

Millennials: Waterbeds are returning, and Bainbridge Island waterbed inventor wants you

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Still an inveterate tinkerer at 71, Charlie Hall plans to test-market a new, improved model of the waterbed, which became a long-running fad after he introduced the first one 50 years ago in San Francisco. Now a millionaire inventor, he lives part of the time on Bainbridge Island. (Dean Rutz/The Seattle Times)

By

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Millennials, the inventor of the waterbed has a message for you. Especially those of you living right here in the Pacific Northwest, like he does.

You need a waterbed.

Charlie Hall is 71 and a millionaire because of waterbeds and some of the other 40 patents he holds. (You know the Sun Shower, with the solar-heated bags that let you bathe when camping? That's his.)

He's planning on the waterbed making a comeback this spring.

"I don't think a millennial has ever seen one," says Charlie, as everyone calls him, about the invention he debuted 50 years ago at a "Happy Happening" art show in San Francisco.

"But I have this theory that it's a Northwest kind of thing. I feel like a lot of us spawned in a waterbed."

And so those younger types, "Maybe they want to visit the spawning ground."

That first waterbed was called "The Pleasure Pit" because, as the oft-repeated sales pitch went in that groovy era, "Two things are better on a waterbed, and one of them is sleeping."

Working with a good friend of his from the waterbed days — Keith Koenig, president of City Furniture, with 16 stores in South Florida — he is about to test-market Waterbed 2018.

No more rigid frame that made them hard to get out of. Now there's foam around the edges. New materials suppress the wave action that some customers didn't like. Dual bladders allow each side of the bed to have its own temperature control.

It's not like Charlie needs the money from the Return of the Waterbed.

He has a ranch home in California wine country and another place in that state, and about 15 years ago he bought a home right on the Bainbridge Island waterfront. Looking out through the big windows, he has a straight-on, unobstructed view of downtown Seattle. During nice weather, he spends a lot of time on his 55-foot cruiser, going around the San Juans.

Still, he's an inveterate tinkerer. He can't help it.

That [Sun Shower is part of the catalog](#) for Advanced Elements, of which he's co-founder, although these days not involved in the day-to-day operations.

"It keeps me young, to be active and engaged in a lot of projects," says Charlie.

But are we ready for Waterbeds 2.0?

If history is to repeat, once again it'll be that male customer who'll plunk down the cash.

The ads back then sometimes featured women in slinky outfits, or no outfits at all.

By May 1970, [Charlie Hall's waterbed was featured in a Playboy magazine](#) spread, in an issue that included a story on "The Fiery Feminists" and "An exclusive interview with William F. Buckley Jr."

"I remember we had to do the bed in velvet, I think maybe green velvet," remembers Charlie.

Subtlety was not part of the waterbed ethos back then.

Some came in gargantuan, four-poster wood frames such as a "Jungle Bed" advertised in June 1976 in The Seattle Times [for a special sale price of \\$450](#), which is \$1,953 in today's dollars.

For Charlie Hall, it's a long way from his days as a 24-year-old industrial design student at San Francisco State University doing his graduate school thesis.

“I always liked furniture and I wanted to address human comfort. I talked to doctors, physical therapists, even some psychiatrists, trying to put together elements of comfort that work,” he says.

For example, there are whirlpool baths taken by athletes — “letting your muscles relax, that soothing sensation associated with floating,” says Charlie.

From that came his first effort, a chair filled with a kind of viscous starch.

“It was not practical. It weighed 300 pounds, and you couldn’t move it unless you had a forklift. And you kept sinking deeper and deeper into it until it was hard to get out of,” remembers Charlie. “I also decided that a bed was more important. It’s the piece of furniture used most in the house.”

Then he had the epiphany of using water inside a vinyl bladder, made for him by a company specializing in PVC.

Charlie got an “A” on his thesis, and the waterbed revolution was on. Although it didn’t magically take off.

“We had a little shop in Sausalito, and we would deliver them on top of a Rambler station wagon,” says Charlie.

One of his customers liked the beds so much he helped raise \$100,000 in funding. Celebrities began to notice the new fad.

“One of the Smothers Brothers bought one, and somebody in Jefferson Airplane bought one. I remember we delivered that one to a big Victorian house that was painted all black. Getting the bed in there was hell,” says Charlie.

On June 15, 1971, he was granted U.S. Patent No. 3,585,356 A for a [“Liquid Support for Human Bodies,”](#) the waterbed.

That didn't deter the copycats, who ignored his requests for royalties or licensing fees.

It wouldn't be until 1991 that Charlie was vindicated when a jury awarded him \$6 million in a patent-infringement lawsuit against Intex Plastics, a company that imported waterbeds from Taiwan. He then began receiving licensing fees.

The waterbed craze lasted for nearly 20 years.

A [1986 New York Times story](#) quoted the Waterbed Manufacturers Association as saying they accounted for 12 percent to 15 percent of the American bedding market, and that back then they had \$1.9 billion (\$4.3 billion in today's dollars) in annual sales.

They were so popular that the California Civil Code says landlords can't discriminate against people with waterbeds, as long as they have waterbed insurance. In Seattle there is no waterbed legislation, although some rental agreements either prohibit waterbeds or require proof of insurance.

Then waterbeds practically disappeared.

"Probably bad marketing," says Charlie. "It got to be price wars. Retailers were presenting \$99 specials and selling a very crappy product. It spiraled down from there."

Sometimes, he says, what was sold to college kids was just the bladder — no frame. "You can imagine a bag of water on a college dorm floor. Not a good idea," he says.

Charlie says that there also were a lot of myths associated with waterbeds.

Like they were so heavy that they crashed through the floor. No, he explains, "Forty pounds per square foot is a normal building load on a residential floor. Waterbeds don't even come close. It'd be a third or less."

Or, they'd leak all over the place. No, says Charlie, "They have safety liners that take care of any leak issues."

He does say that it was because of waterbeds that the mattress industry changed. It showed you didn't have to settle for some rigid spring coil bed.

"Memory foam, pillowtop mattresses, all that stuff began to appear," he says. "Look at the ads for the memory foams — they read like all waterbed ads."

Now it's a new day.

Fifty years later, don't you think this could fit you, too?

Seattle Times, June 8, 1978, [in a feature about waterbeds](#):

" ... the avant-garde youth took to them like protest marches."

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