

Business Notes

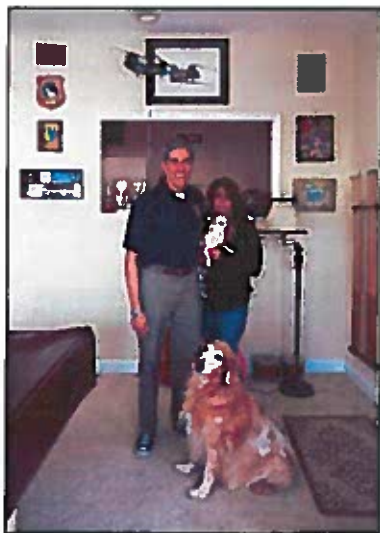
From FBI Special Agent to Real Estate Agent

Luis Villarroel Joins Wife Laura Preidel as The L&L Team at Zack Shore/BHHS

By MARIA SCANDALE | Apr 26, 2017



Photo by: Jack Reynolds



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Aviation soars through all aspects of Luis Villarroel's career, from the Marine Corps to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and now to the clever use of drones to heighten marketing of real estate with his wife, Laura Preidel, as The L&L Team with Berkshire Hathaway HomeServices Zack Shore, Realtors in Barnegat Light.

His vibrant work history aside, Villarroel considers real estate a new "opportunity."

"Work for the best and be the best" is his common career thread, he said.

"Everything I've done has been an opportunity. Joining the Marine Corps was an opportunity; to join the FBI was an opportunity; and now real estate is an opportunity. Berkshire Hathaway, who we're affiliated with at Zack Shore, Realtors, is a universally renowned and respected name, and I know we'll be successful as a team," he said. "Real estate has always interested me. I hit the 20-year mark at the Bureau, and I saw it as a great

opportunity."

The son of immigrant parents from South America who settled in Staten Island, he graduated college, trained as an aviator with the Marine Corps "and got to see the world," including Kuwait during the Gulf War.

As a special agent with the FBI, he was an investigator heading toward the smoldering World Trade Center on 9/11, and a SWAT Team agent kicking down doors to seize fugitives.

The term "special agent" is a broad term, and in his case, "I've done a little of everything," Villarroel said. "I started out with foreign counterintelligence, and moved to counterterrorism; I've done cyber work, and finished up with aviation. My last gig was as a full-time pilot here in the New York division. That's basically a surveillance operation, a Special Operations group."

The drone in his model aircraft collection at their Stafford Township waterfront home is the present and the future. It is the venture he is literally "getting off the ground" here with TourFactory, a company specializing in showcasing real estate.

"Even though I've been flying for over 30 years, it's a new aircraft, a new business," Villarroel described.

Real estate video tours are a stunningly powerful medium for showing a property at its best angle – a captivating 360-degree angle.

As one of the area's married couples selling real estate, the L&L Team is new, although Preidel has been a broker associate with an outstanding record for 15 years, and has 26 years of experience in the industry.

Most recently she was awarded the top performer for the Barnegat Light Office in 2016 as well as ranking in the top 4 percent nationwide for all BHHS agents in 2016.

LBI-area real estate this spring shows a "balanced" market, she said. Not a buyer's market, not a seller's market, but balanced. Other trends: "inventory is down, prices have definitely stabilized and slightly increased." Prime properties are those that are turnkey. "Turnkey sells, and location, view; on the water with the view."

Asked the advantage of listing or buying through a married couple, Preidel answered, "the fact that you get two for one. You get two perspectives, two opinions, two of everything, really." Twice the flexibility and accessibility for one of the team to meet with clients, her husband added.

"The other night we got a call at 9 o'clock. She has her phone on 24/7. We pick it up. We respond right away, even though it's 9 o'clock at night. I want to duplicate that; I think that's what makes her so successful."

The "Luis" half of the L&L Team brings a background of traits that were demanded of an agent in "the Bureau," as agents refer to the FBI.

"The Bureau's motto is 'Fidelity, Bravery and Integrity,' certainly skills that apply to any successful business," Villarroel remarked. "Being a Realtor is a high-integrity position to hold, dealing with customers and clients.

(FBI Director James) Comey expressed that he would love to see every top 500 company in the world employ FBI agents for their fidelity, bravery and integrity."

The public figure whom most Americans know only from the nightly news, Villarroel knows as "one of the best directors we've ever had in the Bureau. I like the man. There are others in the Bureau that may disagree with me ... but I like his honesty, I like his transparency."

Villarroel sees Comey as "apolitical" also, in investigations of Hillary Clinton's private use of an email server, and this year with his testimony confirming that the FBI was probing the Trump campaign's ties to Russia.

“He’s a card-carrying Republican, but he is apolitical. He will follow leads as they come. I remember when this was going on,” he said, referring to investigations of Hillary Clinton, “he would send us emails and give us a heads-up. He would talk about the transparency that he felt he needed to provide, not just to Congress, but to the American public as well.”

The Realtor team insistently takes an “apolitical” stance as businesspeople.

Interestingly, when he was asked whether a new administration comes in and changes the rules for FBI agents, Villarroel said that is not the case.

“You don’t see that as much at our level, the micro level, when we’re dealing with investigations.

“We don’t stop chasing criminals and terrorists just because a new administration says, ‘Don’t do that because it would look bad on me.’ We follow the leads; we follow terrorism and terrorists and spies where ever they’re going.”

In his current life in Southern Ocean County, the former agent says he “is more busy now than I was with the FBI, a different busy.”

“With the FBI I was constantly on call, 24/7, and did a lot of traveling all over the country. And now I’m not that on the edge of the sphere, but I’m busy,” he said. Real estate, launching the drone business, officiating high school basketball (he would love to branch to the Division III college level), and substitute teaching for Stafford Township elementary schools are the current tasks.

Beyond this interview, he wouldn’t routinely talk about his career adventures.

“FBI agents on a whole are very modest people,” he said. “We don’t brag about what we do; we let our actions speak for themselves.”

He does tell his 17-year-old daughter in Manhattan that “learning is forever.” That started young.

“I’m a first-generation American here. My parents came from Colombia and Ecuador, and they settled in Staten Island. And we’re living the American dream; they worked hard to get us in school, get us through college, and I took every opportunity that I could to advance myself. My parents are very successful in what they do, and so we *are* the American dream.”

Over the pool table, the model airplanes float into conversation about Marine Corps active-duty years from 1988 to 1996. Mostly stationed in California, the Marine aviator did a tour in Kuwait in 1991 at the time the three-month conflict with Iraq was ending.

“It was a great opportunity, and to be able to fly helicopters was incredible,” said Villarroel, whose last rank was as major. “I think the Marine Corps opened the door for the FBI.”

The Boeing Vertol CH-46 Sea Knight was a medium-lift tandem rotor transport helicopter powered by twin turboshaft aircraft engines. It was used by the U.S. Marine Corps to provide all-weather, day-or-night assault transport of combat troops, supplies and equipment for 40 years until 2004.

“It held about 14 combat-loaded marines, and the unique thing about this helicopter was the tandem rotors front and back. We could practically fly in all kinds of winds.

“In aviation, with any plane, the direction of the wind is very important. With the aerodynamics from this configuration, it makes it able to fly in any wind configuration.”

The FBI tasks covered national security matters internal to the United States. (“Anything outside of that spills over to intelligence gathering; that’s really done by the CIA.”)

“The highlights of my FBI career were probably my first five years in the New York office,” Villarroel said. “That included the TWA 800 case, which turned out not to be a terrorist case, but at the time we were investigating it.

"I got involved directly in a major case in Africa when the embassy bombing happened in 1998," he continued. "I was tasked to go over there and conduct investigations of the Dar es Salaam attack in Tanzania."

The Aug. 7, 1998, United States embassy bombings were attacks in which over 200 people were killed in nearly simultaneous truck bomb explosions. One was in Dar es Salaam, the other at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya.

"And my last major case out of the New York Division was Sept. 11, the World Trade Center.

"My partner and I were initially doing surveillance in Staten Island when all that occurred, and after it happened, we lost complete communications with home base. Cell towers, radio towers, they were all on top of the World Trade Center.

"If you know Staten Island, we were over on the port side by where the ferry is, with a direct view of Manhattan. Growing up in Staten Island, that's what I saw every day when I went to school, the World Trade Center and the Statue of Liberty. Seeing it that day was incredibly surreal. When we lost complete contact and we saw the big cloud of smoke when the tower fell, I thought we had blacked out the whole New York Division of the FBI," he recalled.

They couldn't tell what kind of damage had been wreaked at the site. He had to get there. He and his partner were able to get on a ferry loaded with only emergency personnel. They watched the second tower crumble on the ride over.

"We got to the other side and all we could do was just walk. We couldn't see more than 20 feet ahead of us. The idea was that we just have to get to the scene any way we could.

"As we were walking up towards the World Trade Center, everybody was driving away, even the firemen. As the firemen came towards us, saying 'What are you guys doing; we just came back from there; there is nothing you can do. there is nothing we can do. The fire was so hot, there is nothing anybody can do at this point.'"

They finally found their way to Ground Zero and began "clearing the rubble, picking through the metal" to investigate, "continuously, nonstop, for almost two months until the time we realized that the crime scene is here but the bad guys were somewhere else.

"There was really nothing the New York Division could do but follow the leads that were coming. The leads were taking us to Boston, Florida, Arizona, different parts of the world. There weren't really any players associated with the crime in the New York area at the time."

The now-retired agent said, "Since Sept. 11, the whole world changed." But he feels he has been "blessed" with relative safety in his career. Medals and ribbons hang on the wall, but he describes most of them as "been-there, done-that kind of medals."

"I've been fortunate in the Marine Corps, and in law enforcement I have never had to shoot at anybody and no one ever shot at me," he said, despite a firefight he was in but that wasn't in his immediate surroundings. "Over my whole career, that's a blessing. I've drawn my gun, but I've never pulled the trigger."

There were many times, however, that the agents went in to a scene ready for the worst according to the criminal's threats.

"You go in there with the guns up, and usually the intel is 'this guy is going to go down and he's taking you with him,' and we show up and we don't knock on the door – we're doing high-risk entries – but we're knocking the door down, and as soon as we knock that door down, they give themselves up," Villarroel described.

"They like to talk loud to their friends, so you're always prepared going in, thinking the worst, but for me it turned out the best."

Sales is the new frontier.

"I tell my daughter all the time. learning is forever, and I'm learning something new with each skill set in marketing and negotiating skills."

Today the agent is a real estate agent and the team is L&L.

Preidel grew up in Burlington, N.J., but was born in Hawaii as her father was in the Air Force and stationed there. She bought her first beach home on LBI in 2000. The two share their love of Long Beach Island and look forward to serving sellers and buyers. They can be contacted at the office at 609-494-1776, extension 1425 or by other contacts listed on their web page at Discover LBI.com.

Send business-related items to mariascandale@thesandpaper.net.

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