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FIREFIGHTER BACK TO FULL DUTY AFTER SURGEONS PERFORM PROCEDURES TO SAVE, RECONSTRUCT ARM

Specialized care of a level 1 trauma center can be the difference between amputation and recovery

ORLANDO, Fla - After being attacked by an alligator on a hunting trip, firefighter Carsten Kieffer found himself on the other side of an emergency call. He was sure his arm would need to be amputated when he arrived at the Level One Trauma Center at [Orlando Health Orlando Regional Medical Center \(ORMC\)](#). As a level 1 trauma center, ORMC has specialists available like [Karan Desai, MD](#), a hand and upper extremity surgeon whose persistence and expertise saved Kieffer's arm and even allowed him to return to full duty as a first responder. Dr. Desai got the call about Kieffer's injuries on his very first day of rounds at ORMC.

"One of the residents came to me and said, 'We have a patient that had an alligator basically bite off his arm.' I thought it was a joke at first because I was new to Orlando Health and I thought they were just giving me a hard time as the new guy. But then they showed me the X-rays and the pictures." Desai said. "I was shocked initially, but then I immediately switched into game mode and wanted to go and figure out how to help this patient."

When Dr. Desai arrived to assess the injury, it was unclear whether Kieffer's arm could be saved. He had several broken bones in addition to missing tissue and muscle that had been ripped and mangled during the attack.

"I didn't make him any false promises. We really couldn't tell if his arm had blood flow or if he had any nerve function," Desai said. "So we started with a six-hour surgery to explore the extent of the damage and to set the bones the best we could using two plates and 17 screws."

Waking up from that surgery with his arm intact gave Kieffer hope, but there was still a long road ahead. Over the next few months, Dr. Desai performed skin grafts to cover the wound, transferred bone from Kieffer's hip to his arm and relocated muscles in the arm to restore function to his wrist and fingers.

"He just kept going to find the best possible option for me," Kieffer said. "I don't know how you thank someone for that. It's just beyond amazing to me what he has done."

"At the beginning of this process, Mr. Kieffer looked at me and said, 'Hey doc, I want to go back and be a firefighter.' That honestly meant a lot to me to help somebody to be able to go back to helping others," said Desai. "I think that was very powerful for us to be able to get him back to work. He's at full duty

now and is doing excellent. I think about that every day.”

While alligator attacks are rare, emergency physicians stress the importance of seeking the appropriate level of care in serious orthopedic injuries. Dr. Desai says seeking care at a level 1 trauma center made the difference between amputation and recovery.

“We have the expertise in microsurgery to be able to reconstruct different types of tissue in the upper extremity. We have nerve specialists, such as myself, who can repair complex nerve injuries and reconstruct nerves,” Desai said. “We’re learning more about how to repair injuries and salvage limbs all the time, and it’s really important to be at a center where there are specialists at the forefront of these developments who can offer this sort of comprehensive care.”

Kieffer was lucky that another first responder who was with him when the attack happened insisted that he be taken to ORMC’s level 1 trauma center, where he could get the specialized treatment he needed. Dr. Desai says the surgeries performed on Kieffer prevented an amputation, but it was Kieffer’s hard work and determination in rehabilitation that led to his incredible recovery. For Kieffer, facing an injury that could have such a profound impact on his life drove him forward during rehab and gave him a new perspective.

“I thought I would never be able to pick up my daughter again or play catch with my son, so those are things I will never again take for granted,” Kieffer said. “My kids were pretty traumatized when the attack happened and I have promised them that I won’t be hunting alligators anymore. And while I’m grateful to be back to work, I’m working a lot less overtime than I used to because I’ve realized that spending time with my wife and kids and having more experiences with them is really what’s important.”

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ABOUT ORLANDO HEALTH

Orlando Health, headquartered in Orlando, Florida, is a not-for-profit healthcare organization with \$7.1 billion of assets under management that serves the southeastern United States.

Founded more than 100 years ago, the healthcare system is recognized around the world for its pediatric and adult Level One Trauma program as well as the only state-accredited Level Two Adult Trauma Center in Pinellas County. It is the home of the nation’s largest neonatal intensive care unit under one roof, the only system in the southeast to offer open fetal surgery to repair the most severe forms of spina bifida, the site of an Olympic athlete training facility and operator of one of the largest and highest performing clinically integrated networks in the region. Orlando Health is a statutory teaching system that pioneers life-changing medical research. The 3,200-bed system includes 15 wholly-owned hospitals and emergency departments; rehabilitation services, cancer and heart institutes, imaging and laboratory services, wound care centers, physician offices for adults and pediatrics, skilled nursing facilities, an in-patient behavioral health facility, home healthcare services in partnership with LHC Group, and urgent care centers in partnership with CareSpot Urgent Care. Nearly 4,200 physicians, representing more than 80 medical specialties and subspecialties have privileges across the Orlando Health

system, which employs nearly 22,000 team members. In FY20, Orlando Health served nearly 150,000 inpatients and nearly 3.1 million outpatients. During that same time period, Orlando Health provided approximately \$760 million in total value to the communities it serves in the form of charity care, community benefit programs and services, community building activities and more. Additional information can be found at <http://www.orlandohealth.com>, or follow us on LinkedIn, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter @orlandohealth.