

Former death row inmate Spann wins parole, plans move to Conn.

By Meg Kinnard, Associated Press Writer

COLUMBIA, S.C. --Former death row inmate Sterling Spann plans to move to Connecticut after winning parole Wednesday when the Probation, Parole and Pardon Services board voted 5-1 to release him.

Spann, 43, had spent 17 years on death row before he won a new trial on the charges involving the 1981 death of Melva Niell, 81, of Clover.

He was sentenced to 20 years to life in prison after entering a plea in 2002 that did not admit guilt, but conceded there was enough evidence that a jury might convict him.

The parole board voted against releasing him unanimously in 2004 and on a 3-3 vote in 2005.

Spann plans to move to Connecticut, where his attorney Lionel S. Lofton said a job is waiting for him. A couple from Monroe, Conn., saw Spann's story on NBC's "Dateline" several years ago and have become his benefactors, Lofton said.

The couple has no connection to Spann or to South Carolina. They own a string of tire stores across the country and "have adopted Sterling and his entire family," Lofton said.

"They have been working very hard to help Sterling and see that he's got good legal representation and make sure that he had a place to live and a job to go to," Lofton said.

The outpouring of support was unprecedented in Lofton's 30 years of practicing law. "It's really heartwarming to see that there are people like that in this country," he said.

Spann is currently at the Broad River Correctional Institution. Because his release to Connecticut must be approved by both that state and South Carolina, it could take up to 45 days before Spann is freed, said Pete O'Boyle, spokesman for Probation, Parole and Pardon Services.

Prosecutor Tommy Pope promised in Spann's plea deal to take no position on parole other than a letter stating Spann should serve the entire sentence. He did not immediately return calls from The Associated Press.

Lofton said Spann's good behavior while he was out on bond in 2002 might have helped his case for parole this time around.

"He had a track record for them to see that he hadn't done anything wrong" while out on parole, Lofton said. "Sterling's record since he's been back in prison has been exemplary."