

Operation Mend: Reconstructing injured veterans

Nov. 9, 2011 | Isabel Angell | KPCC

[Comment](#) 2 [Tweet](#)

[Download](#)

These days, military veterans are surviving injuries that would have killed them in previous wars. They return home with severe burns that leave them so disfigured their families and friends might not recognize them. One Southland-based program helps these veterans through the next stage of recovery. (Note: This story contains graphic descriptions of combat injuries and medical procedures.)

Retired U.S. Army Sgt. First Class Mike Schlitz served in Iraq as an Army Ranger until a roadside bomb wounded him four years ago. He's the only one of a four-member crew who survived the explosion; it threw him from his Humvee. When Schlitz tried to stand up and help his comrades, he realized he was on fire.

"So you know they teach you drop stop and roll and all that stuff, and unfortunately when you have that kind of accelerant, that kind of propane on you, it doesn't really work," Schlitz said, "so I was basically lying there burning to death until my guys came along with a fire extinguisher."

Schlitz sustained burns over 85 percent of his body. He lost his arms, his nose and his ears. Military hospitals nursed him back to health, but after the attack he barely resembled the man who'd left for Iraq. That's where [Operation Mend](#) entered the picture.

"What we do is try help do a little of the finish work, which often means so much to them," said Southland philanthropist Ron Katz. Katz started the program after he saw a severely wounded soldier just like Schlitz on the TV news.

Katz happens to serve on the board of Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center; he made some calls and launched Operation Mend. In the last four years, it's offered free reconstructive surgery to severely disfigured veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Katz said its first patient was the young soldier he saw on TV. "When their eye is sewn up or their lip is reconnected, and all of a sudden they see hope where they didn't see as much hope before, it's a wonderful, wonderful experience."

The first person Katz recruited was the medical center's plastic surgery chief, Dr. Timothy Miller. He's a U.S. Army veteran of the Vietnam War. Miller said that helps him understand his patients' experience.

"For me, a plastic surgeon, to be able to do something, you know, to help them, is one of the greatest opportunities in my professional life," Miller said. "It means a great deal. I'm not sure I could put it in words."

Miller performs about two surgeries a week for Operation Mend. Schlitz has gone under his knife for about a dozen operations, including 10 to rebuild his nose.

Miller and his team grew Schlitz a brand new nose right on his forehead. When it was ready, the veteran says, they just flipped it down.

"The bridge of your nose right here is actually bone from my skull," Schlitz said, "the cartilage that would make the outer nostrils, that's from the remnants of my ear cartilage, and the skin came actually off my chest, so the nose is kind of really piecemealed together, but it really just looks like everybody else's."

Schlitz said Operation Mend has helped to restore his self-confidence. "You can see it, like when I would go through an airport and I didn't have a nose and I didn't have that kind of surgeries I had before this, you got treated a lot different," Schlitz said, "but now that I have the nose, I have some of the things that make me look a little bit more normal. People treat me like everybody else now, and it's, it's nice."

Like Schlitz, U.S. Marine Staff Sgt. Octavio Sanchez sustained major burns and lost his nose and the use of both hands. Six years ago his vehicle hit a "daisy chain" of three IEDs strung together.

When he returned home, he says the stares bothered him, but he worried even more about the way they affected his family. He recalls when his oldest son started crying at a mall for what seemed like no reason.

"And he told me that he was upset because there was this man that kept on staring at me and looking at me," Sanchez said, "and I had to sit him down and explain to him that sometimes people do that because I don't look normal."

At home in Fontana, Sanchez, who's also retired from the military, read about Dr. Miller and Operation Mend. "And it was at that point where I was like, this is it, this is him, this is the man who is going to transform what I have into a sculpture."

Sanchez has lost count of his Operation Mend surgeries — he thinks it's between 8 and 12. He owes his new nose to the same kind of operation as Mike Schlitz. Sanchez said Dr. Miller also eliminated massive scar tissue around his mouth and chin.

SPONSOR



ADVERTISE WITH US



FIND US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

[Follow @kpcc](#)

"He's given me normal back," Sanchez said, "taken some of those, you know, stares away, and given back to my kids and my family, because in my case I wanted them to be a little more at peace, and now they are."



Sanchez and Schlitz say people still stare at them, but after Operation Mend they can handle it better.

Schlitz said he'd rather field questions about his injuries, so he offers this advice to civilians who might be curious about a veteran they meet: "If they look a little bit different, don't be afraid to ask them what happened. You know, chances are they're going to appreciate you asking them 'Hey, what happened to you,' versus just staring at them."

In his post-Army life, Schlitz works for several nonprofits that help wounded veterans. That work has taken him to Iraq three times since he was wounded. Sanchez lives with his wife and four children and works in construction. These are two of more than 50 servicemen and -women who have benefited from Operation Mend.

You can find out more about the program at its website, OperationMend.ucla.edu.

Join our community: Like [KPCC on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#) to get updates and talk about the day's news with other fans.

Web Resources

[Become a KPCC source on military or veteran life](#)

Related

- [Veterans Day 2011: Tell everyone #wheretheyserved](#) (Nov. 8, 2011)

CA/Local News

- [Will LA parks soon be brought to you by some business?](#)
- [After settlement, Ticketmaster can still keep renamed fees](#)
- [Five SoCal artists win \\$50,000 grants](#)
- [California could lose a third of its inmate firefighters to prison realignment](#)

» [MORE CA/LOCAL NEWS](#)



blog comments powered by [DISQUS](#)