## Revitalization: How Do You Make a Dance Come Back to Life?

by Joyce Fortune

In the 1990s, the Palo Alto Contra Dance was the place to be. The dance (so I have heard) regularly pulled in over a hundred fifty dancers, with parents trading off child-watching and tons of people having a fabulous time. By the time I joined the community in 2005, it was a smallish local dance with fifty or so people. I happily danced there and at weekend camps for several years before noticing that there was any problem. I did notice that my personal motivation to get up off my butt on a Saturday night was sort of flagging about two years ago, but chalked it up to tiredness and not having transportation. If I thought about it, though, part of the problem was that the dance was getting smaller and smaller and it was less and less fun. It started to feel more like an obligation than a party.

Last summer, I started going to a series of local dances to do a survey about our spring weekend, which was also dying for lack of attendance. At that time, I started to see other local dances and, as they say, the scales fell from my eyes. These other dances were packed-more than a hundred dancers-and a lot of the dancers were the same people I saw at weekends. I also noticed that whereas our local dance sold cookies for fifty cents and bottles of water for a dollar at the break, every other dance I went to had a table of free potluck food. I also noticed that there were often several people making things happen, putting away chairs, putting out food and so forth. I went back to Palo Alto and decided something had to be done. I wanted people to come to my dance and dance with me!

Many new dances were now competing with our local Saturday night dance and we had gotten a reputation for being boring and slow. The dance suffered from the "used to be" syndrome—people regularly said how great it used to be, focusing on what was lost and that it no longer was great. The dance was on a downward spiral. I have a theory: the dancers go where the dancers are. If you start to decline, it is almost a surety that you will continue to decline. Dances are really just parties. No one wants to go to a party where people aren't having fun. Walking into a dance hall and seeing that there aren't really many people there is sad. People don't feel jazzed and excited to be there.

In a conversation with Alan Winston and Jim Saxe, two longtime dancers and organizer types, after

a dance, we started to formulate a plan. I felt strongly that the dance needed to go from being run by one couple to being a community event. Eric Black and Diane Zingale, who had been running it for literally decades were burnt out and frustrated by the lack of help from others. So, with the assistance of Alan and Jim, I scheduled a meeting to get people together to make a plan. We gave out invitations to scores of people and had about twenty over to my house for a potluck and meeting in September 2009. We had a good, honest discussion about what the dance needed and some consensus came out of the meeting. More importantly, six committees with eighteen people on them were created and a plan was set in motion.

First and foremost, we changed the food situation. We now have a potluck table at each dance, where people bring snacks or donate a few dollars. Another dancer stepped up to be "food diva" and keeps track of our supplies and supplements the potluck offerings by shopping for chips, fruit and other snacks.

The next really important change was to mix up the faces at the front desk. We did away with the old practice of having people sit out two dances for half price entry. Since we have a "pay as you can" policy, this really made no sense and it was hard to get people to sit at the door. Therefore, the manager didn't really get to dance and no one wanted to manage. By asking for multiple people to sit out only one dance, we get a variety of people helping out and managing is not so odious. We now have seven managers and each manage once every three months, which is not that big a burden for anyone to carry. Further, door-sitting is an easy volunteer job that people can do and feel like they are contributing to the dance community, which they are.

We started aggressively working on programming, limiting the "local" caller to once a quarter to bring in more variety and actively pursuing special talent for special events. Multiple people working on this process (a committee of six) has really brought in fresh talent and energy. I also started working on getting a variety of sound people in to share the load and have a variety of faces on the dance floor.

We always had fairly good external publicity, continued on page 12

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but we decided to focus a little on the material we were handing out. My husband found club cards in local cafes—small (two inch by three inch) cards that are laminated and full color and he started making a club card for our local dance that is appealing and concise, can fit in a pocket and is easy to pass out to dancers. These are a great visual cue and calendar of our dances. A Facebook invite also goes out for each dance and gets quickly disseminated to a great number of people. For the younger generation, Facebook is a central way of keeping their calendar.

One of the big turning points was when I started creating an email for the dance itself. Each week I ask people directly if they want to be on our local email list and I put together an email detailing the next dance and send it out on the Monday or Tuesday before the next Saturday dance. We are competing with lots of other events in people's lives and need to be in the front of their minds. I also have made a point of talking to newcomers and getting their email address to send a follow-up email to them as well as adding them to our regular list. I also hand them each a club card and a sheet with our Facebook page, email address, website and my phone number. This contact seems to help keep them coming back.

I have made a very conscious effort lately to really work with newcomers too. We always did have lots of newcomers, thanks to Diane's publicity work, but although they would come once, they wouldn't come back. Now I make sure that they all get partners, that the regulars are aware of who's sitting down, that we really notice the gender balance so that if we are short of men, the experienced women dance together or ask the newcomers to dance with us. We actively help them to learn how to ask people to dance and make sure they are only sitting out voluntarily.

Now, one year later, the dance is on a serious upward spiral. We have raised our "normal" attendance from thirty-five to forty-five a year ago to fifty to sixty now. We can pull in a hundred people at a special dance. The load is being shared around and the dance feels a lot more exciting. Newcomers are coming back and bringing their friends. We have some families attending and I hear lots of positive things from all over. We have more to do, but it feels like we are definitely on track.

I think one key is to have one or more people who are jazzed and willing to commit to organizing people, then a core group who are willing to do the footwork. It is important to be able to direct and manage people. Teachers seem really suited to telling others what to do. I now call myself "Chief Cat-

herder." Teachers also are really good at "borrowing" ideas from other people. I would like to note that many of these ideas were not mine. I thank Karen Fontana in Hayward for her input and have stolen lots of things I have seen at other dances. Another really important key to success came from a talk with Jim Saxe about what happened when his squares series was dying. Jim said something really important—don't ask people to come to the dance out of a sense of commitment or obligation. People will come if it is fun. So I try at all times to have a "no guilt" philosophy. We are all here to have fun. Do what you can for the dance, but don't worry if you can't do much. No guilt. Just make it fun and they'll come back.

(*Toronto*, continued from page 11)

Members of Toronto Women's Sword have returned to our practice schedule with inspiration, creativity, and commitment. We welcomed the opportunity to showcase our dancing, learn through watching and interacting with other dancers, and develop ideas for future development.

Formed in 1988, Toronto Women's Sword performs traditional English hilt-and-point dances such as longsword and rapper sword. TWS is the first Canadian group dedicated to the preservation and promotion of English traditional sword dance. The team is committed to increasing awareness through regular performances and encourages accessibility by making it open to interested members of the Toronto area. Over the last two decades, TWS has had the privilege of performing their dances throughout Canada, the eastern United States, and England.



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