

ContraResolution—A Free Dance for Beginners

by Loren Shlaes



Country Dance New York goes on hiatus during the summer and, aside from the usual monthly dances in Brooklyn and the Village, dancing is scarce here during June, July and August. Those of us who live to contra dance have had to learn to be resourceful in order to survive until September.

For four of us in August 2013, that meant packing up our dancing shoes and heading out to Greenfield, Massachusetts for the weekend. We were impressed by Greenfield's strong sense of community, the high level of their dancing, and the crowded hall, despite the August heat and lack of air conditioning. I asked several people if they could tell me why this was so, and the answer was that Greenfield puts a lot of effort into recruiting new dancers and regularly reaches out to the community. They visit college campuses and recruit among the townspeople in order to maintain a large pool of dancers.

Wandering around Greenfield on Saturday afternoon, we saw posters everywhere inviting the locals to an extended beginner session at the Grange. David Kaynor has been hosting these sessions on a regular basis for years. In order to encourage new dancers who may not feel comfortable jumping in after a quick pre-dance lesson, he regularly offers an hour of in-depth teaching with individual assistance by experienced dancers. Anyone who attends the afternoon dance is offered free admission to that evening's dance.

Photo by Jeff Barry

We thought we should do something like that to boost attendance at our home dance in Manhattan. By the end of the weekend, we had come up with a plan: a free afternoon contra dance geared for beginners, with an equal number of experienced dancers on hand, and a discount coupon for that evening's regularly scheduled dance.

When we proposed our idea to CD*NY's board of directors that fall, everyone was immediately enthusiastic. They agreed to fund half the projected cost of \$1000 to cover rental of the hall, the caller, the musicians and publicity materials. David Chandler, who sits on both boards, suggested that I write a grant proposal to CDSS to request the other half, so I did. Linda Henry contacted me to say that CDSS liked our idea and that the grant committee had agreed to fund our proposal.

With our funding secure, we approached Will Mentor, and Nor'easter, who were scheduled to appear on January 11th, and told them what we had in mind. To our delight, everyone was available.

We decided to call our dance ContraResolution. Our tag line was "A New Year's resolution you'll want to keep!" We plastered flyers and postcards all over the city, and posted notices on Facebook, inviting dancers from around the area to help teach the beginners. One of our members invited her entire student listserv at Columbia University.

ContraResolution was a huge success, with over two hundred twenty-five people in attendance. The hall was packed! Dancers from all over the tristate area came to assist us. We gave everyone who came to help a pink ribbon to wear around their necks, and asked them to pair up with the ribbonless dancers. Somehow we managed to have about an equal number of new dancers and experienced helpers.

To our surprise, Will didn't spend a lot of time on preliminaries. He had everyone practice moving in time to the music for a few minutes, cued up the band, and we were off! He trusted the experienced dancers to help the beginners keep from getting too lost and to be on time, and he was right. Even without much prior instruction, judging from their expressions and how crowded the dance floor remained until Will ended the afternoon session with a waltz, everyone had a wonderful time.

Quite a few of the new dancers chose to order pizza and hang out with us during the break, and many of them stayed for the evening. The hall was so packed that night that we had to move all of the tables and chairs out into the hallway to accommodate all of the dancers.

I am delighted to report that the younger dancers on the planning committee want to make ContraResolution a yearly tradition and have

carefully archived the work that went into the planning. We have been approached by a long time member of the community who has offered to underwrite the next one, which is scheduled for January 10, 2015.

We are so grateful to CDSS for their generous support and enthusiasm and for helping us start what appears to have already become a cherished yearly tradition.

The many people who worked so hard to make the first ContraResolution a big success: My co-chair, Josh Schnur-Holmes; Mara Milic for the beautiful graphics; our planning committee: Melanie Firestone, Damon Wang, Shoshana Silverman, Jennifer Werfelman, Merle McEldowney, Claire Shaffer and Anne Scher; our event staff: Sara Raab, Maurice Chen, Myra and Brian Luna Lucero, Kate Fais, Jeff Bary, Rylan Buchholz and Melanie Firestone; our sound crew, Jesse Schaffer and Damon Wang; Carl Levine, who conducted weekly workshops for our experienced dancers and who taught the beginners session at the evening dance; and all of the experienced dancers who so kindly and generously shepherded our first time guests into the joy of contra. And for the incredible magic: Will Mentor, Cedar Stanistreet, Julie Vallimont and Max Newman.

An avid contra dancer, Loren Shlaes is an occupational therapist and teacher of the Alexander Technique in New York City and has just attended her first CDSS American Dance and Music Week at Pinewoods Camp where, she said, she had a "seriously fabulous time."

More of Jeff Bary's ContraResolution photos are at <http://tinyurl.com/mvjyt4x>

