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## A Ring That Says No, Not Yet

By [STEPHANIE ROSENBLOOM](#)

THE thin silver band that 17-year-old Katie McMunn wears on her finger is a placeholder. Someday, she hopes, it will be replaced by a wedding ring. In the meantime it serves as a daily reminder of a vow she made three years ago to remain chaste until marriage.

"I want to give all of my body to my husband," Ms. McMunn said.

She was 14 when she first slipped on the silver band during a program promoting abstinence for teenagers, held in Pittsburgh. The three-hour event, called the Silver Ring Thing, featured music videos, comedians and speakers who introduced an idea Ms. McMunn had not considered: that somewhere out there, her as-yet-undiscovered husband was waiting for her. She was so moved she took her vow and borrowed \$10 from a stranger to buy her ring.

Ms. McMunn is among tens of thousands of young people who in the past decade have taken a chastity vow until marriage and slipped on a ring to symbolize it. Chastity rings, part of the controversial abstinence-only movement in sex education, are becoming more mainstream. Also known as purity rings, they are being purchased by college students, members of church youth groups and abstinence organizations, and couples who are dating but abstaining. Some are acquired as part of programs like the Silver Ring Thing, others are bought independently.

Once sold mainly in Christian gift shops, the rings are now offered by retailers like Zales and [Amazon.com](#). And sellers say business is booming. "We began selling purity and chastity rings in 2002 and saw a dramatic increase in interest through 2004," Rebecca Roberts, who offers 48 different styles of purity rings on [AppleFieldDirect.com](#), wrote in an e-mail message. This year, she said, she is feeling increasing competition from other retailers.

The growing visibility of purity rings comes amid a long-running controversy over the promotion of abstinence in sex-education programs for teenagers. Critics charge that promoting abstinence as a singular virtue means denying to teenagers the sex education they need. That means that if someone breaks the chastity vow, he or she will not know how to avoid contracting sexually transmitted diseases, they say.

Those who wear and promote the rings argue that abstinence is the only way to practice truly safe sex. And they would like to spread that message far and wide. In the next seven years, the Silver Ring Thing, a religion-based group promoting abstinence, aims to persuade 20 percent of the world's youth to abstain from sex until marriage, said Denny Pattyn, the group's founder. In the meantime, purity ring wearers say that they are beginning to change youth culture, if ever so slightly.

Since 1996 when the Silver Ring Thing held its first program in Yuma, Ariz., some 50,000 young people have put on rings, Mr. Pattyn said. And thousands more have bought rings from other suppliers.

Most feature Christian imagery like the face of Jesus Christ, a cross or a crown of thorns. But more secular designs are becoming available. One is molded into the shape of a rosebud. Some sparkle with diamonds and gems. Others carry the message "True Love Waits." Chunky boys' rings adorned with crosses or barbed wire are becoming more popular.

As the variety of rings has increased, so has the expense. Some are still under \$20, but many now sell for more than \$300.

The rings are still not mainstream enough to be considered cool. When Ms. McMunn tells her peers that she is waiting for her husband, "people give me weird looks," she said. "I have gotten made fun of a lot." But the rings are catching on to the point where many wearers feel comfortable talking about them.

In online chat rooms, ring wearers confide in one another, forming a community that turns its back on spring break and "Girls Gone Wild" rites of passage.

"I don't think Christian youth are hiding their beliefs as much as they used to," said Jerry Rady of [ScriptureJewelry.com](#) in Escondido, Calif.

"Before, it was in the closet, a lot of that stuff," said Nickolas Pfindner, the owner of [ReligiousJewelryStore.com](#), based in Jamison, Pa. "Peers are starting to really appreciate and respect kids who make that choice."

Ring ceremonies, once modest affairs held in people's homes or in churches, now sometimes involve hundreds of participants and laser light shows interspersed with talk of pregnancy and the dangers of sexually transmitted diseases.

It is this melding of a chastity vow with the trappings of sex education that some sex educators object to. Michael McGee, the vice president for education at Planned Parenthood, said that abstinence-only groups are putting "a generation of kids at risk" by teaching them that condoms do not work. If teenagers who are taught only abstinence break a chastity vow, which many do, Mr. McGee said, they are less likely to protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections. He said teenagers have come into Planned Parenthood offices in Texas seeking pregnancy tests - yet when offered free condoms they have refused, saying they were taught condoms do not work.

"The reality is I believe the people from Silver Ring Thing and Planned Parenthood are both really concerned with the health and well-being of kids," Mr. McGee said. "Our approach is not to preach Christianity but to talk about people taking care of themselves and their health. Abstinence has always been part of our message. It's just not the only message."

In May, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against the federal government, challenging the legality of granting more than \$1 million since 2003 to the Silver Ring Thing, which the A.C.L.U. has called an "overtly religious abstinence-only program."

The lawsuit is still pending. But in August, the Department of Health and Human Services notified the Silver Ring Thing that it was suspending payments because the group "may not have adequate safeguards to clearly separate in time or location inherently religious activities from the federally funded activities." Federal financing to the group will not resume, according to the letter, until the group demonstrates that it has corrected the problem.

Mr. Pattyn said that only the last 20 percent of the Silver Ring Thing program presents a Christian message and that a secular version of that part of the program is also available. The group, he said, is in the process of making the distinction between the Christian and secular programs clearer to participants.

Most chastity rings from retailers are sold with pledge cards bearing religious messages like "Remember to hold tight to what God has asked you to keep pure."

Parents often present the rings to sons and daughters teetering on puberty. "I can't think of any parent out there that wouldn't value the sentiment behind the ring," said Julie Lee, who sells purity rings online at [JuliesJewels.com](http://JuliesJewels.com), from Graham, Tex.

"It's a good tool to help you explain your decision and a reminder to you to remain pure," said Jonathan Wagner, 16, of Wexford, Pa., who wears a purity ring.

Mr. Pfendner said many teens are putting purity rings on their Christmas wish lists, even above iPods. But his busiest time of year, he said, is August, when teenagers are heading off to college.

For Mr. Rady of [Scripturejewelry.com](http://Scripturejewelry.com), Valentine's Day brings more business. That is when many youth groups publicly pledge their chastity in front of family and friends, he said.

Taking off a purity ring is supposed to be part of a different ritual: the wearer's wedding. Trisha Magaw, 28, who runs WAITT (Wanting An Individual To Trust), which sells purity rings, wore hers until she was standing at the altar. "There was an exchange of my purity ring for my wedding ring," she said.

Definitions of purity vary. The Silver Ring Thing's is one of the strictest. "Your private areas are not to be used or touched by a member of the opposite sex," Mr. Pattyn said. "No oral, anal, no fondling, no traditional sex." Even kissing is risky business, he added, because it escalates into more heated behavior.

A statement on the Web site of True Love Waits, an abstinence group that encourages the wearing of purity rings, says purity also means saying no to "sexual touching," "to a physical relationship that causes you to be 'turned on' sexually," and to "pornography or pictures that feed sexual thoughts."

Some ring wearers consider only intercourse outside the bounds of purity, and think sexual touching is allowed. But Tiffany Kelly, 18, a college student in Wenham, Mass., who wears a purity ring, likened touching to using cheat codes in video games. "You didn't really beat the game," she said. You did not, she said, "really honor your body." Virginity, however, is not a prerequisite to ring ownership. Adults and teenagers who want second (or third or fourth) chances at chastity have donned the rings as a sign of their recommitment. In the world of abstinence accessories, such rings are known as Second Time Virginity rings.

Ms. Kelly, who was crowned Miss Massachusetts a few weeks ago and will compete in the Miss USA pageant in April, has no intention of breaking her vow. "I think of it as the ultimate wedding present," she said. "It's saying 'you're worth waiting my whole life for.' "