

The Philadelphia Inquirer

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Mayor Rizzo, back in town

The double life of Main Line murder suspect

*Craig Rabinowitz is linked
to prostitution, strip clubs.*

By Anne Barnard,
Jere Downs
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FOR THE INQUIRER

He started inviting a woman from an escort service to his home around the time he got married.

He took his wife and baby to restaurants at night — but by





The Philadelphia Inquirer / ERIC MENCHER

Coleen Murphy performs Thai massage, which incorporates some principles of

A touch of the East

An ancient method of massage makes its way to Philadelphia

By **Rusty Pray**
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Incense was burning, mixing its heavy perfume with the voice of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, the Pakistani qawwal singer, coming from the CD player. At the foot of the futon in the sparsely furnished front room, a kneeling woman was intoning a prayer.

In Bangkok, this scene might not have seemed unusual. But in Coleen Murphy's second-floor apartment off Rittenhouse Square? As out of place as a tree sloth hanging off William Penn's hat.

Murphy was about to give Melissa Duran a Thai massage, a style of Asian therapeutic bodywork just making its way into this area from the Left Coast and other mysterious lands.

Thai massage is "just so different," said Murphy, the preparatory prayer finished and a second ritual — washing the client's feet — about to begin. Both aspects are rooted in Buddhism. Traditionally, Thai massage was viewed as a spiritual practice, closely linked to the teachings of Buddha.

While getting a Thai massage "you wear

"You're on the floor as opposed to a table.

"You think you're going to be twisted into a pretzel," she added, laughing. "You're like, 'What? I didn't think I could go in that direction.' But you go in it, and it works, and it feels great."

The technique has a 2,500-year history and a lot of respect in Thailand, where massage is the oldest form of medicine.

In Philadelphia, well, massage is commonly associated either with a practitioner pounding away on a naked back, or a man wearing a rumpled suit and a furrowed brow furtively entering an unmarked doorway.

Thai massage is "one of those things you don't hear much about at all," said Terry Tosh, owner of the Pennsylvania Institute of Massage in Quakertown, which teaches the more conventional Swedish style.

"I've never met anyone who does it," she said. "Around here, we're still getting used to regular massage."

Like Chinese acupuncture and Japanese shiatsu, Thai massage is based on the activation of pressure points along central en-

THAI

of Indian yoga, with hamstring-twanging stretches a featured part of the procedure.

One evening last week, Duran changed into loose-fitting clothes before lying on her back on the futon. Murphy went to work.

Over the course of the next hour and a half — the minimum time required for a full Thai massage — Murphy poked and prodded with her fingers, kneaded with her feet, and used her body weight to stretch Duran's muscles.

After washing Duran's feet, Murphy began manipulating the toes before working her way up Duran's legs, applying gentle pressure along the shins with her fingers.

At one point during the portion of the massage that incorporates yoga, Murphy stood straddling Duran's hips, and with a foot in each hand, used her body weight to stretch Duran's legs backward until her heels nearly touched her ears.

Duran didn't even blink.

When it was over, Duran said she felt rejuvenated.

"I have been put back in touch with my extremities," she declared.

It was the second Thai massage for Duran, 28, who lives in South Philadelphia and manages a University City restaurant.

She got her first about a month ago after "a friend and neighbor raved about Coleen's skills and how great she felt afterward," she said. "Since I'm on my feet 13 hours a day, it sounded like a wonderful idea.

"And it was."

Murphy, a 27-year-old Philly native with curly brown hair and hands that flutter like birds when she talks, says she feels as invigorated as her clients after a massage.

"It's an energy massage, and when I do it, I feel like, 'Wow, that was good, that was great,'" she said.

So, exactly how did an Irish Catholic lass from Tacony with a psych degree from Syracuse, who has worked in such run-of-the-mill fields as drug and alcohol counseling and advertising, get involved in something so exotic?

Murphy and her boyfriend, Andrew Assalian, learned the technique while on a trip to Asia last year. They met when they were students at Syracuse and found they had much in com-



Melissa Duran, whose restaurant job keeps her on her feet for long stretches of time, finds the 90-minute massages rejuvenating.

monial medicine hospital in Chiang Mai, a walled city about 435 miles northwest of Bangkok, where the style is taught. They arrived in January 1996, and the first thing they did was get a Thai massage.

"Afterward, we were like speechless," said Assalian, 26, who grew up in Middletown, N.Y. "It was like nothing I'd ever experienced before in my life."

They spent two weeks taking classes in Thai massage with 16 others — none of them Asian — before continuing to travel around the continent, practicing their new craft on each other and fellow travelers.

Before returning to Philadelphia in October, the couple spent another month at the hospital, refining their skill.

And now Murphy is a Thai massage therapist. She has been doing it full-time since November and wants to make it her life's work.

Assalian also practices Thai massage and dreams of opening a massage school. But he has hedged his bet with a part-time day job at an immunology lab at the University of Pennsylvania.

Murphy and Assalian operate their fledgling business out of their apartment on South 19th Street, relying mostly on word of mouth to generate business. They charge \$65 for a full Thai massage, less if the client doesn't have 90 minutes of free time. It's their concession to Western

is the skill of the therapist. In Pennsylvania, finding out who has the touch comes down to trial and error or trusting the judgment of friends.

The state does not require certification for therapists.

This gives Oriental massage therapists like Murphy and Assalian a problem gaining mainstream acceptance.

However, several organizations nationwide offer certification programs.

In Pennsylvania, there are a little more than 100 therapists practicing Oriental bodywork who have been certified by the American Oriental Bodywork Therapy Association, said Ruth Dolphin, a board member. And about the same number, she estimates, simply hang up a shingle and work without certification.

Murphy and Assalian are in that category. They say they were certified in Thailand, but they have not yet been certified in this country.

No statistics are available on the number of Thai massage therapists in Philadelphia, but Dolphin, co-founder of the School of Asian Healing Arts in Cherry Hill, N.J., practices Thai massage as well as other Asian styles.

In addition to being an obscure practice, the Thai style suffers by association from the bad rap massage has in these parts.

"If you look at the Philadelphia Yellow Pages, it looks like a porn magazine," said Tosh, the Quakertown massage school owner.