

Marital-aid house parties are the ‘classy’ alternative to sex shops

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EAST PLAINFIELD, CT—Sex toy parties are a weird scene.

Angela Gray, otherwise known as “Athena’s Goddess No. 1225,” is standing in front of 10 people explaining the correct usage and benefits of everything from massage oils and body sprays to very complicated-looking electric marital aids—most with suggestive names like Coochy Shave Cream, Nipple Nibblers and Passion Flower.

This is a sex toy party. This is what she does for a living.

Well, this is what she does for a part-time job, and so far she makes a good living at it. In half a year, July to December last year, Gray racked up more than \$33,000 in sales. The Enfield resident works for Athena’s Home Novelties, a Rhode Island based company specializing in sensual products sold by 650 semi-independent “goddesses” like Gray.

Sunday evening in Mary McDonnell’s living room in Plainfield was sort of a 21st century Tupperware party—a very adult Tupperware party.

Gray arrived at the party about an hour early to set up. In a small room down the hall she established a makeshift store where participants could purchase any of the electric devices, oils, lubes and lotions she brought with her. But first came the hour-and-a-half presentation during which she explained the products and tried to educate partygoers about how to use them safely and effectively to enhance their sex lives.

Anyone who answered one of Gray’s questions, volunteered for one of the G-rated demonstrations, or was the first to notice when she mentioned certain parts of anatomy received a nude playing card.

The partygoer who ended up with the most cards at the end of the night won a grab bag of sample lotions, potions and other products. Every time one of those words passed Gray’s lips, hands shot up around the room followed by unintelligible shouts.

Gray isn’t shy. The presentation covers everything from massage to masturbations to finding a woman’s G-spot. And the party is loose with plenty of laughs and participants passing each product around a circle to smell and feel. The only rules are no kids and no nudity, Gray said.

Gray buys all the products she shows at the parties from Athena’s and then sells them for a profit. She also gets training and advertising help from the company. The party hosts get 10 percent of the party’s sales as credit. That percentage goes to 15 percent if the party tops \$1,000 in sales. Gray said she hosts a party that size once or twice a month.

“It’s a party. People are coming to have fun,” she said. “They learn and become educated.”

Gray travels up to an hour and a half in any direction from Enfield and conducts around 12 parties a month, mostly around Lebanon, Claremont and at Plymouth State University.

“It’s great in terms of profit, but it’s also great to meet so many different types of people,” she said. “The longer you do it the more you realize it can really affect people’s lives. The happier people are sexually, the more confident and happy they are in general, and it affects the people around them. So I think it’s really a service.”

Athena's is different from other companies offering similar services, Gray said, because of its emphasis on classy presentations, education and discretion. At no point did Gray's explanations devolve into anything resembling smut or porn, and purchases were made behind closed doors.

Most people at the party didn't want to share what they planned to buy, or their last names, but most weren't shy about exploring new toys and products in front of their friends.

Misty, a 21-year old Hartland resident, came with a roommate just for a good time.

"It's just fun," she said. "She does it very tastefully, but she gets the point across."

"You learn new stuff. You can joke around and feel comfortable because it's a small group," said Ashley, 22, another Hartland resident.

Gray keeps things on the up and up. Athena's prides itself on taking the sleaze out of sex and sex toys, billing itself as the mature alternative to grimy headshops or the impersonality of Internet sites. Because of that she gets a number of repeat customers, including McDonnell, who was hosting her second party.

"It's fun. Every time we do one we try to get a new group to introduce them," McDonnell said. "What (Gray) does is really tasteful. It's not porn and Jenna Jameson stripping from a pole."

"It's fun because (Gray is) funny and you don't have to be embarrassed, and it's all private," said Sara, another partygoer.

Another Athena's trademark is hosting more than all-female parties. Gray offers parties for co-ed groups or gay or lesbian soirees.

Sara and her boyfriend, Justin, were one of two couples at the Plainfield party. Justin wasn't shy about experimenting with some of the devices, testing them out on his arms and temples.

"They're just toys," he said.