

Casa Colina in Pomona aids in ongoing recovery of wounded Army Ranger



Army Ranger

Cory Remsburg, who was wounded in Afghanistan, gives the thumbs up as President Barack Obama speaks about him in the State of the Union address on Jan. 28 in Washington. At right is first lady Michelle Obama. JEWEL SAMAD — AFP/Getty Images

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Felice L. Loverso, president and CEO of the Casa Colina Centers for Rehabilitation in Pomona, bids farewell to Remsburg on the day he left Casa Colina, on April 27. Cory was escorted home to Arizona by a motorcycle group. Courtesy photo

POMONA >> During the State of the Union address, President Barack Obama took time to call the nation's attention to Army Sgt. First Class Cory Remsburg. Obama spoke of Remsburg's recovery after being wounded in Afghanistan during his 10th tour of duty.

As part of his recovery, Remsburg came to Casa Colina Centers for Rehabilitation in Pomona, where the Army Ranger spent 16 months before heading home to Gilbert, Ariz., last April.

During the months he spent in Pomona working with a team of physicians, therapists and other specialists, Remsburg made significant advancements after suffering major injuries in a bomb blast.

"We consider the team of professionals at Casa Colina to be a part of our family now," Craig Remsburg, the Ranger's father, said in statement from Casa Colina. "The 16 months that Cory spent at Casa Colina was a difficult time for our family, especially since I was traveling back and forth to Arizona and could not be with him every day. I knew my son was struggling, but I also knew that his care was the best in the nation when it comes to traumatic brain injuries."

Greg Remsberg credited Colina's staff with giving his son his dignity back and the strength to "embrace his 'new normal.'"

BACK FROM THE BLAST

Remsburg was wounded in 2009. At the time he had been in the service for more than eight years and was a squad leader with a heavy weapons squad of the 1st Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, the elder Remsburg said in an email.

The Ranger was on a mission when a roadside bomb exploded, sending him into a nearby canal, where fellow Rangers found him underwater minutes later, the statement said.

Remsburg, who had gone into a coma, was taken to a trauma hospital where a military surgical team determined he had suffered a traumatic brain injury in addition to injuring one of his eyes, having two collapsed lungs, paralysis in his left arm, burns, and damage to his vocal chords, the statement said.

Remsburg was taken to Germany for additional treatment before being brought back to the United States where he was treated at two veterans hospitals. After more than three months he woke from the coma and was awarded a Bronze Star and Purple Heart, the statement said.

Remsburg arrived at Casa Colina after more than two years at the Tampa Polytrauma Center, a Veterans Administration medical facility in Tampa, Fla., his father said in an email. At the time “Cory was still learning to walk, talk and prepare for his next phase of recovery.” The Remsburg family researched medical facilities before bringing the young soldier to Casa Colina.

“Cory and the family knew it was time for Cory to take the next phase, to learn independent skills at (Casa Colina’s Transitional Living Center),” the elder Remsburg wrote. The family evaluated many different facilities and visited several as well.

Remsburg decided Casa Colina’s Transitional Living Center could provide aggressive therapy regimens, up-to-date facilities and a good location, his father wrote.

When Remsburg arrived he had weakness in one side of his body, had difficulty walking and communicating, said Dr. David Patterson, a specialist in rehabilitation medicine.

To walk a few feet, Remsburg requires several minutes and needed assistance, Patterson said. By the time he went home to Arizona, the soldier could walk about 16 feet in 8 seconds without help.

He was able to communicate and participate in conferences with the team of specialists caring for him and discuss his progress and future treatments, Patterson said.

He left prepared to live independently.

“We did a really good job with him,” Patterson said, but added the work was possible because of Remsburg’s desire to make advances and the support of his family.

“He already had the work ethic in him,” Patterson said. “He had the drive and determination.”

'WASN'T GOING TO GIVE UP'

At Casa Colina Transitional Living Center, Remsburg spent six hours a day taking part in different types of therapy.

The work wasn't easy, and the Ranger would sometimes become frustrated, but on those occasions his therapists would remind him of his progress.

"He definitely had challenges but he has a fighting spirit," said Sarah Meredith, Remsburg's occupational therapist at Casa Colina.

Remsburg took part in Casa Colina's Outdoor Adventures, a program through which people with disabilities can engage in recreational activities that can be challenging but empowering. Through the program Remsburg went on a trip to Catalina Island.

"It was not in the plans for Cory to go hiking, but he wanted to do it," Meredith said.

So with the assistance of two therapists, Cory went on a short hike, and "he loved it," she said.

It's not often Meredith has patients like Remsburg, who "push themselves so far for so long," she said. "He wasn't going to give up on life."

He was simply going to come up with a different way to approach life, Meredith said.

As part of his therapy, Remsburg would go on shopping trips, handle cash and figure out how to get around using public transportation, Patterson said.

Among the things the Ranger was working on before leaving Casa Colina was sky diving, said his physical therapist Tammie Johnson.

As a Ranger Remsburg had logged about 1,000 jumps, and that was something he wanted to do again, Johnson said.

He found a friend who was willing to go with him on a jump, and Johnson and others figured out what parts of his body Remsburg needed to work on to accomplish a jump successfully.

"With this client, you are always thinking out of a box," she said.

Some people believe that someone who suffers a traumatic brain injury needs to engage in the kind of therapy Remsburg had at Casa Colina no later than 12 months after the injury occurred in order for it to be effective.

"Casa Colina blew that out of the window," Patterson said. "These neurological recovery markers are artificial markers. They really don't exist."

'AMAZING MOMENT'

About 10 years ago Casa Colina welcomed the first of what up to now have been 55 wounded warriors, said Felice Loverso, Casa Colina's president and chief executive officer. During that time Casa Colina, the military and the federal government have learned from each other on how to more effectively help their patients.

Loverso said the quality treatment Remsburg received was the same as any other traumatic brain injury patient receives at Casa Colina.

Loverso said he was happy to see Remsburg at the State of the Union and was more so because of the sacrifices they made and the months of work the soldier continues to make.

"He's a tough guy, a true Ranger," Loverso said. "I am so humbled by the sacrifices they made."

On the day Remsburg left Casa Colina a group of 35 motorcycle riders that included war veterans and others met at the facility's grounds. Among those in the group was Loverso. The group escorted Remsburg to the state line. That's where a group of about 350 motorcyclists was waiting to escort the Ranger to his home in Arizona.

"To deliver him into their hands was just an amazing moment," Loverso said.