

Husband: Giffords smiled and gave him neck rub

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This photo provided by ABC television shows Rep. Gabrielle Giffords' husband and NASA astronaut Capt. Mark Kelly talks with host Diane Sawyer during a pretaped interview in Tucson, Saturday, Jan. 15, 2011, his first television interview since the tragic shooting of his wife in Tucson. The interview is scheduled to air Tuesday, Jan. 18. (AP Photo/ABC News, Ralph Freso) NO ARCHIVES. NO SALES.

(AP) -- The husband of Rep. Gabrielle Giffords says his wife's condition has improved so much that she has been able to smile and give him a neck rub as he has kept a near-constant vigil at her hospital bedside.

The interactions with astronaut Mark Kelly are new signs of Giffords' impressive progress in recovering from a gunshot wound to the head at a political event nine days ago. Giffords still cannot speak, because of a

tube in her throat that is helping her breathe.

"She's in the ICU. You know, gone through this traumatic injury. And she spent 10 minutes giving me a neck massage," Kelly explained in an interview with Diane Sawyer to air Tuesday on ABC. "It's so typical of her that no matter how bad the situation might be for her, you know, she's looking out for other people."

Such encounters indicate higher levels of functioning, implying that "she's recognizing him and interacting, perhaps in an old familiar way with him," said Dr. Michael Lemole.

Dr. Randall Friese said Kelly also told doctors he saw Giffords smile. He said sometimes people see what they want to see, but that "if he says she's smiling, I buy it."

The steady progress for Giffords came on the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday to remember the legacy of the civil rights leader who was killed by an assassin's bullet 42 years ago.

Political leaders invoked the assassination attempt against Giffords as they asked Americans to recommit to King's values of nonviolence, tolerance, compassion and justice.

"Last week a senseless rampage in Tucson reminded us that more than 40 years after Dr. King's own tragic death, our struggle to eradicate violence and to promote peace goes on," Attorney General Eric Holder said at King's former church in Atlanta.

Doctors upgraded Giffords' condition from critical to serious over the weekend and say they carried out three successful procedures that demonstrate she is recovering well.

A breathing tube was moved from her mouth to her throat along with a separate feeding tube that was shifted from her nose to her stomach. Dr. Randall Friese said removing the tubes in her nose and mouth reduces the risks of infections.

Doctors also said they performed a surgery on Giffords' eye socket to remove bone fragments to relieve pressure on her eye. There were no complications from the surgery; doctors needed to perform the eye procedure all along but waited until her condition improved to do it.

The suspect in the shooting, 22-year-old Jared Loughner, remained jailed in a federal lockup in Phoenix. Investigators have described him as a mentally unstable man who was kicked out a community college last year and became increasingly erratic in recent months.

He apparently became obsessed with inflicting violence on Giffords since attending one of her campaign events in 2007.

Kelly said he would be willing to meet with the parents of Loughner, who have remained in seclusion since the shooting. Kelly, who has two teenage daughters from a previous marriage, said the parents have to be in a tremendous amount of pain.

"I don't think it's their fault. It's not the parents fault," Kelly told ABC. "You know, I'd like to think I'm a person that's, you know, somewhat forgiving. And, I mean, they've got to be hurting in this situation as much as much as anybody."

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