

UCLA program pairs injured vets with Los Angeles families to ease recovery (Photos)

Josie Huang | Take Two | March 13th, 2013, 9:27am

SLIDESHOW

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Grant Slater/KPCC

Israel Del Toro, an Air Force Sergeant, and Michael Schwimmer, a TV executive from Sherman Oaks, share a meal in Westwood. Del Toro is receiving free reconstructive surgery from UCLA; Schwimmer's family keep him company through his recovery.



Dana Katz coordinates the Buddy program for Operation Mend. Her daughter Gracen Evall is part of a group of teenage volunteers

"Party in DT's room!"

A family of four beams at Israel "DT" Del Toro as he opens the door of his hotel room.

The Schwimmers of Sherman Oaks are his "buddy" family - Flavia, her TV executive husband Michael, son Jonah, daughter Hannah. They provide support during his trips from his home in Texas to Los Angeles to receive free reconstructive surgery at UCLA through a program called Operation Mend.

Del Toro survived a roadside bomb attack while serving as an Air Force Tech Sgt. in Afghanistan, suffering burns over 80 percent of his body.

Del Toro's made some 15 visits to UCLA's medical center, often for multiple surgeries at a time. Over that period, the Schwimmers have come to know Del Toro well -- how he loves to go to the movies, how his favorite foods are Pringles and Reese's Pieces. But he still manages to surprise them, like when he shows 15-year-old Jonah a photo of the gun he built.

"Wow, you built that?" said Jonah.

"You own a gun?" Flavia Schwimmer asked in a hushed voice.

Made-for-TV

The percentage of Americans serving in the U.S. military is the smallest it's ever been: Less than 1 percent. Surveys have found the military and the civilian population feel less of a connection to one another than in past decades.

The buddy program for Operation Mend aims to bridge the gap. Since the program began in 2007, Katz has matched military patients with more than 50 "buddy" families, mostly from west L.A. and the Valley.

"There is no question that it has the makings of the sitcom," Katz said.

Katz said that a lot of the patients are from small towns, and experience culture clash.

"They joke that there's one stop light and two bars, so when they come to Los Angeles and they see some of the homes of the buddy families and it can be overwhelming," Katz said. "It can actually at the beginning make a patient uncomfortable if they have a buddy family whose house is fancy."

There's other tricky areas to navigate.

"We don't talk politics and don't talk religion until you really know each other," Katz said. "Most of our patients have guns, they love to hunt. This is not the culture in Los Angeles."

But Katz said over the patients' multiple visits to L.A., they bond with their buddy families, who keep them company in a city where many are friendless, and help to monitor their recovery from surgery.

"People outside of Los Angeles in the military don't think we care about them," Katz said. "So they come here and then they go home and they say wow, you know what? The country does care about us. Those people in Hollywood, in Beverly Hills, they care about us."

In turn, military members share war experiences that families living in L.A. only read about. Over dinner at an upscale Italian restaurant near UCLA, Del Toro tells the Schwimmers about the hand surgeries he's in town for. He's missing fingers on both hands.

"They're going to cut deeper into here to give me fingers and straighten out these two, the index finger, and the middle finger and straighten them out and pin them," said Del Toro. "That's going to give more of a space so I can grab onto a glass."

Shrinking military, shrinking connections to the public

Being able to get to know a veteran is becoming less common. The U.S. armed forces have shrunk in the 40 years since the end of the military draft. So have the connections between the military and the public.

D'Vera Cohn of the Pew Research Center said a 2011 survey found three-quarters of Americans over 50 have had a relative in the military.

But, "only a third of adults under age 30 do so, so it's maybe that people who don't have a family connection to the military would be less likely to have an understanding of the issues that people in the military face," Cohn said.

Some politicians worry decreasing exposure to the military means future generations will be less apt to join it, or advocate for it. Still, others, such as Michael O' Hanlon, a fellow at the Brookings Institution, are more troubled that a tiny portion of the population is doing the fighting for the other 99 percent.

"What you have is an all-volunteer force lot with lots of individuals doing two and three, four tours while most of the rest of us, including yours truly, and that's the hard part," O'Hanlon said.

A "Star Wars" age

Thing is, Del Toro says he would deploy again if the military would let him. In 2010, he re-enlisted in the Air Force, the first 100 percent disabled airman to do so. In the audience was Michael Schwimmer.

Three years later, over dinner, Del Toro was telling Schwimmer about his job training new Air Force recruits at Lackland Air Force Base outside San Antonio. He also competes in the Paralympics, throwing the javelin, discus and shot put. But what he wouldn't give for new fingers. Schwimmer, who doesn't see out of his left eye, nodded.

"It's the same with the eye, still can't do an eye transplant," Schwimmer said.

Del Toro joked, "Until we get to the 'Star Wars' age, then I can be like Darth Vader."

Del Toro breathes heavily for effect, as Schwimmer laughed. Sometimes you find common ground where you least expect it.