

UCLA's Operation Mend: A Hero Among the Stars

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I was lucky enough to spend my Saturday night among several well known names, such as the legendary Smokey Robinson and funny man Cheech Marin. But it was one face you've likely never seen before that was the true star and reason why a couple of hundred people gathered inside Hollywood's House of Blues: to raise money for UCLA's Operation Mend.

Army Specialist Joseph Paulk is one of the thousands of wounded warriors Operation Mend has benefited since it started in 2007, coincidentally the same year Paulk was brutally wounded in Afghanistan. Paulk's tactical vehicle was hit by 3 anti-tank mines. He suffered 40% burns to his body and face, paralysis of his vocal cords and complete amputation of all 10 fingers. As he put it, he never wanted to set foot in public again. He couldn't handle the stares. Not even a hat, sunglasses, and a hoodie made him feel presentable. And then, he found Operation Mend.

The groundbreaking program provides returning military personnel with severe facial and other medical injuries access to the nation's top plastic and reconstructive surgeons, as well as mental-health support. In April 2014 alone, the program has transformed 102 veterans. These life-changing procedures are made possible by a grant from the Iraq Afghanistan Deployment Impact Fund, but also through groups, like The Thaliens, which hosted this Saturday night fundraiser for the 56th year in a row. All told, I'm proud to report, the event raised an impressive \$1 million for Operation Mend.

The evening included a speech from Paulk and it was all you'd expect: tragic, yet touching and

inspirational. The Southern California native (he lives in San Diego) explained that never in a million years would he have thought he'd have the courage and confidence to stand on-stage and tell his story to such a star-studded crowd, in Hollywood, of all places. He says he owes it all to Operation Mend and the several surgeries it afforded him.

By far, meeting Paulk was the highlight of my night and as people flocked to him for a photo, including me, it was easy to see, Paulk was and will always be a hero among the stars.

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