





# What the Heart Touch Project is Teaching Us About Cambodia's Youngest HIV/AIDS Patients

By Karrie Osborn

Today, their futures look bright.  
They run and play and learn and smile.  
Yesterday was a different story.

After her mother died from AIDS complications, young Phana's\* future still seemed hopeful when her aunt took the grieving child into her home. But hope turned to despair when the aunt kept 9-year-old Phana locked in an upstairs room, fearful she might lose business as a hairdresser if people knew the child was HIV positive. This is the stigma of HIV and AIDS that hangs over so many children in Cambodia.

Phana was eventually rescued by the New Hope Cambodian Children orphanage, and today she and the other 350-plus, mostly HIV-positive children who call New Hope home are given a chance to see the world in a new light—one of hope, of a future, and of a place to belong. Here, they are cared for, protected, given necessary medical care, and taught that having HIV does not make them “less than,” as their society tries to label them. Part of that education comes when receiving therapeutic massage from volunteers at The Heart Touch Project and knowing, seeing, experiencing—some for the first time—that they are *not* untouchable.

*\* Name changed to protect the child's privacy.*



### A MISSION BORN IN CRISIS

The Heart Touch Project is the brainchild of Rolfer, massage therapist, and psychotherapist Shawnee Isaac-Smith, a woman first motivated by seeing her own AIDS-stricken colleague denied therapeutic touch in the throes of his illness in the 1980s. The care she gave to her dying friend when no others would showed her the path she was destined for, and that inspired her in 1986 to open a wellness center that specialized in delivering both comforting touch and other holistic modalities and welcomed those afflicted with the disease.

It was the height of the epidemic in Southern California, Isaac-Smith recalls, and medical staff were “going into AIDS patients’ rooms wearing spacesuits.” Soon, hospices started springing up as a result of the fear toward AIDS patients being treated within the hospitals. “These people were outcasts, even within our own medical system,” she says. At the time, people were dying at an alarming rate in the United States and around the world, and health-care practitioners had no idea how the disease was contracted or spread, further fueling the fear.

When Isaac-Smith created The Heart Touch Project nine years later, the nonprofit organization focused solely on individuals with HIV and AIDS. “I wanted to provide touch to those who thought they were untouchable,” Smith says. “It was a thought that morphed into an organization.”

Shawnee Isaac-Smith founded The Heart Touch Project in 1995 to offer touch to “those who thought they were untouchable.” Today, the nonprofit works internationally with the same mission, including at the New Hope for Cambodian Children orphanage.

With time, new drug “cocktails” helped patients who were HIV positive stave off full-blown AIDS, and survival rates increased exponentially. Hospices were no longer overflowing with AIDS patients, yet The Heart Touch Project had volunteers who still wanted to help. “Our mission had been met in the United States,” Isaac-Smith explains. “The population wasn’t needing our services the same way, so our board started looking at other populations that were untouched.”

As a result, the nonprofit began expanding its efforts beyond AIDS to the elderly, and then eventually hospice patients of all ages. A convergence occurred when Children’s Hospital Los Angeles wanted Heart Touch to design a therapeutic massage program for its neonatal intensive care patients. Isaac-Smith and her team designed and implemented the program there, and partnered with the hospital on various research projects. Today, The Heart Touch Project brings its expertise to Children’s Hospital Los Angeles, Cedars-Sinai Medical Center, Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, and UCLA Mattel Children’s Hospital.

Still, the full breadth of The Heart Touch Project’s potential would not be realized until the nonprofit’s efforts began extending beyond its work in the United States.

### REACHING BEYOND BORDERS

The international work of The Heart Touch Project began in 2006 when a group of Thai volunteers asked the organization to help some of their 400,000 AIDS orphans in Thailand. “We went to Thailand for two years, and while we were there, amFAR [The Foundation for AIDS Research] contacted us about possibly going to Cambodia,” Isaac-Smith says. “They explained about the stigmatization Cambodia still has with HIV/AIDS and about the orphanage that was taking in these ostracized kids.”



### THE HEART TOUCH PROJECT PEOPLE

Patrick Callahan, pictured above with some of the children from the New Hope for Cambodian Children orphanage, volunteered to serve as principal of New Hope's school after falling in love with the children and people of this country during his many volunteer trips there with The Heart Touch Project. Below, a volunteer from The Heart Touch Project lets her tiny client try out her own massage techniques during a recent trip to the New Hope orphanage. Helping children experience healthy touch in a country that often labels them "untouchable" is a goal of the program.



Teaching caregivers at the New Hope for Cambodian Children orphanage about massage and HIV, and that there is no reason to fear these children, is a primary goal of The Heart Touch Project mission.

And so began the international partnership between Heart Touch and the New Hope for Cambodian Children orphanage in the Kampong Speu province, a facility founded and run by John and Kathy Tucker. “They embraced the idea of bringing safe and nurturing touch to their children,” Isaac-Smith says of the Tuckers.

But the challenge was no small one. Not only do these children deal with the trauma of being orphaned and fighting their own AIDS battle and all its demons, but Isaac-Smith says they also deal with the lasting trans-generational trauma from the Khmer Rouge regime and its Killing Fields that wiped out generations of families, as well as the trauma of losing their newfound “siblings” at the orphanage to the disease or other circumstances. These children deal with a lot, and the armoring that comes from that kind of pain is difficult to break through.

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## What Is Heart Touch?

“The Heart Touch Method is not so much a modality but a way of being a mindful, loving presence with our clients. The Heart Touch Method teaches a gentle, nurturing, and mindful form of touch therapy founded on a profound respect for the special physical and psychological needs of an individual. Neither strictly a technique nor a modality, The Heart Touch Method is a specialized form of skilled touch. It is based on a holistic and humane approach to therapeutic massage and has a vital emphasis on the dignity and worth of those struggling with serious illnesses and medical conditions.”

*Shawnee Isaac-Smith,  
founder of The Heart Touch Project*

For Isaac-Smith, the decision to go to Cambodia was a simple one. She knew that in addition to offering pain relief and comfort for these young AIDS patients, it was important to remind the children that they are valued, they are loved, and they are touchable.

Today, the international program of The Heart Touch Project is self-sustaining, with volunteers funding their own trips and utilizing YouCaring.com as a way to raise money to assist with travel expenses. In addition to Thailand, Cambodia, and India, the group will soon be expanding its efforts to South America.

For nearly 10 years, hundreds of volunteers have made the trek to New Hope for Cambodian Children and offered massage to children ranging from newborn to 18 years of age, as well as to the facility’s staff and administrators. Each year, another group of volunteers travels to Cambodia and has their lives changed by this profound experience.

One of those volunteers is Patrick Callahan, a US massage therapist and former educator who made the Cambodia trip four times. His work with The Heart Touch Project started as a volunteer and grew to his role as executive director and then director of the International Outreach program. Little did he know how his life would change as a result of his experience helping Cambodia’s children.

### A PLACE FOR NEW HOPE

Twenty miles outside the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, New Hope for Cambodian Children sits remotely in a rural area, surrounded by rice paddies and small villages. Families bring young orphans to the doorstep when their AIDS-stricken parents die. It is the only orphanage in Cambodia to accept these children who are shunned elsewhere.

Callahan was so impacted by his visits to Cambodia that he and his husband, Mike Norman, pulled up roots in Southern California and moved to Cambodia in 2014. “We had been coming to New Hope with Heart Touch since 2008 and were so impressed with the work of John and Kathy in providing a safe place for children infected with the HIV virus that we wanted to be part



## My Best Advice

Shawnee Isaac-Smith says massage therapists can have significant impact when working with clients with HIV. Here are her top five pieces of advice for working with this special population.

1. Keep your heart open. Allow yourself to acknowledge any fears you may have and then let them go.
2. Never work on your client with AIDS when you are feeling ill. Persons with HIV or AIDS often have depressed immune systems and are more susceptible to contracting other illnesses.
3. There is no need to wear gloves unless you or the client have an open wound. Creating a deep and sacred connection supersedes the psychological barrier of the gloves. The most important thing is to keep your heart open and connected to your client.
4. The rule of thumb is “if it’s wet, don’t touch it.” HIV can only be transmitted through bodily fluids. The only bodily fluids you may come in contact with are open wounds. HIV cannot be transmitted by tears or sweat.
5. When in doubt, ask. If you see a lesion, rash, or sore on your client’s body, ask your client about your areas of concern, just as you would with your healthy clients.



During The Heart Touch Project visits to New Hope for Cambodian Children, approximately 250 children are massaged over the course of a two-week trip.



Shown here providing massage to a caregiver at the New Hope orphanage in Cambodia, Shawnee Isaac-Smith says the work they do with this organization is beyond rewarding.

of their work,” Callahan says. Today, he volunteers as the principal at New Hope’s on-site school.

This former Heart Touch volunteer still has the Heart Touch mission in his blood, and he continues to coordinate the nonprofit’s annual trips to Cambodia. In addition to being life-changing for the volunteers, Callahan says the Heart Touch visits have a huge impact on the children at the orphanage.

Physically, massage helps relieve some of the daily aches and pains the children endure and alleviates side effects caused by the potent medications they take every day. “Massage is also profoundly relaxing for many of them and gives them an experience of being touched in a way that most of them never knew or realized existed,” he says.

Callahan also believes the work the children receive at the hands of Heart Touch volunteers helps them, in turn, be more compassionate with one another. “That said, I doubt this is a conscious realization on their part. But on some level, they understand the importance of touch.” Isaac-Smith agrees, noting that the visits have brought a whole new culture of compassion to the orphanage.

## Join the Movement

The Heart Touch Project  
[www.hearttouch.org](http://www.hearttouch.org)

New Hope for Cambodian Children  
[www.newhopeforcambodianchildren.org](http://www.newhopeforcambodianchildren.org)

### THE WORK OF HEART TOUCH

The children run to the van as it approaches the orphanage. “Massage, massage,” they yell. They come knowing they will all get a turn.

Over the course of two weeks, the 14 or so Heart Touch volunteers will put hands on about 250 children. “It’s a pretty full day,” Isaac-Smith says. “Some kids know how to work the system; they change their shirts and come and get more,” she laughs.

The children remain clothed as they climb on the table, and a brief assessment from the therapist includes looking for open sores and rashes, and letting the orphanage know if there is anything they need to be aware of. Isaac-Smith says there are usually a few nurses in the volunteer group, so they are easily able to address any concerns.

The work itself is comforting for the children and meant to ease the stress in their little bodies. “We give them a typical Heart Touch massage, which is a very slow, soothing session,” Isaac-Smith says.

The caregivers are also offered massage and volunteers teach them about the challenges these children have living with HIV. “Saying and seeing are two different things,” Isaac-Smith says. “They see us giving the kids massage and then washing our hands—having no hesitation in touching the kids or picking them up and hugging them. They understand that if Americans are coming over here and doing this, then it must be OK.”

Isaac-Smith says the value of what New Hope for Cambodian Children does can’t be understated. Being part of that is rewarding beyond words. “There’s something very magical, of course, about children anyway. But the joy these little kids have in such adverse conditions, it’s a life-changing thing to work with these beautiful little beings.” **m&b**

 Karrie Osborn is senior editor at Associated Bodywork & Massage Professionals. Contact her at [karrie@abmp.com](mailto:karrie@abmp.com).