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Disabled Veteran to Receive New Home in Perris



Retired Army Ranger Sgt. Oskar Zepeda, wife Lisa and daughters, Sophia Flores and Isabel Duarte, stand at attention during the National Anthem at the March 31 groundbreaking for a new home for the disabled veteran and his family at the Avelina subdivision in Perris.

Staff Sgt. Oskar Zepeda's life changed forever the day he absorbed a hand-grenade blast from a suicide bomber while hunting Taliban terrorists in Afghanistan.

The blast tore into the right side of the Army Ranger's body, severely damaging his spine, right leg, foot, arm and hand. He's endured more than 30 operations to restore partial use of his limbs but knows he won't ever completely recover.

The explosion also left him with traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and constant pain. He worried how he would take care of his family, his wife and two daughters, and what the future held for them.

One thing he won't have to worry about is a home mortgage.

Zepeda and family are moving to Perris, to the new Avelina subdivision under construction near Evans Road and Orange Avenue.

Zepeda, 31, his wife, Lisa, 32, and daughters, Isabel Duarte, 15, and Sophia Flores, 7, took part in a groundbreaking ceremony at the lot where their new home will be built. Perris City officials and representatives of Pulte Homes joined the family at the groundbreaking.

Perris Mayor Daryl Busch, Mayor Pro-Tem Rita Rogers and City Councilmembers Tonya Burke and Mark Yarbrough were among public officials welcoming the Zepedas to town.

"This is a very touching day for us," Zepeda said. "I cannot wait to become part of the Perris community. I am so glad that the community is here. It shows they care and have not forgotten about us veterans. Now I can focus on my rehab and the future. The City of Perris is doing an awesome thing. We feel like you are opening your arms to us."

The Zepeda family is the latest recipient of a gift from Operation Finally Home, which brings together housing companies and suppliers committed to constructing homes for wounded veterans. To date, Operation Finally Home has provided 100 homes to seriously injured veterans across the country.

The non-profit has partnered repeatedly with Pulte Homes through its "Built to Honor" initiative to make the dream of a home to veterans like Zepeda a reality.

"You have more than written a check for this home," said Ronnie Lyles, project manager for Operation Finally Home. "We admire and honor you so much for your years of service to this country."



Perris elected officials join with Army Sgt. Oskar Zepeda and representatives from Pulte Homes to break ground at the site of the family's residence, scheduled for completion in August.

Hero receives a custom-made home

The Zepedas' new single-story home will include special modifications to accommodate the injured veteran. Those include wider doors for easier passage and no steps because Zepeda has difficulty negotiating even slight inclines.

The 2,000-square-foot, four-bedroom, two-bath is set for completion in August, in time for his daughters to arrive and start the new school year.

"It is important to give back to our serving brothers and sisters who have sacrificed on our behalf," said Jennifer Norwood, a Pulte marketing executive. "Sgt. Zepeda is a most humble man, a good-hearted man who does not believe he deserves any special recognition."

Zepeda spent 10 years in the Army, including nine deployments to hot spots in Iraq and Afghanistan. He served as a machine-gunner, rifleman, squad leader, sniper and platoon sergeant in places like Baghdad, Mosul, Ramadi, Al-Asad and Kabul.

On the night of Sept. 8, 2011, Zepeda was part of an elite Ranger team assigned to bring in two Taliban leaders who had eluded capture for months. One gave up without a struggle; the other fought Zepeda, who clamped a headlock on him before he detonated the grenade.

"The right side of my body took a beating," he said.

Years of surgeries, therapy and slow recovery followed. It took months for Zepeda to relearn to walk and gain function in his right arm. Even today, he has no grip strength in that hand and limited lateral control of his right leg.

Zepeda retired from the Army in 2014.

Still, he has no regrets.

"I joined the Army because I wanted to serve and I was proud to wear the uniform," he said. "I can't focus on the past and feel sorry for myself. I've got to move on."



Perris City Councilwoman Tonya Burke and Mayor Pro-Tem Rita Rogers stand at attention during the National Anthem at the March 31 groundbreaking ceremony for the home of retired Army Sgt. Oskar Zepeda. Both praised Zepeda's commitment to service and said they are pleased to welcome Zepeda and his family to Perris.

Praise from Perris representatives

City elected officials heaped praise on Zepeda and Pulte Homes before taking part in the groundbreaking ceremony.

"You can't do anything better than to honor our veterans," said Mayor Busch, who served as a shipboard radar operator in the Navy. "Pulte Homes is doing a great service in our community and across the country to honor our disabled veterans. To be able to honor a Perris veteran is very nice."

Mayor Pro-Tem Rogers said she was proud and humbled by the opportunity to take part in the groundbreaking.

"It is always wonderful to give back to our veterans who risk their lives and serve with such distinction," Rogers said.

City Councilwoman Burke commended Pulte Homes for donating them mortgage-free residence to the Zepeda family. She said the large turnout at the event—more than 100 people attended—also showed Perris as a kind and welcoming community.

"It is wonderful to take such care of the veterans who take such good care of our country," Burke said. "I am pleased to take part in welcoming the Zepeda family to Perris. We as a community care about our residents."

City Councilman David Starr Rabb, a Navy veteran, said he is delighted Pulte Homes and the City are making the Zepeda family feel welcome in Perris.

"This City has long welcomed veterans and I am pleased that it continues to honor veterans like Sgt. Zepeda and his family," Rabb said. "We continue to welcome veterans to our City."

City Councilman Yarbrough, the father of three current and former service members, said Perris enjoys a long history of supporting its military, noting that the Perris Valley Cemetery holds the remains of 13 Civil War veterans. While nothing can completely repay veterans like Zepeda for their pain and suffering, receiving a home and well-wishes of the community indicate Perris remains committed to its men and women in uniform.

"It send the message we care," Yarbrough said.



Perris Mayor Daryl Busch and City Councilman Mark Yarbrough with disabled Army veteran Oskar Zepeda at the March 31 groundbreaking ceremony.

Media Contact
Joe Vargo
Public Information Officer
951-943-6100
jvargo@cityofperris.org



Perris City Hall
101 N. D Street
Perris, CA 92570

Hours: Mon. - Fri. 8 am - 6pm

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