

## COMMUNITY PROFILE

# Sean Walling

## Longtime local builder of high-end, hand-crafted bikes

**Profile:** Sean Walling

**Age:** 37

**Occupation:** Bicycle frame builder and owner of Soulcraft Bicycles.

**Background:** Walling is married to Lainie Bebber. The couple lives in San Rafael but plans on moving to Petaluma soon. He grew up in San Rafael and attended a few junior colleges and Sonoma State, where he majored in history. Walling has been building bikes in Petaluma since 1988, when he started at Bruce Gordon Cycles. From 1990 to 1999 he worked at Salsa Cycles, then started Soulcraft with a friend when Salsa was sold and the new owners closed the shop. Soulcraft was named "Hardtail of the Year" by MTBReview.com a few years ago (a hardtail is a mountain bike with front suspension only).

**What do you like about Petaluma?** "I like that it feels like a small town, even though it's growing. I can go downtown and every time I go there I see a couple of people I know, either at the market or the post office."

**What do you make?** "I make mountain bike frames, single-speed frames, cyclocross bikes, road frames, sometimes custom one-off designs for trade shows — a pretty broad spectrum."

**You've been doing it for almost 20 years. Do you have it down yet?** "You never have it down. That's the thing, if anyone asks for my advice, I always tell them: 'Always be humble about it.' No matter how good you think you are, you can always learn something."

**Who is your customer and how do you get him or her?** "It's all word of mouth. I don't do any advertising except sponsoring a race team [which includes Yuri Hauswald of Petaluma].



TERRY HANKINS/ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

Sean Walling, owner of Soulcraft Bicycles in Petaluma, has been building bikes in Petaluma since 1988.

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There are certain types of customers I don't want to deal with. I don't want to deal with people who have so much disposable income that they have this attitude that 'I'll buy this because I heard somebody say it was good,' and then never ride it. I want people who actually use these bikes and actually ride them."

**What do you strive to create in a bicycle?** "A bike that disappears under the rider. And what I mean is, when you get on it and start riding, you will not really notice the bike. You are looking at the trail or the road, whatever it is you're riding over, and you think 'I have to get over this hump or up this hill or around this turn,' and you do it, and you

don't think about the bike."

**Hobbies?** "My favorite thing is riding bikes, my second most favorite thing is making bikes."

**How would you describe yourself?** "Pretty easy-going. I try to be humble in what I do, and friendly."

**What is your greatest accomplishment?** "Being in the seventh year of Soulcraft."

**Who has inspired you?** "Lots of people: Ross Shafer [former owner of Salsa], John Hammond, the former production manager at Salsa, Bruce Gordon, Tom Ritchey."

**What is your advice to others?** "Anybody who's starting out in this climate, to start out as more of a hobby than as a job. And don't undersell your products, charge top dollar for what your skill level is."

**What is your greatest challenge?** "Keeping myself organized and on track."

**What are your goals?** "Personal goals are to spend more time with my wife and start a family, move to Petaluma. To always do work that makes me happy and I'm passionate about. With Soulcraft, I'd like to grow it bigger than it is, but to remain true to the reasons I started this company — to build really nice bikes, create a really friendly relationship with my customers, and treat them with respect."

**Favorite food?** "If I had to live on one thing the rest of my life, probably a chicken burrito."

**Favorite movie?** "The Big Lebowski."

**Favorite book?** "The Grapes of Wrath."

**If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be?** "To take away all the guns and weapons of mass destruction."

— Interviewed by  
Dane Golden