

TO RUSSIA WITH LOVE

LATER this month, a charity founded by a mum from Osterley after a promise she made to her dead daughter reaches its fifth birthday. The *Chronicle's* Jessica Thomas talks to Sarah Settelen about her ground-breaking work helping Russian orphans

IMAGINE lying in your bed 24 hours a day, on soiled sheets, with no one paying you any love or attention - and now imagine you are a four-year-old child.

This was the awful scene that mum Sarah Settelen was confronted with on a tour of Russian orphanages in 1998.

Sarah, who was still grieving the death of her severely disabled four-year-old daughter, Ellie, vowed to help these forgotten children in her memory and founded The Promise.

"After the death of Ellie, I remembered an article I read, about Russian orphanages and just felt that I had to go and see for myself," said Sarah, 46. "If I were a religious person I would describe it as a kind of calling."

In Russia disabled people are stigmatised, with families receiving no help to look after needy children.

This often leads to their abandonment in orphanages that have too many children and not enough staff.

Children start in baby homes and if they are assessed as 'idiot', the category for those with serious learning difficulties or physical disabilities, they are sent to orphanages for the disabled.



AID: Sarah with a child from the orphanage

Here they receive no education and minimal therapy," she said. "The children just sit in their beds all day long, some have reached 17 and have never been outside before. These homes are normally closed to

outsiders so we were really excited when they asked us to come and help them"

The Promise introduced an educational technique called Portage to the orphanages in 2006.

Under the intensive scheme, trained staff work one to one with disabled children to develop basic skills.

In the UK the service is provided by the Government, and Sarah says it has transformed the children.

"They are up out of their beds, some even feeding themselves," she said. "It's the one to one contact that makes the difference.

"We have also introduced Portage into the homes of Russian families with disabled children and hope to expand this work among other communities and develop the work being done in orphanages, but we need help."

Sarah and her husband Peter have now adopted one of the children from Russia, Natasha, who like Ellie suffers from cerebral palsy.

If you would like to donate to the charity, which celebrates its fifth anniversary on July 28, visit www.thepromise.org.uuk



TRAGIC: Sarah Settelen with late daughter Ellie