

Vets heal with the help of new friendships

Operation Mend, a UCLA Medical Center program for wounded veterans, provides complex medical procedures while also connecting vets with local families who provide a personal connection during the vets' recovery and subsequent treatments in Los Angeles. NBC's Mike Taibbi reports.

By Stephanie Becker, Producer, NBC News



LOS ANGELES -- When an IED ripped through the humvee carrying Air Force Sgt. Israel Del Toro, known as DT, the life of the 30-year-old husband and father changed forever.

Eighty-percent of Del Toro's body was burned and his face and hands were practically melted away. After being kept in a coma for four months, Del Toro was told that he cheated death three times, would need a respirator for the rest of this life and would never walk again.

Now, more than 100 surgical procedures later, he's not only walking and breathing on his own, he just qualified for the Paralympic Nationals in the javelin.

It was a difficult journey, but one made a bit easier by friendships created through a program called "[Operation Mend](#)." Operation Mend is run out of UCLA's Medical Center in Los Angeles where wounded military personnel are given access to top plastic and reconstructive surgeons.

Because the approximately 90 military men and women who are patients in Operation Mend aren't from Los Angeles and don't know anyone in town, they're paired with a "Buddy Family." So far 70 families have volunteered to just "be there" for recovering veterans.

Del Toro began his treatment at UCLA in 2009. As he told NBC's Mike Taibbi, when he heard about the "Buddy Family" program, he felt it was a little ridiculous.

"I'm a grown man!" he thought at the time. He was certain he didn't need anyone's help, despite knowing he'd be away from home for days or weeks at a time for treatment, often without his wife and son.

Just about 10 miles away from UCLA, mother-of-two Flavia Schwimmer was starting to feel like she needed to "do something for someone else."

Flavia knew the woman who ran the buddy program and the match was made.

Del Toro, who grew up in Chicago's South Side and whose parents both died when he was young, now lives with his family in San Antonio, Texas. He had a pretty good idea of what all Californians were like... kooky, Hollywood types, "out there," as he would say.

The Schwimmers were nervous too. By Michael Schwimmer's account, the family had no experience with anyone in the military. He is the CEO of nuvoTV, an English language network for Latinos. He and his wife Flavia felt it would be a good life lesson for their two kids as well as themselves.

While the lives of both families are different, they all have one thing in common: the ability to see past the superficial.

Soon, Del Toro, his wife Carmen and son Guero became family to Michael, Flavia, Jonah and Hannah Schwimmer.

So, what do "buddy families" do? Flavia happily listed her deeds and duties -- everything from sitting with Del Toro after his surgeries, to stocking the fridge at his hotel with his favorite foods to sending Del Toro off to the movies with her husband Michael (they like the guy flicks). There were trips to the beach, shopping, the La Brea Tar Pits, and of course, a fabulous Flavia Schwimmer home-cooked meal.

When the two families got together recently, the men chided each other about their divergent view on politics and guns. The women chatted about how fast their kids were growing up. Carmen helped Flavia make dinner. Hannah Schwimmer, 12, stood back-to-back with Carmen to show how tall she was getting. The moms laughed. Del Toro played a ferocious game of table tennis with the Schwimmer's son Jonah, and then a video game.

They all sat down to dinner, laughing and eating. Except for the horrific reason for this friendship, it was a modern-day Norman Rockwell painting. That's not a buddy family -- it's just family.