

## A Journey of Resilience and Joy: Alysha's Story

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**When Christine and Lou adopted their daughter Alysha from Bulgaria, they struggled to find the right support for her trauma and learning needs—until they discovered Easterseals Academy. Through compassionate, trauma-informed care, Alysha gained confidence, joy, and independence, inspiring her parents to make a legacy gift so more children can thrive as she has.**

When Christine and Lou adopted their daughter Alysha from Bulgaria at the age of 13, they

welcomed her with open arms—embracing her whole, authentic self while preparing to help her heal from past hardships and build a brighter future. Adoption at any age brings transition but, for Alysha, who carried the weight of early childhood trauma, adjusting to life in the United States was especially challenging.

When Alysha first arrived in America, her parents struggled to find the right support. They searched for counselors who could help her begin healing from trauma and communicate effectively, but because Alysha spoke Bulgarian and relied on translators, the already limited pool of resources was even narrower.

"Finding support for Alysha was very difficult, because she spoke Bulgarian and used translators," recalled her mom, Christine. "It was tough to get anyone to really talk to us. It was very, very hard to find a counselor."

Like many parents, Alysha's family turned to their public school district for help. They enrolled her in their neighborhood school and, while the staff tried their best, the large classrooms, language barriers, and limited resources left Alysha struggling to connect with others, regulate her emotions, and feel like she truly belonged.

"[The public school] did the best they could, but they really didn't have that time, especially since that environment was just overwhelming for her," Christine recalled.

Over time, Alysha's parents felt her needs were going unmet, and the weight of those moments left them questioning themselves.

"During those difficult times, sometimes, you know, we sometimes questioned if we were doing our best to address Alysha's special needs," Christine shared.

Just before Alysha's junior year of high school, a school counselor encouraged her parents to connect with their local Easterseals affiliate—[Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford](#). That recommendation opened the door to [Easterseals Academy](#) in Tinley Park, Illinois, where Alysha soon enrolled and began her new chapter.

"It was like a breath of fresh air. We met the team right away, and they had everything Alysha needed—speech therapy, social-emotional groups where she could connect with peers, and instruction tailored to her level," said Christine. "She really took off here. Now she's reading at a third- or fourth-grade level, which is amazing progress. She's now reading books, closed captions, and making incredible progress."

## A New Chapter

From the moment Alysha walked through the doors, Easterseals embraced her as more than a student. Teachers and staff recognized her history of trauma and surrounded her with trauma-informed care, structure, and respect. This approach created the foundation she needed to begin healing and building trust.

"Our trauma-informed approach has been key to Alysha's success here," Sam, one of Alysha's Easterseals Academy teachers, recalls. "When she first started, she had significant social-emotional needs and often experienced strong emotional reactions. Those moments are now much less common, especially in the school setting. What we've been able to provide is structure, rapport, respect, and transparency—the exact supports she needed to feel safe and understood."

The Academy's trauma-informed approach centers on safety, trust, and consistency, using therapeutic tools such as visuals, routines, social stories, and task analyses. Staff apply these strategies with compassion and evidence-based practices, creating a classroom environment where healing and learning go hand in hand.

With consistent support, Alysha learned to recognize her emotions and ask for help. A breakthrough moment came when she calmly requested a highlighter to guide her scissors, replacing what once would have been a meltdown with self-advocacy and confidence.

"To anyone else it might look small," recalls her teacher, Sam. "But for us, it was an incredible success. It showed she believed in her own ability to ask for what she needed."

Now in Easterseals Academy's post-secondary program, Alysha is preparing for graduation. She balances academics with vocational training, enrichment activities, and community field trips that help build independent living skills. She works at the school store, enjoys horseback riding, yoga, swimming, and performing in talent shows. Community outings have become one of her favorite parts of the program.

"Sometimes we go to Sam's Club or Jewel-Osco, sometimes Family Dollar," Alysha shared with a smile. "We go swimming, then to Dunkin' Donuts. I love all of it."

Her passions shine brightest with animals. Alysha works at a local aquatic store, caring for fish tanks, and maintains several aquariums at home.

"Easterseals gave her a safe place to discover what she loves," Christine shares. "She's reading, earning good grades, and comes home happy. She has goals and believes in herself."

## **The Power of Partnership**

Alysha's success has been a true partnership between her family and the Easterseals team. Teachers communicated openly, collaborating with her parents on strategies and celebrating progress together.

"Her family is so positive and willing to put in any support we request," says Sam. "That collaboration has made all the difference."

For Christine and Lou, the transformation has been life-changing.

"Easterseals has been a godsend," Christine says.

## **A Legacy of Gratitude**

Grateful for the impact Easterseals had on their daughter, Christine and Lou made a profound commitment: a legacy gift to Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford.

"We both agreed—this is absolutely what we want to do," Christine explains. "Easterseals has been the biggest resource we've had. Alysha is proud to say she goes here, and we're proud to give back."

For Easterseals staff, their decision is humbling.

"It affirms that what we're doing is meaningful," says Sam. "Not just Alysha, but her whole family sees it—and now their gift will help others."

Alysha's journey is a testament to resilience, love, and the power of the right support. From a teenager carrying the weight of trauma to a young woman filled with confidence, joy, and dreams for the future, her transformation has been extraordinary.

Her parents' legacy gift ensures that many more children and families will have the same chance to thrive—turning gratitude into action and hope into a lasting impact.

