

The Syracuse Contra Prom

by Sarah VanNorstrand

On April 3, 2010, I stood on stage with Eric McDonald, Brendan Carey-Block (two-thirds of Matching Orange) and Andrew and Noah VanNorstrand (two-thirds of The Great Bear Trio), looking out on a crowd of outrageously dressed, high-spirited dancers. The attire included everything from tuxedo t-shirts, a maroon velvet coat with tails, a few ball gowns and lots of goofy thrift store outfits. The elegant nineteenth century dance floor of Madison Hall in Morrisville, New York was packed with dancers, and the room was humming with energy and excitement. For those of you who weren't there, this describes the scene this spring when I was calling for Syracuse Country Dancers' second Seventh Annual Contra Prom. It was a really special evening and after seven years (I'll explain the "second seventh" thing in a minute) of organizing, decorating and encouraging people to come out for the event, I felt like the Syracuse Contra Prom was finally realizing its intended potential.

My friends and I started the first Contra Prom when we were all more or less juniors in high school. By that time, we were regulars at the Syracuse Country Dancers' weekly contra dance, thanks to the comfortable and welcoming atmosphere that is the hallmark of our dance community. I think for many of us it was the first time we were enthusiastically involved and included in any sort of community. Finding a place to hang out and have fun together on a weekly basis with such a variety of people was a really unusual and enticing experience. Community is elusive in today's world and contra dancing brings together the most unlikely people in an activity that is at its best when the dancers are not only connected with the music, but are equally connected with each other.

When prom season rolled around, I wasn't interested in going through all the motions, time-honored though they are, of buying the dress, finding the date, going to the dance, where the actual dancing is pretty minimal, and then the marathon of after-parties. The expense and the difficulty of navigating the super-cliquey atmosphere at school didn't sound like fun to me. I'm sure many people, perhaps in different circumstances, do enjoy their proms, but I needed another option. I wanted to create an alternative that

would involve more fun and less peer pressure, so I went to the board of the Syracuse Country Dancers and asked if we could put on a contra dance version of Prom.

The first year was a real success. People understood the intended mood of the event right away and showed up in everything from tuxedos and bow ties to one of our friends in a superman costume. It was everything I love about contra dancing: great music, fun dances, all sorts of people, goofy outfits, even goofier attitudes and a warm, welcoming community of dancers. Since then, we've held the event annually and each year gathers a bit more momentum. The decorations are just a little more elaborate, the outfits get more creative, and each year's cake outdoes the last. Now we have groups of

people show up who've never danced before, but who are curious about this crazy folk music prom that costs only seven dollars. Great music and good dancing are central to the evening, but this event also strives to create an environment where people can feel free to be themselves without the pressure to conform to mainstream culture.

This year was our second seventh annual event (last year, we messed up and called it the seventh annual when it was actually only the sixth) and it was the best combination of dancers, dance hall, music and atmosphere that I think we've ever had for Contra Prom. I'm very proud of the event and I'm excited that other people are considering starting up something similar at their home dances. I'm grateful to the Syracuse dance organizers for letting us give it a try, because it gave us a sense of ownership and inclusion that connected us with contra dancing in a permanent way. Many of that original group of friends are still dancing, even though we've dispersed and gone in different directions after high school and college.

Personally, I've continued my involvement with the Syracuse Dancers and now I'm a member of the board. I currently handle the booking for our dances and I'm an active caller. Music and dancing are integral parts of my life, largely thanks to a community



of dancers that made room for my friends and me at an important time in our lives. We found a place at those weekly dances where we could have an incredible amount of fun in a positive environment, and the music and dancing that we absorbed has stayed with us. Most of the old crew still make it back for every Contra Prom, and we mingle with a new crowd of dancers who are discovering the benefits of contra dancing for themselves. I already have big plans for next spring's eighth annual Contra Prom, and I really hope some of you will get out your prom attire, whatever that might be, and join us on the dance floor for what I think will be the best prom you've ever experienced.

Sarah can be reached through her website, web.me.com/evergreenfarm/Sarah_VanNorstrand/Welcome.html.



Previous page: Dancers at Madison Hall. This page, top: "You never know what might happen at Contra Prom" (a.k.a. Sarah and Kailyn), below: this year's cake; photos by Andrew VanNorstrand.