

## Operation Backbone and Local Medical Team Helping Army Vet

Navigating the healthcare system after military service can be a struggle for wounded soldiers. Veteran Kurt Santini, US Army 10<sup>th</sup> Division, of Virginia, is finally receiving a long overdue spinal surgery, pro bono, at Kenmore Mercy on October 16. It's being made possible thanks to the hospital, local spine surgeon Franco Vigna M.D., M.P.H., and a military veteran support program called Operation Backbone.

Injured during a parachute accident, Santini lost air in mid jump and free fell about 100 feet during a mission. He has suffered with severe back pain due to spinal cord compression for the last 17 years. "My goal now is for me and my wife to have a fulfilling life, a life that is more than dealing with my disabilities," said Santini.

In a strange twist of fate, Dr. Vigna, of the reVive Spine Center, heard about Operation Backbone on an airplane. The patriotic spinal surgeon knew immediately that he wanted to get involved and reached out to Mike Sformo, the non-profit's founder and CEO and Western New York native. Operation Backbone works with servicemen and women across the world helping to improve their quality of life, lessen their pain, reduce their dependence on pain medications, and get them back to where they need be.

"We like to take care of the people that take care of us," said Dr. Vigna, who is donating his services to perform spinal surgery that will relieve the pressure on Santini's neck and back.

Kenmore Mercy is donating the operating room, professional staff, medical supplies and post-surgical care. "It is the mission of Kenmore Mercy Hospital, and all of Catholic Health, to help those in need like Kurt, who would otherwise still be waiting for his surgery, said Walt Ludwig, President & CEO of Kenmore Mercy Hospital. "We're pleased to be part of the team to help him get a chance at a better life."

According to Sformo, a Gulf War veteran of the US Navy, "Our veterans are the ones who need our help the most. Unfortunately, the VA wasn't designed to handle the sheer number of cases from an aging population from Vietnam to Afghanistan. The numbers are overwhelming, which results in a lack of diagnoses and proper medical treatments. Outside resources like Operation Backbone are helping to supply the medical care that is requested by so many soldiers."

The non-profit organization works with hundreds of military members each year, coordinating medical logistics with key specialists to get them on the road to recovery, back on the front lines, and back to their families. "Many of these individuals have been managed very sporadically in the past. The longer period of time that goes by, the more indoctrination of opioid dependency, pain, depression, frustration, behavioral issues and medical injuries," said Sformo.

"This ultimately impacts their loved ones and their jobs, thus making the recovery, very long and complex," he added. "Therapy or stronger interventions to address their problems is the start. Candid talk and proper medical opinions are the key."