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Operation Mend Changes Lives of Wounded Veterans

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By TAI HERNANDEZ

MYFOXNY.COM - In May 2005, Marine Corporal Aaron Mankin, then 23, was in a convoy hit a roadside bomb.

"An IED burned away my nose my face," he said. "My mouth had contracted so much my mother had to feed me out of a funnel."

His willingness to go on camera and tell his story has changed lives.

"A philanthropist by the name of Ron Katz and his wife, Mattie, saw me on the news that evening and they sat on the board of UCLA Medical Center," he said. "It really touched their hearts to want to do more to do something."

It's how Operation Mend was born. It is a nonprofit organization that provides free plastic surgery to severely wounded soldiers at the Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center.

"This is private medicine helping our military medicine colleagues," Dr. Kodi Azari said. "Put my head down on my pillow knowing that I've done well, because I'm taking care of people that have given so much to us."

"My vehicle got hit with an IED. It flipped us upside down and engulfed everything in flames," said Army Specialist Joey Paulk. "It killed my team leader instantly from what i hear. It ejected me outside of the truck about 20 feet and my battle buddies behind me came up and put me out with an extinguisher."

Joey suffered burns to 40 percent his body. He lost all 10 fingers and, for a time, his confidence.

"Before I got hurt I was very outgoing, very social," he said. "Once I got hurt I secluded myself a lot. I kept to movie theaters because it was dark."

After reconstructive surgery by operation mend, Joey proudly attends public events to raise money for the group. It's helped him. And he's helping others.

Treating just one service member costs about a half million dollars. That covers surgeries, travel, temporary

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