UCLA IN THE COMMUNITY

'Walking man' joins UCLA Operation Mend at NYC Veterans Day parade

Roxanne Moster | November 07, 2014

Courtesy of Charity Maness Photography

Vietnam veteran Ric Ryan.

A Vietnam veteran from a tiny town in California, Ric Ryan has been raising money over the past six years to support a UCLA program that helps soldiers injured in Iraq and Afghanistan. On Nov. 11, he will walk alongside veterans in the upcoming America's Parade in New York City, thanks to a surprise invitation from UCLA Operation Mend.

Ryan, a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps (1964-68), has raised thousands of dollars for Operation Mend, which provides free medical, surgical and mental health services to severely injured members of the military. His fundraising campaign started with a personal quest: taking a walk every day to escape the demons that had haunted him since his service in Vietnam.

But then Ryan added a twist to his daily trek: Each time someone waved at him as he walked by in his rural hometown of Murphys, California, he would wave back and also donate 25 cents to Operation Mend from his disability checks. Soon, local residents joined the cause, opening up their wallets to "the Walking Man of Murphys," as he has affectionately been dubbed.

The trickle of donations became a flood. In the past three years alone, Ryan has raised more than $48,000 and returned more than 30,000 waves.

To thank him and honor his simple act of kindness, Operation Mend surprised Ryan with an invitation to join its representatives in America's Parade, which is sponsored by the United War Veterans Council and has become the oldest and largest event in the nation honoring our military veterans. Ryan will be walking and waving with the Operation Mend team of patients, surgeons, caregivers, friends and families.

Learn more about Operation Mend here. To make a donation, go to www.operationmend.ucla.edu/support.