

Unsuspecting passersby hugged in the park.

## All-embracing free love seizes city



JOHN COSTELLO / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Inviting the public's embrace, Laurie Elder and two other West Philadelphia women offered "free hugs" in Center City for about two hours yesterday, and hundreds took them up on their offer. The random acts of kindness were inspired by a Web video.

philly.com

To view a popular YouTube video of the man who inspired the "free hugs" idea, go to <http://go.philly.com/hugs>

By Natalie Pompilio  
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Pigtails bobbing, Laurie Elder bopped up to a stranger walking by LOVE Park yesterday afternoon, waved her sign, then outstretched her arms.

Seconds later, the two were hugging.

A few feet away, Debs Hoy was doing the same thing — wrapping her arms around someone she'd never met. Near her, Fran Staret was approaching a group of walkers while waving her torn sign: "Free Hugs," it read.

The three West Philadelphia women were spreading a little sisterly love in a city where, with the growing violence problem, it seems love is lacking. They were encouraging people to slow down rather than hurry by, to connect with a stranger rather than ignore one. They were offering "free hugs" for about two hours yesterday, and hundreds of people took them up on their offer.

"All the people who don't usually hug," she said. See **HUGS** on A7

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## Public hug fest spreads love in Center City

### HUGS from A1

ally look at me are hugging me," said Elder, 29. "We've had so many hugs. I don't want to stop."

Hoy, 26, said she noticed that, post-hug, people were smiling and their shoulders were less hunched.

"I've had a few people say to me, 'I really do need a hug,'" Hoy said. "That's great. Sometimes that makes all the difference."

The idea was inspired by a recently popular YouTube video that features a man in a Sydney, Australia shopping mall, offering free hugs to passersby. Dur-

ing the segment, police arrive to stop the hugging, prompting the hugger to collect 10,000 signatures from supporters.

According to legend, a 21-year-old who called himself "Juan Mann" went on the filmed hugging spree in 2004 after his engagement broke up, his parents divorced, and his grandmother died.

"It's something that's international. You can hug anywhere, any time, anyplace," Hoy said.

The hugges came in all races, ages and sizes and from all economic backgrounds. A homeless man wheeling a cart cracked a wide grin after getting a hug. A

car pulled over, four men in suits jumped out, and each had a quick squeeze before jumping back in their vehicle.

Some passersby waved off the enthusiastic embracers. A few muttered things like "I'm married" or "My wife will kill me" as they hurried by. At least one man seemed irritated to even be asked. Another had the distinction of being the only one to act inappropriately during his embrace.

But most people at least grinned at the women or stopped for a hug.

"What's this for?" one huggie asked as he stopped his bike to

get a Hoy half-hug. "It's just for hugging? That's awesome."

Faye Allard, 29, a sociology Ph.D. student at the University of Pennsylvania, filmed an hour's worth of hugs to edit and add to the YouTube collection.

"I think it's brilliant. As a sociologist, you study all these problems about how terrible the world is, how terrible Philadelphia is, and then you come downtown and every third person seems to want a hug," Allard said. "And look at the smiles."

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