

Love at First Sight: Chester Mayor Welcomes Guide Dog Zara

by Michael Maness, www.PreciousHeart.net
[Tyler County Booster](#) (10-11-18), 1A and 3A.

There she was, a dark brown-eyed beauty, piercing his heart as she walked to him. Her smooth black and auburn hair as striking. Her form exquisite, her gait light.

Had she been a champion?

Love at first sight!

Floyd Petri could see through his tunnel, though legally blind with his peripheral vision gone.

His long-awaited seeing-eye dog, Zara, had arrived, escorted by the lovely, confident Jessica Bimmermann who had driven all the way from Kentucky after finishing nine months of training Zara.

Jeff Mullins, V.P. of Operations for Rebuilding Warriors, a veterans nonprofit, flew down from New Jersey to make the presentation at the Chester City Hall, Friday afternoon, Oct. 5. Mullins was himself a disabled vet with PTSD with his own helper Zoey, a pitch-black rescued Bull Terrier Lab mix with perfect manners.

Family and friends filled the small council room with Petri's wife Barbara, daughter Sandra, son Charles, and granddaughter Caitlin; fellow Chester Lions Club Secretary Chuck Davidson; and fellow amateur radio licensed operators Nick Toparcean and Jimmy Caruthers.

Mullins outlined their mission and his honor to be able to help Petri. Zara was the perfect lady, yet a bit nervous, while Zoey just made herself at home.

Rebuilding Warriors will be moving from California to Madisonville, Tx., in a few weeks. In pride of place on their web site as the most recent recipient, Petri's photo slideshow starts from his leaner, younger years (RebuildingWarriors.com).

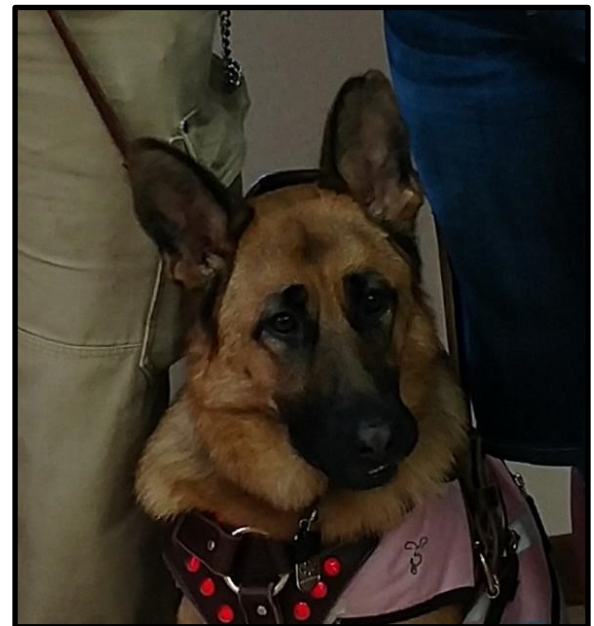
Zara (pronounced Tsar-ah), a registered German Shepherd, glanced quickly around acutely alert. A variation of Sara, Zara means "light" in French, "orange flower" in Italian, "princess" in Hebrew, and "eastern splendor or princess in Arabic.

Zara is captivating!—all the more reason for others to be careful, says Bimmermann. Avoid petting. Zara needs to focus on her job of attending to Petri's every move.

Bimmermann chose Zara especially for Petri on contract with Rebuilding Warriors. A 20-year veteran dog trainer, Bimmermann spent 15 years with Leader Dogs for the Blind,



Jeff Mullins (L), V.P. of Operations for Rebuilding Warriors presented veteran Floyd Petri (C) with his seeing-eye dog, Zara, that was trained by Jessica Bimmermann (R), founder of Channeled Canine in Kentucky on Friday, Oct. 5 at the Chester City Hall. Underneath Mullins is his own service dog, Zoey.



and continues to contract with them, other orgs, and private parties. She started Channeled Canine Service Dogs two years ago for the love of helping others (ChanneledCanine.com).

Petri can still see as in a tunnel, though all of his peripheral vision is gone and getting worse. Retinitis pigmentosa (RP) is mostly inherited and usually renders one legally blind by their 40s. In that, Petri was fortunate, being past 70 now and a diabetic.

There is no cure, and eventually he will go completely blind—a frightening destiny!

However, Petri is a true “prepper” and expert survivalist, a long-time interest, for no one knows when the end of the world might come. He takes protection of his family seriously.

Plus, “once a cop, always a cop” and “once a soldier, always a soldier” for life, Petri has been in law enforcement all his life. He is very proud of his service as a law officer and in the military, always wearing his trademark cap with rank. This makes his blindness even more painful. He mourns the day when packing his pistol will come to an end, though he can still shoot “expert” on the firing line. His tunnel still has a clear sight line.

“I had been waiting two years for the right dog,” Petri said.

Bimmermann beamed as she watched Mullins make the official transfer from Rebuilding Warriors to Petri, the presentation live-streamed to their Facebook page.

Bimmermann found six-month-old Zara at Rheinhardt Kennels, and she eagerly took to the training. Learning how to stop for curbs, navigate turns, avoid obstacles—the first steps—Zara did great. She progressed to busier environments like Gatlinburg, Tenn., and then Oktoberfest Zinzinnati in Cincinnati, Ohio, the largest Oktoberfest in the U.S. attracting over 500k.

Bimmermann loves training. When asked about attachment, she noted that part of the training is to love the dog yet remain detached enough to keep the dog focused. In other words, it will be tougher on Zara to make the transition to Petri. Bimmermann will stay with Petri through the weekend, to help train Petri.

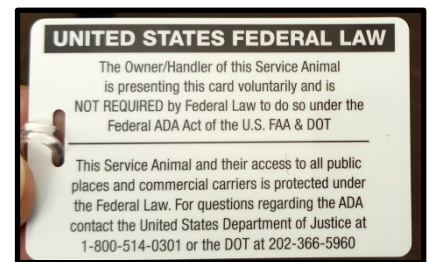
Though a big old cop, Petri has a very soft heart for dogs. They had to get rid of their dominating T-Rex who seemed to control Petri too much; that is the nature of chihuahuas.

“Haha,” Petri laughed as Bimmermann helped him. No stranger to training of all kinds, Petri took to his training well, too.

On the first outing with Zara, Mullins treated all to lunch at Big Jake’s in Moscow.

Zara was a bit shy with Petri, as Bimmermann aided Petri’s vigilance.

Inside the restaurant, with Petri’s Zara and Mullins’ Zoey peacefully resting at their feet, and a good lunch on the way, Mullins shared a few war stories from his time in Afghanistan and other presentations around the country.



Petri and Zara 2018

Bimmermann said it usually takes about ten days for a trained dog to transition to a new owner. Then it takes from six months to a year before the two are understanding each other well enough to tackle new routes and environments.

Bimmermann said, “Floyd will have his work cut out for him as Zara is a beautiful dog and people will be tempted to want to pet her, but it is crucial that her attention be focused on Floyd for his safety. So when encountering Floyd in public, please be respectful and simply admire their relationship from afar.”

Petri said, “Not only do I get a guide dog from a champion line, I get a lifelong friend and companion that will love me as I love her. I will take her everywhere that I go. If she is not welcome, then they will not get my business. By Law there is only one place that she cannot go. Believe it or not, that is to church. She can only go to church with their permission.”

Founder Jeff Anderson started Rebuilding Warriors in 2014, himself a decorated U.S. Army Airborne vet, their motto being, “Rebuilding Warriors, Saving Warriors, One Dog at a Time.” Anderson not only holds a Ph.D. in martial arts science, he has earned three black belts, one in the rank of 7th Dan in Shudokan Ryu Taiho Jutsu. His long resume in martial arts includes a 2009 induction into Martial Arts Hall of Fame, and he trained Matt Damon for the hit movie the Bourne Identity.

A Lufkin native, Petri entered the Air Force in 1961. After finishing Nuclear Weapons school in Colorado, he spent time loading hydrogen bombs on B-47s at Dyess AFB in Abilene, then on B-52s at Barksdale in Shreveport, La. There he also loaded 750-lb conventional bombs for the first Top Secret “Arch Light” mission to tear up the Ho Chi Mein Trail in Laos.

In 1965, he joined the Nacogdoches Police Department and rose to Lieutenant Watch Commander (day shift), Bomb Squad Commander and SWAT Commander. In 1977, Floyd joined the Tyler County Sheriff’s Department and patrolled the county as a deputy.

In 1979, Petri became Chief of Police of Kountze. He had been a certified bomb disposal expert for over a decade. That skill came in handy when Silsbee ISD had an explosive threat in their science lab, and he was the closest certified technician. (That story is worth telling at length another time!)

In 1980, he entered the Texas Air National Guard and ended up an Air Policeman at Ellington AFB. When called to active duty, he became a security policeman and rose to a Strike Response Team Leader (SRT), which guarded Presidents George H. Bush and Ronald Reagan when they came to Houston.

After four years, the Army National Guard asked him to run a new Criminal Investigation Division (CID) created at Austin, which is the Army’s equivalent to the Navy’s NCIS seen on TV. That is, Petri held both active Army Special Agent credentials and Texas State Adjutant General Special Agent credentials, reporting directly to a two-star general.



Petri and Zara 2018

After open heart surgery in 1995, he took medical retirement, 100 percent disabled, as a Sergeant First Class (E-7) Special Agent, USACIDC.

In 2016, his RP was hastening his blindness quicker than his diabetes, and on Tax Day, Apr. 1, he received his certificate of legal blindness from the VA.

Blindness is tough for anyone. Going blind slowly certainly has its own peculiar griefs, watching your freedom fade away like the sunset.

Zara will increase his freedom to walk safely as his vision vanishes.

As all who love dogs know so well, Zara will become a best friend, an extension of Petri's being, and, as he knows more than most, a companion on life's very dangerous roads.

