

# LOCAL NEWS

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL

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## Hugs are what world needs now, Cuddle Party host says

By GWEN MICKELSON  
SENTINEL STAFF WRITER

This weekend, Peter Nowell of Scotts Valley was preparing for a party by setting out lots and lots of pillows.

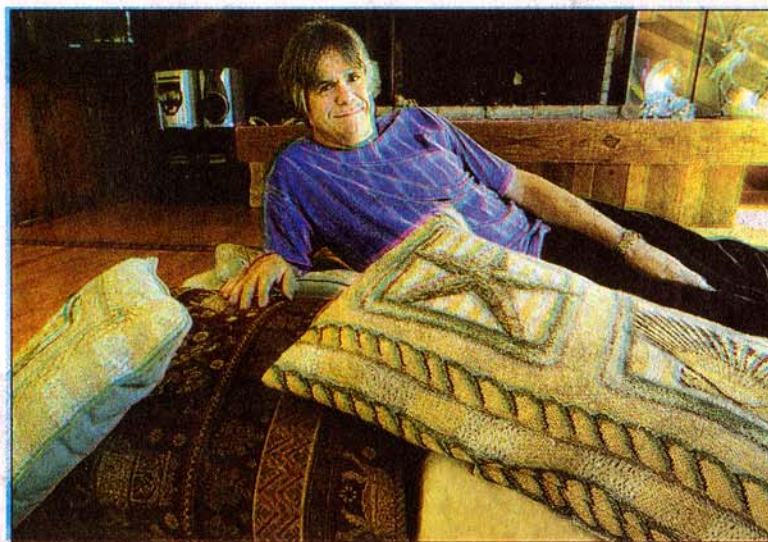
That's because the event Nowell is hosting today isn't going to be a typical cocktail party or sports-watching get-together. It's a Cuddle Party.

The events, which are happening all over the United States and in Australia and Canada, are billed as playful, fun workshops where adults can rediscover nonsexual touch and affection, redefine their assumptions about men and women, and network.

The very words "cuddle" and "party" together might cause sideways glances or raised eyebrows from the general population, but Nowell and others say the parties are not about sex.

"I find that people really want to have more close-knit community in their lives," said Nowell. "They want to communicate in a way that makes them feel they really know someone on a lot of levels."

The parties are facilitated by specially trained and certified moderators



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Peter Nowell is hosting a cuddle party for 30 people at his Scotts Valley home.

who make sure no sex happens, that everyone feels safe and that the sexual energy, when it shows up, is dispersed

safely, according to the Cuddle Party Web site.

Their purpose is "to create a new cul-

ture where intimacy and affectionate touch can be explored without it necessarily being a sexual overture," said Yvonne Shevnin, a certified Cuddle Party facilitator in Santa Clara who will facilitate the Scotts Valley event.

The movement was launched in 2004 by Reid Mihalko, a self-described "bi-coastal sex and romance coach" whose background includes writing, acting, producing, teaching martial arts and street combat, doing intuitive massage and studying yoga.

In 2002, Mihalko began full-time relationship coaching. He enrolled in an intensive six-month coaching and leadership training program at Landmark Education of San Francisco, and began studying sexuality through workshops, classes, books and discussion.

Mihalko was joined in the endeavor by Marcia Baczynski, a New York-based relationship and communication coach, writer and sex educator.

Cuddle Partiers "spoon, hug, give each other back rubs," said Shevnin. They may even affectionately kiss. But, she said, "Some people don't participate at all. In fact, one of the rules of Cuddle Par-

ty is no one has to cuddle with anyone at a Cuddle Party ever."

That would seem to defeat the purpose of attending a Cuddle Party, but Shevnin says the parties can be about more than affectionate touching.

"It really helps people feel safer by teaching them that 'no' is a perfectly acceptable answer," she said. "It also challenges people's bias around physical image."

If one feels the slightest hesitation about any kind of connection with anyone, Cuddle Partiers are told to just say "no," said local therapist Beila Krow, who's attended several of the parties.

"Cuddle Parties are also a great place to get over fear of rejection, by practicing playfully saying 'no' to each other," she wrote in an e-mail. "Soon rejection loses its charge."

The upcoming Scotts Valley event is full, but Shevnin says more local Cuddle Parties are in the works. For information, visit [www.cuddleparty.com](http://www.cuddleparty.com).

Contact Gwen Mickelson at [gmickelson@santacruzsentinel.com](mailto:gmickelson@santacruzsentinel.com).