Schools new to the program schedule the residency for one week each year; however, many schools now hire me for two, three, and even four weeks each year. Returning to the same school repeatedly demands that I always have new and challenging dances to offer. Many thanks go to the CDSS community and various callers around the country, who are not surprised by my “dial a dance” phone calls asking for detailed help with various dances.

From Salinas to Sacramento, it is a great pleasure to present San Francisco Bay area veteran dance musicians for the Friday night barn dance. When teaching in other parts of the state, I work with other wonderful dance musicians. For schools that cannot afford to pay for the band, I call and play the dance myself. This arrangement is not as fun for me, but with the proper sound equipment, it works. Being both the caller and the band, I have learned to fiddle and call any dance I select for teaching. I never use recordings. As a veteran of the greater folk music and dance community, I have strong feelings about the benefits of live music.

I am fortunate to draw upon a broad range of folk experiences ranging from playing in contra dance and zydeco/Cajun bands to touring with world class step dancers and my family’s folk band. As a professor of English and American Studies, my father developed programs that brought great bearers of folk tradition to visit the university, sometimes for entire semester-long residencies. African-American folk artists Bessie Jones and Douglas Quimby lived with us during such a program.

This year at a Mendocino school, I managed to teach Chorus Jig to the sixth grade class. I was so pleased with the outcome that, the following week, at a Sacramento school, I taught the faculty the same dance during a class held after the students went home on a minimum-day schedule. Later that week, at the Friday barn dance, the teachers performed several contra dances for the students and parents.

At a high school where I taught the entire freshman class, one class was particularly undisciplined. I asked a staff person about it and she said, “They’re all on drugs.” I asked, “Prescribed or unprescribed?” She said, “Both.” I decided they needed something elegant to work on so I added Duke of Kent’s Waltz to my program overnight, and it worked beautifully. During a residency earlier this year, a teacher told me she saw a particular student smile, for the first time ever, during dance class. Over the years, I have collected many heart-warming stories, and I know how fortunate I am to have such a rewarding job.

I refer to the teachers and principals who take an interest in my program as “my partners” because they understand the value of bringing dance and music into the schools, and they know they are affording students the experience of a lifetime, but then, you know that!

Evo Bluestein is a professional musician and music teacher, specializing in traditional American folk music. He plays fiddle, banjo, autoharp, guitar, zydeco accordion and other instruments. Growing up in a musical family, he performed with his family in countries around the world, and later as a duo with his brother Jemmy. Evo is the originator of the Evoharp and Sparrowharp (his own autoharp designs) sold internationally, and he enjoys playing zydeco and blues with Bad Boys Zydeco and with the original music ensemble Lyquid Amber. Find out more about the school program at www.eovobluestein.com.

This article was published in the CDSS News, May/June 2008.