

# CHILDREN should grow up in HOMES NOT HOSPITALS.

## PERSPECTIVES



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## Children Need Communities

By Beth English

One of the most difficult times in my career was watching a young child named Lori move to a nursing home and later to a state institution where she spent her childhood. There were very few community-based residential services for individuals with significant disabilities in 1979 and certainly none in rural Georgia.

Forever ingrained in my memory is my first visit to Central State Hospital in Milledgeville. It was 1973 and I was a psychology major at Abraham Baldwin College. Our class toured the hospital, but one memory that is poignant is the day I was in the Boone Building. The room was lined with metal cribs and in each bed was a child with a disability. It was overwhelming to me – the sterile environment, the smell of pine cleaner and those dreary pale green walls. The visit made an impact on every student in the class – several changed majors and some dropped the class. For me, the visit lit a flame that continues to burn even now.

In 2001, history repeated itself when I received a phone call from a local agency. A one-year-old baby with congenital birth issues, including shaken baby syndrome, was hospitalized and needed placement. Meeting after meeting took place and to my dismay, this precious little girl was placed at Central State Hospital. For almost a year, Easter Seals Southern Georgia worked to develop a safe and happy home and in January of 2002, Natalie\* moved out of the hospital. Over the years that followed, I am really not certain who received the most benefit from this relationship – Natalie or her new mom. Natalie changed the face of disability in our community and bridged so many barriers simply by her presence.

Easter Seals has been entrusted with the care of a number of children with significant

disabilities. Some have come to us from state institutions, others from their families – all medically fragile with very complex needs. Getting it right the first time is not a choice; it is the only acceptable outcome. Caring for these children is risky. It is time consuming but is by far the most important work that we do.

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I have watched children develop new skills and express themselves in new ways. I have watched the bonding take place between family members, caregivers and friends. I have seen community members engage with children who would have never crossed their paths if not for our services, and the results are immeasurable.

The world is a very different place from the 1970s. But the lesson from that first visit to the hospital has stayed with me all these years.

Children should grow up in homes not hospitals. Whatever our State has to do to make that happen is the right thing to do. The results are life changing, not just for the individual with the disability, but for all of us who live, work, play and worship with them.

To learn more about  
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Georgia**, visit  
[www.easterseals.com/  
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*\*name has been changed*