

Hallowell man who died kayaking remembered for his kindness, faith and love of the outdoors

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By Emily Duggan August 11, 2023



Martin Spahn is all smiles after climbing Chief Mountain in Colorado in 2016. His sister, Mary Spahn, says he suggested climbing the mountain when there was not enough snow for skiing. Spahn died recently while attempting to kayak to a Canadian island. *Courtesy of Mary Spahn*

HALLOWELL — Martin Spahn died doing what he loved — being in the outdoors on one of his adventures.

“He felt if there was some challenge out there and if he could do it, he should try,” said George Spahn, his son.

His final challenge was an attempt to kayak from Lubec to Grand Manan Island in New Brunswick — a roughly 11-mile trip — but he did not make it. Spahn’s [body was found](#) Monday near the Raccoon Point area of Campobello Island by the Canadian and U.S. coast guards, after he was reported missing on Sunday. He was wearing a life jacket.

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Spahn, who was 57, lived in Hallowell and was a prominent member of the community.

Following the news of his death, tributes poured in on social media from people tied to different groups he has been a part of, including the [Capital Area New Mainers Program](#), the Peace Corps and local churches.

“The world has lost a kind and generous man...” wrote Marty Thornton, a friend of Spahn’s through the Unitarian Universalist Church of Augusta. Thornton added Spahn was “always soft-spoken with a gentle smile and great warmth.”

His death is the latest of several boating-related fatalities in or near Maine in recent weeks.



Martin Spahn and his son, Eli, in 2016. *Courtesy of Steve Spahn*

A Madison man drowned after being thrown from a [whitewater raft](#) on July 25, and a 72-year-old man with ties to Anson died when his airboat nose-dived into a river July 5. Officials also recently called off the search for an [18-year-old lobsterman who went missing](#) from his boat

off the bay of Steuben on July 21.

The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife records the number of boating deaths on a yearly basis but does not have this year’s data yet, the agency’s spokesperson Mark Latti said. Last year, the department recorded eight deaths related to boating incidents and on average, there are about six such deaths a year, he said.

A LOVE OF AGRICULTURE

Before Martin Spahn moved to Maine, he spent four formative years in the Peace Corps, which solidified who he was as a person, his brother, Steve Spahn, said.

Spahn was born in the suburbs of Denver, Colorado, the third youngest in a family of 10. He went to the University of Colorado Boulder, where he received his bachelor’s degree in French before joining the Peace Corps from 1989 to 1993.

Through that program, he landed in Togo, Africa, where he helped villagers with agricultural efforts and later met his future wife, Pam Lombard.

Spahn took the time to learn the native language in the village — even though French had become the country’s official language — and lived in a mud hut with no electricity.

“It was an incredible thing, and mind-blowing,” his brother Steve Spahn said. “He was really so at home at this very foreign place, and he loved it. What he took from there was his love for agricultural life.”

After his time in Togo, Spahn and Lombard moved to Oregon for Lombard to complete graduate school, then to Idaho and eventually, to Maine, where the couple started a Community Supported Agricultural Farm in Palermo and raised their two children, George, now 25, and Eli, 22.

Saint Martin de Porres Farm in Palermo held many memories for George and Eli Spahn. There, the boys helped their father grow vegetables and pick beetles off the plants, which George said he did “for a penny a beetle.”

They lived on the farm for just over 10 years before Lombard and Spahn divorced and both separately moved to Hallowell.

Spahn’s four years in the Peace Corps impacted those he served with, too, with many sharing memories of him on Facebook once they received the news of his death.

“He was doing what he loved, kayaking, this time off the Northern Coast of Maine. Martin was one of the most kind, gentle people I have ever known. It breaks my heart,” wrote Ellen Mallory, a friend from the Peace Corps.

A MAN OF FAITH

As a Hallowell resident, Spahn was known around the community for his volunteering efforts and for his involvement with churches in the Augusta area.

Described by those closest to him as “a man of faith,” Spahn was a devoted Catholic and a member of St. Michael Catholic Parish in Augusta. After his divorce, he attended the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta.

Spahn’s brother, Steve Spahn, is a Catholic priest in Maryland and said there were times when he felt Martin Spahn was in “some ways a better priest than I’ll ever be,” because of his humanitarian efforts and dedication to his faith.

“In his daily life, (Martin) would think a lot of things had meaning and everything would work out in the way God planned,” George Spahn said.



Martin Spahn and his son, George, in 2016. *Courtesy of Steve Spahn*

Gina Czerwinski, the pastoral life coordinator at St. Michael Parish, described him as “a very compassionate, empathetic, selfless, faith-filled man.

“He was involved in many parish activities, including leading a men’s faith-sharing ministry, and was an active member of our parish Social Justice Commission, helping with various events like the Angel Food Supper Ministry, in addition to serving as a Lector, Extraordinary Minister of Holy Communion at Mass and to the sick and homebound,” Czerwinski said.

When Spahn wasn’t at church, he would likely be helping people around the community by giving them rides in his electric car or passing out food at a local pantry.

“He gave back a lot,” George Spahn said. “He would help with all kinds of things — he wouldn’t say no. If someone gave him a suggestion, do this, or do that for fun, or do something, he will make it happen.”

And even through his work, Martin Spahn helped people.

Employed at ESM, Inc. in Augusta, Spahn helped people with intellectual disabilities with daily tasks as a direct support professional. When the company heard the news of his death, nearly 20 people responded with words and memories about Spahn.

“Martin is the example of what spreading love, hope and kindness looks like,” said his co-worker, Elizabeth Michaud.

AN ADVENTURER

But, most of all, Spahn loved the outdoors.

He could name every coniferous tree and most, if not all, of his weekends were spent in the woods, especially when he had Eli and George for the weekend.

Together with Eli Spahn, the pair conquered all 67 of New England’s 4,000-foot mountains.

“Most of the fun memories I have are doing adventures and things like that,” Eli Spahn said. “He really loved the outdoors, and that’s where my love of the outdoors comes from as well.”

George Spahn said on their hikes, his father would carry the “biggest backpack,” a trait that Eli Spahn said he later found himself doing when he would go on hikes with his friends.

“He would make sure we had everything we needed in a giant backpack, even if it wasn’t long of a hike,” Eli Spahn said.

Steve Spahn said he and his siblings would try to get Martin to come back to Colorado, but he loved being in Maine, especially on the water.

“He loved Maine — nothing would take him out of Maine,” Steve Spahn said. “There is no water to speak of in Colorado and he was a water enthusiast, and I think it’s something that, when his life ended, he was doing something he loved.”

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