

# New Jersey

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PHOTO BY JIM PATHE

Monica Pease of Basking Ridge watches therapist Eileen Kennedy massage her 6-month-old daughter, Olivia, at Professional Massage Therapy Associates in Springfield. Kennedy will be helping orphans in Romania.

## Massage therapists to share a loving touch with orphans

By Angela Stewart  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Eileen Kennedy started by gently rubbing Olivia's feet, rotating her thumbs in a circular motion to create a soothing effect.

Her hands then eased their way up the baby's legs and then her chest, rubbing a hypoallergenic body oil on her delicate skin along the way to reduce friction.

Olivia responded by spreading her arms wide, smiling and making soft cooing noises, as she sensed the warmth of Kennedy's hands caressing her body.

"You are so good, Olivia; you are the best," she told the baby, who will turn six months old next week.

"She loves to be rubbed," said Olivia's mother, Monica Pease of Basking Ridge, explaining she often massages her daughter after a bath.

Kennedy, a certified massage therapist, knows the benefits of the gift of touch, the first sense to de-

**"Because the babies (in Romanian orphanages) don't stand often, their legs are just bones . . ."**

—EILEEN KENNEDY, massage therapist

velop in newborns. She knows that physical contact promotes emotional well-being in babies and that without consistent human touch babies can fail physically.

Now, with the aid of an international organization devoted to the tactile sense, she and a colleague from New Jersey are about to share that gift with overseas infants who have been deprived of such tender touches.

In Romania, there are more than 100,000 babies languishing in orphanages. Because the institutions are severely understaffed, the infants spend their days lying in small cribs

and are rarely held by their caregivers, except to have their diapers changed.

"Because the babies don't stand often, their legs are just bones, because they have very little muscle tone," Kennedy said.

Kennedy and her associate, Cheryl Chapman, owner of Professional Massage Therapy Associates in Springfield, will be flying to Romania in June as part of a 12-member infant stimulation team that will bring the art of massage to these orphaned babies, as well as teaching it to their caretakers.

Sponsored by the International Loving Touch Foundation and Northwest Medical Teams International, a private, nonprofit humanitarian organization, the team plans to visit two Romanian orphanages in the city of Sibiu over an 11-day period. Besides massage therapists, the team will also include child development specialists, nurse

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## Massage

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### Therapists to help Romanian orphans

practitioners and social workers.

Infant massage has been more commonly practiced in countries outside the United States, but lately it has been gaining more interest here.

Hackettstown Community Hospital recently started an infant massage program, and program coordinator Russell Blair said its benefits can't be overestimated. Infant massage, he said, contains such critical elements of bonding as eye-to-eye contact, caressing, smell and mutual interaction. But he said physiological benefits, such as the enhancement of nervous system development, are also important.

"Skin is the largest organ in the body, and because a baby's nervous and digestive systems are not fully developed, massage continues the stimulation and helps the development of these different systems," he said.

Studies have shown massage therapy to be especially beneficial for pre-term babies, helping them to grow and develop faster than other infants, according to Maria Hernandez-Reif, director of research for the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami School of Medicine. She said institute studies have found that premature infants who receive massage therapy are generally discharged from the hospital six days earlier than other preemies and gain almost 50 percent more weight.

Diana Moore, president of Loving Touch, which is based in Portland,

Ore., said she met Chapman and Kennedy at a national massage therapy convention last year and invited them to come along on what will be the group's fifth trip to Romania.

According to Moore, Kennedy and Chapman are the first New Jersey therapists to travel with the team, whose members hope to have an impact on both the physiological and emotional development of these touch-deprived babies.

Following past visits by Moore's stimulation team, Romanian caregivers have reported an increase in alertness, activity, and hand and foot coordination among the visited children, who generally range in age from birth to 3 years old. Lucia Roman, a staff psychologist at one Romanian orphanage, said the therapists also bring over items like mirrors, swings and crib toys which also result in more alertness and activity on the part of the children.

"Even though they stay in small cribs, they work hard to make movements in their beds," she said, adding that the toys serve as an incentive to become more active.

Chapman, 54, a holistic registered nurse practitioner, and Kennedy, 45, who has worked in health care marketing since 1979, are paying their own way to Romania and have been seeking donations from individuals and corporations to help underwrite their airfare, lodging and translation services.

Both women say that while they know they will be extending their loving touch to just a fraction of the total orphaned infant population in Romania, any difference they can make in these children's lives will be fulfilling.

"We're just a small ripple in a big pond, but it starts with one and goes from there," Chapman said.