

# Montgomery man gives back after being incarcerated

Cheryl Makin, Bridgewater Courier News Published 5:00 a.m. ET July 5, 2020

Despite what many would consider a lot of negatives in his life, Evan Spaeth believes in the positive. And that includes giving back to those who helped him during his time of need.

The 48-year-old man spent 24 years of his life incarcerated in a state prison for attempted murder and burglary. Set free on an "emergency release" on May 11, 2018, Spaeth had served more time than he was sentenced.

"I went in at a young age and I came out old," he said.



Despite what many would consider a lot of negatives in his life, Evan Spaeth of Montgomery believes in the positive. And that includes giving back to Easterseals NJ, an organization that helped him in his time of need. (Photo: ~Courtesy of Evan Spaeth)

Upon his release, Spaeth, who lives in the Belle Mead section of Montgomery, was sent to Easterseals NJ, based in East Brunswick, and Richard Hall Community Health and Wellness Center in Bridgewater.

Easterseals NJ offers children and adults with disabilities and special needs with a variety of services as they address life's challenges. An arm of the national nonprofit, Easterseals NJ serves more than 9,000 individuals at the more than 100 sites in the state with direct services, advocacy and education.

A comprehensive community mental health center, Richard Hall is dedicated to the prevention, early detection and treatment of mental illness and serious emotional and behavioral problems.

## A blessing

Spaeth believes the combination of the two organizations was the right formula for him. "A blessing," is what he calls them. He is so thankful for Easterseals that he recently donated to the organization.

"Easterseals and Richard Hall is what really helped me," he said. "I was coming out here. My mom got called at the last minute saying your son is coming home – like the day before. So, I'm lucky she took me home. Richard Hall and Easterseals helped me get ingrained back into society. I hadn't been out in the world since I was 22. When I got out, I didn't know anything. I didn't know how to use a cellphone. Nothing."

**READ:** [Easterseals gives Montgomery woman new lease on life \(/story/news/local/outreach/caring-communities/2017/11/11/easterseals-gives-montgomery-woman-new-lease-life/837151001/\)](https://www.bridgewatercourier.com/story/news/local/outreach/caring-communities/2017/11/11/easterseals-gives-montgomery-woman-new-lease-life/837151001/)

At Easterseals, Spaeth firmly believes he was given "the best case manager" in Patrice Baker. She helped set him up with services such as Social Security and disability and introduced him to many life skills, including patiently taking him for his driver's test four times.

"She worked really hard with me," he said. "It's a big transition back to society. I was gone for 24 years. I didn't have a driver's license. I didn't have disability money yet. I was basically an adult child."

His hardest transition back to life outside of prison – trust

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"I'm a person that has a bit of a hard time with trust from people that are trying to help," Spaeth said. "I think that was hard, but I started realizing that the people at Easterseals genuinely care."

While Spaeth admits he had a rough life, which includes suffering from mental illness – depression, anxiety and PTSD – since childhood, he does not use this as an excuse for his prison stint.

Going to prison saved his life, Spaeth believes.

"It may sound silly but it's true," he said. "I wasn't thinking about my mental illness. I wasn't thinking rationally. I was doing stupid stuff. I hate saying it – that's a long time to learn a lesson, but I'm still here. I'm still alive. I'm still ticking, and I've helped a lot of people just since I've been out – telling my story. I believe that was the point – I wish it wasn't, but it got me where I am today."



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Spaeth said he has received a lot of support from his family. His mom is always telling him, "You're a good kid, I always knew you were."

"Yea, I'm not a kid anymore," he said with a laugh. "But now, I know I am a good person, I am working, and I have people who care about me. Then, I wasn't thinking. I didn't like prison. I had a hard time in prison but everything in life makes you who you are. And that has made me who I am."

## Getting past trust issues

Spaeth believes he must be honest with others as well as himself. That continued once he was freed from prison. Just as he knows he has issues concerning trust, he would not want to be the cause of trust issues with others.

"My family asked me before I went to Richard Hall what I was going to tell those people – when they ask where I've been for 24 years," he said. "I said, 'I'm going to tell the truth.' Why am I going to lie? What am I going to say, I was in another country? When you get friends, you need to tell them the truth or they would want to know why you lied to them. That's when you find out who really cares and who your friends really are. If you tell them the truth and they back up on you, then you know it wasn't meant to be."

While he said he wasn't "scared of society," Spaeth's said he "feared being stigmatized."

"First, I'm a minority; second, I've been in prison for 24 years; third, I have a mental illness," he said. "So, you know ... for a while I wasn't trusting everything I was hearing. But I always say, 'actions show' and those two

facilities – Easterseals and Richard Hall – were big assets to me."

In turn, Spaeth gave back – donating to Easterseals – and he believes others, including the state, should be giving back and giving more "to these facilities that are helping the people."

"It was worth the donation for what they have done for me to help me transition back into society," he said. "It's weird to find an outside community that will do whatever they can do to help somebody without stigmatizing them. Easterseals – they do so much. People go out of their way to help. It's a beautiful thing. I know they've been good for me and I now they are good for society. I know they are blessing a lot of people out there."

## Giving back

His goal is to continue to give back – and not just monetarily. Spaeth aims to become a peer counselor. The program was supposed to begin in August but is on hold due to COVID-19.

"I want to help somebody else and give back," said Spaeth, who has worked with state mental health advocates and spoken at Richard Hall about the

Because of the pandemic, Spaeth's treatment at Richard Hall was paused as were certain services with Easterseals. He has been doing his best, continuing therapeutic measures, meeting and social distancing with fellow Richard Hall clients at a local coffee shop's parking lot in cars or walking in a park.

Not feeling exactly like he is back in prison, Spaeth see similarities in the lockdown measures. Though Spaeth finally got back into society and now has a clear path forward, he refuses to look at the current global crisis as a setback.

"It definitely does feel a bit like that at times," he said. "But, what can we do? It's a struggle sometimes, but I am lucky I have a cool mom and we play games and watch TV. We have dogs and take care of them. I do the shopping because my mom is older."

His experience has brought him wisdom that perhaps he would not have acquired had prison not been part of his journey.

"Listen, there was a lot of time when I wasn't sure," Spaeth said. "But I didn't quit. Like when I went for my driver's test. I went four times and I didn't quit. Patrice said a lot of people would have given up, but I just kept on at it. It was because of her, too. She wouldn't let me procrastinate.

"That's also what I like about Easterseals – they will let you do things at your pace, but they won't let you procrastinate or push things to the side. They keep you focused on your main goal. I've learned over the years, sometimes you need that little nudge. And that voice that tells you that you are never going back. That's what Patrice did for me – gave me that nudge."

"I try my best – that's all I can do," he added.

For more information about Easterseals NJ, go to [easterseals.com \(https://www.easterseals.com/nj/\)](https://www.easterseals.com/nj/) or call 732-257-6662.

For more information about Richard Hall, go to [www.co.somerset.nj.us/government/human-services/mental-health](https://www.co.somerset.nj.us/government/human-services/mental-health) (<https://www.co.somerset.nj.us/government/human-services/mental-health>).



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