



**Zara's Global Promise:**  
I promise that I will actively engage, with my teammates, in improving the Collision Center until our vision is achieved.  
In carrying out this commitment, I further promise that I will:  
- Put the good of the team ahead of my own short-term personal gain;  
- Find solutions rather than excuses when presented with a challenge;  
- Continually improve my skills so I can better serve the team.

The plaque was designed, built, and installed by a select team of team members.  
Jason Klueh



*Julie and Brad Zara*

**ZARA'S  
COLLISION CENTER**

## An Interesting Beginning

Brad and Julie Zara met shortly after high school, married in 1985 and opened Zara's Collision Center, Inc., in February 1987. The business wasn't exactly the direction that they had initially intended for their livelihood. Julie was finishing her teaching degree at then Sangamon State University, doing preparation for her teacher education certificate. With her credentials in hand she taught special education for a number of years, while Brad immediately entered the workforce.

"I went to work straight out of high school in a (auto body) shop and was fortunate enough to get into a growing business," Brad said. "Nobody really wanted to fill the new roles that came available, and I was eager to learn." As a result he was able to experience and grasp a strong understanding of the business in a short time. "The bottom line," says Brad, "is that it came down to thinking that I wanted to get out of the business, when in fact the things that maybe were driving me that direction, I ultimately thought were issues I could deal with if I were running my own business."

Julie said she remembered him coming home from work one day and saying "I'm either gonna start my own business or go back to school." He had already been accepted into the landscape architecture program at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. We had looked at the school and everything." But then Brad decided he should weigh his options.

"I could go to school for five years or take advantage of an opportunity that was more immediate, go into business and in five years start making money," he said. "It (landscape architecture) was also a field that after five years of education I might not like." Julie said he had built their house and with the help of one other person did all the landscaping and had really enjoyed it. "He liked that so much that I think it was what gave him the idea," she said.

Brad agreed. "It came down to wondering if I would enjoy doing it as much for others as I did for us, and also understanding that landscape architecture was a far cry from what I was doing in landscaping around our house. The problem was I had already put in my notice with my employer in November that I would be leaving the following January to start school. As time grew nearer though, that's when I switched gears and looked for a location to open my own shop. In doing that, word got out, and I went to my employer (Dick Taylor) and told him my change of plans. He actually ended up renting me the building that I started with him in. So I really started my own business in the same place where I got my first job in this field."

"We were really fortunate," Julie said. "When we opened the doors he had immediate business." Brad had talked to Rob Isringhausen of Isringhausen Imports about whether or not there would be a market for add-on accessories for the high-end cars. His honest response was 'no.' However, Brad said, "We had enough experience working together that if I were to open my own body shop he said he would send me business, and he was true to his word. That really helped us to get going and establish credibility quickly. We had high-end vehicles sitting out and people would see that and have confidence that we could do the job."

The only problem with that in the beginning was that people started to pigeonhole Zara's Collision Center as a shop that only worked with high-end vehicles. "Really, the bigger market is in the everyday transportation, and is a toss-up between the American- and Japanese-made vehicles. We do a lot of Hondas and Toyotas, as well as General Motors and Ford. Whatever is being sold the most of at the time is really where the market is." And as far as the majority of repairs needed? They come as a result of general car collisions. "And yes, we do a lot of deer hits," they said almost in unison and smiling. It's the nature of the business and the area.

## Changing Times

I asked if and how the business has changed over the years. They took deep breaths, smiled and let the story unfold. As the business has grown, so has the staff and vision. When Brad first launched the business he and Julie were business partners, but she was teaching, and he was the sole person working the business. "She was mostly a silent partner, though her encouragement along the way has always been strong," Brad said. They made a \$12,000 investment to get started, and the two said growth had hit a plateau about seven years ago. "I was ready for a change (from teaching) and Brad said 'Do marketing for me, please.' That's when I became a more active part of the business, working on the marketing side of things," Julie said.

Admittedly, though, she had no marketing background or experience, so she went to HIP Advertising who still does Zara's marketing plans. Julie helps to execute and implement those plans. She was excited to tell of one of their most recent experiences in choosing billboards from the designs HIP provided. "Our oldest daughter, Hannah, graduated from Williamsville High School. She was taking a marketing class, and we had her take the designs with her and let the class pick." In the past, Julie said, they took the designs to the office/shop and had employees take a look and give input. While that had worked, she really wanted to help her daughter's marketing class. "I thought they could have some great discussion, really analyze the boards, see how they come together and share which one(s) they liked. They chose them ... in about five minutes," she said laughing. "Those are the ones we'll use."

The thing that struck Julie and Brad about having the class decide was that it took them about five minutes to agree on the ones they liked. "It really proves how so much of the time we can really over-think things," Brad chimed in. The time and thought that has been spent developing what Zara's Collision

Center has become, however, was not over-thinking. It was more like strategic planning and continues today.

## *Continued Growth Today, Tomorrow*

Having Julie on staff is not the only change Zara's Collision has experienced. That initial \$12,000 investment has multiplied itself time and again. The company's sales last year were \$4.5 million. "At the beginning, it was just me," said Brad. "Now we are 25 people strong. The business has changed, too. In general, back when we started, people were more in control of where their vehicle got fixed. Now it is heavily influenced by the insurance industry. Even though people have the freedom to go where they want, one path may be easier than another. I think we've done a good job of never losing our focus of the customer!"

In the 16,000-square-foot facility on Widetrack Drive, Springfield, they are rightfully proud of, the professional environment that has been created for their employees to work in, and to help their customers feel at home. Starting with the lobby and the friendly faces who welcome you as you enter, it's clear this is not your stereotypical auto repair shop. They host meetings and classes throughout the year for various professional and community organizations – both of which are important to the Zara's. Keeping in mind the lifeblood of the business is auto body repair, a full 12,000 square feet is dedicated to body shop space. They strive to involve their staff in decisions that affect the workings of the business, and actually listen.

Brad and Julie spoke very highly of their staff. "We make sure they are well-trained and get the certifications necessary to offer our customers the best in repair services," said Brad. "Our staff has always been the cornerstone of our success throughout the business, which includes the body shop, paint department, office, detail department, production, and we have a management advisory board. Feedback from our employees is important to us," Brad said. "We are proud to be the only team in the region that has achieved

Acoat Selected Partner, I-CAR Gold Class recognition and ASE Blue Seal of Excellence certification."

The longevity of employees working for a business speaks volumes. At Zara's Collision Center, customers can expect to see people who have served the business for as many as 23, 21, 20 years and the list goes on. Brad smiled, and said it's a bit of a challenge for young people who want to come in and work because nobody ever leaves. "That's a good thing," he said. "Everybody here works hard."

The same business today, they said, would likely be a \$1 million start-up to be a player in this industry. There are a lot of very strict OSHA requirements and fire codes to adhere to, plus technology that has to be upgraded in order to provide the best services, according to Brad. "We stay on top of all of that. It's good for our customers. It's good for business," he said.

## *Family, Community ... the Reasons They Do What They Do*

While the business is important to Brad and Julie, their family and community are even more so. They have three daughters: Hannah, a Williamsville High School graduate; Emily, a senior and Claire, a seventh grader. "Hannah and Emily have worked part-time at the family business on occasion, but they don't see themselves in this business," said Brad. Family time is important to the Zara's. That's why the girls were part of their recent trip to Italy, where they hoped to explore some family history, amidst all of the sights and sounds of the culture.

"One of the biggest lessons I've learned is to never feel like it's all on me, that I'm the only one who cares about the business. It's OK to take time off. As a business owner I sometimes get caught up in the fact that I have to earn my keep. Part of that is through the risks we've taken and the investments we've made," said Brad. "When you meet and talk to our Zara's Collision Center family, you'll find I am clearly not the only one who cares." That knowledge gives Brad

and Julie the freedom they need to find a good balance and even allowed them to go on their extended trip. "This is the longest we have ever been gone, and we knew that we left everything in capable hands," he said.

When you are in business in a community that supports you, the Zara's said, it's not only an obligation to give back to that community, but it's a privilege. Visit [www.zarascollision.com](http://www.zarascollision.com) to learn about their car give-away program; it's one of the ways in which they give back. You can tell as they talk that they give back because they feel blessed with the success they have had through Zara's Collision Center and, even more importantly, by the relationships that have been built in and through their contact with so many people here.

You may know Brad and Julie from their involvement in community groups/organizations. Julie is involved in Illinois Women in Leadership and National Association of Women Business Owners, Springfield, for example. Brad is active at the Capital Area Career Center, having served a number of years as the supervisor for the Illinois Skills USA State Competition, which is held in Springfield each year. The LincolnLand Foundation and Hope School have also benefitted from his service. "Whatever I do, it has to be something I'm passionate about, where I can be most effective," said Brad. Undoubtedly, he and Julie are passionate about their relationships with others, both personal and professional, and about Zara's Collision Center, Inc. It's who they are! **SS11**

