel wounded in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The timing of Mankin's January treatment visit to Los Angeles --- coinciding with a proposed new Operation Mend program collecting gift cards and letters of support for military service patients --- seemed like a sign for St. Mel confirmation students to be the first locally to participate in this letter-writing "FUNd" campaign.

"By the grace of God, Corporal Mankin just happened to be in town for a medical appointment for this Urban Plunge event which was planned in August," said Bob McCulloch, a member of St. Mel's confirmation team.

As students were huddled at tables writing and decorating their letter to a "wounded warrior," the blue-uniformed Marine guest speaker who has endured nearly 60 reconstructive surgeries walked into the room and moved from table to table shaking hands and lending encouraging words before his talk.

Faith on the front lines

An associate student minister at 19, Mankin joined the Marines as a combat correspondent,



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since he excelled at photography and communications. "I found myself in Iraq on the front lines, camera in one hand and rifle in the other," he told the students in a voice raspy from recent throat surgery.

On May 11, 2005, he was wounded when the 26-ton amphibious assault vehicle he was traveling in rolled over an improvised explosive device and was propelled 10 feet in the air. Four Marines died in the attack and 11 others were injured.

He dove out the back of the burning tank with his sleeves and helmet on fire. His attempts to put out the flames by rolling around in the dirt were unsuccessful. "As I closed my eyes, waiting for the Lord to take me, I remember thinking, 'OK, this is the part where my whole life flashes before my eyes. This should be interesting,'" he joked as the previously hushed audience responded in laughter.

"I saw my life in pictures," described Mankin. "These iconic images of my family and friends, the people who had meant the most to me --- they were the ones that I had considered worth fighting for, worth dying for. I remember taking a deep breath, 'This is it!'

"As lonely as you think that that experience would be," he related, "I can't explain to you the peace that I had knowing the role that my faith plays in my life." His Marine buddies extinguished the flames and evacuated him on a stretcher to a helicopter which air-lifted him to emergency medical treatment.

"That was the day that someone tried to take my life, and they failed. Ever since then," continued Mankin, "I felt that it is my responsibility to deny that person now that opportunity. If I had become anyone different from who I was, then they would have essentially killed that Aaron in combat, I would have allowed a part of me to die...

"I wasn't willing to allow the choices that someone else made in their life half a world away to affect who I was to become. That's a choice each and every one here gets to make for themselves."

Mankin told the students that the choice they made to come and write letters to injured military personnel "could very well possibly be what they need to make a decision to hold on and say, 'I made a choice to be who I am' and someone is thankful for that."

"I hope it makes sense that you can appreciate what you have done here today in writing these letters and these lunches that you will give out later today --- what that means for one moment in time for that one person, for you to take the opportunity to connect with them and share part of yourself and for them to share part of themselves with you.



"Connect with one another," he advised, "because that's who we are and that's how we grow. It's what we need."

In a question and answer session following his talk, he talked about how important it is for the students to discern God's plan in their lives. "Once you acknowledge that there is [a plan], everything else

is one choice at a time," said Mankin.

He added that it was personally important for him that people have the opportunity to see a wounded veteran in uniform. Besides being a full-time father to a 4-year-old daughter and a 2-year-old son, Mankin currently serves as a spokesperson for Operation Mend and does speaking engagements for the USO and the Intrepid Fallen Heroes Fund.

As Operation Mend's first patient in a program that, since 2007, has grown to include 43 patients from all branches of the military, Mankin says its services are vital.

"Guys like myself who are sustaining [severe] injuries are surviving," he explained. "So now, you have heroes walking around without faces that years ago would have died. There's this necessity to restore this humanity to our heroes, and that's where Operation Mend steps in and fills that gap."

Giving back

Following his talk, Mankin was surrounded by students wanting to express their appreciation for his service. "I wanted to shake his hand just because of the fact he gave so much for our country, for us and to protect us," said Nick Albanesi, 14, a freshman at Crespi Carmelite High School. "I felt like I should give back in coming today."

"His speech has really inspired me to make a difference, to try and do something for other people because others have given me so much," said Lydia Edwards, 16, a student at Chaminade College Preparatory.

Luke Slipe, 14, who attends Loyola High School, also found Mankin's talk inspirational. "I was moved by his faith and how positive he is while going through this terrible tragedy, and how his faith really compelled him," said Slipe. He was also moved by the quote Mankin shared from his grandfather: "If you don't take the time to do it right, when will you ever have the time to do it over?"

John Frazee, 15, also a Loyola High School student, liked Mankin's Scripture reference to 1 Corinthians 10:13, saying that God does not allow a person to be tried beyond their strength. "It was really inspirational and it makes me feel I can overcome things and do the best in everything I do," said Frazee.

He added that he thinks the Urban Plunges are "cool [because] I like helping out people and doing things in the community" while being with friends.

"The Urban Plunges are actually kind of fun," commented Samantha Labrecque, 15, a student at Oak Park High School. "When I first found out I was going to be spending two days here, I was like, 'Oh... O.k.' But I got here and this is really nice because we're able to write letters to soldiers and know that we're making someone's day brighter and making people's lives better with food."



"I think the Urban Plunges are terrific," said Robert Sausedo,

confirmation team member who has been one of the program's lead teachers for three years. "With Scripture, it says faith without works is dead. We're bringing light to that and we're seeing students change through the process to be not as inward or selfish.

"They're really seeing how their role in life makes a difference in service to others," he explained. "The whole idea is service. And it's different because all of them have community service goals at their schools, but they're committed to the goals here because it's part of the community. And, it's very different because it's not about the service hours in as much as it's about the service."

For more information about Operation Mend, log on to www.operationmend.ucla.edu or contact Melanie Gideon, (310) 794-8161.



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