“Intergenerationality” in the Dance Community

by Lily Leahy, CDSS Youth Task Group

Intergenerationality: A made-up term for this article describing the state of being intergenerational.

When people ask how long I’ve been dancing I tell them “forever.” And it’s true. I suppose my first time on the dance floor was in utero. And ever since, in some way, I have been dancing. I remember attending the evening dance at a Pinewoods adult session, where my father was on staff. In our pajamas, my brother and I danced and laughed on the sidelines. When it was time for bed my mother would take us off to Pine Needles—the cabin closest to the dance pavilion—and put us to bed. The music floating through the pines as we fell asleep made everything feel safe. Years later I remember going to my first sleep-away camp that was not Pinewoods—oh, how scared I was! One of the few things that made me more comfortable was putting an English country dance tape in my Walkman and falling asleep listening to it. It’s funny how things shape us.

Dancing generations—mothers and daughters: (back row, l to r) Andra Horton and Olivia Barrand, Rose Axelrod-Adams and Karen Axelrod, Joanna, Charlene, Erica and Naomi Morse, Diane Greig and Kim Leone, Marcia and Liora Goldensher, Luisa Granitto and Gemma Smith, Mary and Amy Briggs; (front row) Lily Leahy and Deborah Kruskal, Maggie Beaton and Deb Small, Violeta Foster and Barbara Russell, Kari and Claire Xiu Yu Smith; Pinewoods 2007. Photo by Arthur Ferguson; used with permission.

At this past summer’s Fourth of July Boston Centre Session at Pinewoods (my twenty-seventh year) it came to my attention that there were twelve intergenerational groups at camp—ten mother-daughter pairs, and two father-son pairs. (A happy aside I might add is that there was a thirteenth pairing, unbeknownst to most, as I was carrying my own offspring, safe and sound within.) Being at an adult session I found this large number quite impressive—especially considering that I had been to this weekend all my life and never encountered quite so much intergenerationality before. Each of the parents had been dancing for years and had in turn brought their children up doing the same—with perhaps one exception in which dance and song came to the entire family at once. The ages of the “children” ranged from roughly four to thirty. (I won’t attempt to speculate the ages of the parents.) Many of the younger generation I grew up with. They were my peers from family camp or were younger children I had played with and watched while they grew up. I was particularly touched to see one of the daughters, at the all-important age of thirteen. This girl I had known since birth, had played with, babysat for, and watched grow—and was now very much a part of the dance community. She spent many hours of the weekend babysitting and watching the two smallest of the children, just as I had with her.

There were also young people at this session who were somewhat new to the scene and it interested me to find out what they felt about it. I enjoyed observing them throughout the session, this group of teenagers that all found each other almost immediately and hung out through the weekend. But what I enjoyed most was watching them interact with all of the generations at camp. We all took the same classes, we all danced in the evening together and sure, occasionally a group of teens would leave the dance during a slow English set, to go hang out on the dock, but they always showed up again at the party, or to make the last dance, to become part of the whole. It is this

intergenerational aspect that I have always found so appealing about this community.

CDSS and its affiliates have been very concerned with attracting and keeping youth involved. After all, we "youth" are the future and will be the ones to carry on the traditions. But I think it is important to remember that not only do we need to find ways in which to bring in the youth and keep them interested, but to find ways in which to show them the importance of intergenerationality. I consider myself lucky to have grown up in such a community and to have been shown this all my life. But what about the youth who have come to this community in other ways? How can we show them this importance? The scholarship program that Pinewoods Camp offers, with CDSS, seems to be a great opportunity. By "inviting" youth to attend adult sessions at camp, we are bringing in young people that may never have attended Pinewoods otherwise and are introducing them to a scene which is rich in tradition and intergenerationality.

Two of the teens at the July Fourth weekend were on scholarships. Neither had been to Pinewoods before but both had been dancing in the Boston area, mainly hanging out with kids their own age at contra dances or rapper practice. Watching them embrace the entire program and branch out to interact with all generations was like a breath of fresh air—and quite gratifying.

Because dancing has always been such a family affair, I find I have done very little in this community without my parents. Later in the summer I attended my first Pinewoods session without them. This seemed like a scary step for me. But of course, I was not completely alone. How could I ever be alone in a community that has nurtured me? I suppose this is the ultimate satisfaction for parents such as my own. To see their offspring actually choose, on their own, to do what they had always hoped they would do: to carry on the tradition.

The biggest and perhaps scariest step of all for me was joining the CDSS Governing Board. Embarrassingly enough, when I was up for nomination I was notified that I wasn't even a member of CDSS! How could this be? Well, I had always had a family membership and failed to notice that here I was, an adult, without a membership of my own. Of course I remedied that immediately and did my best to cover up my shame.

Happily, I can report that there is a handful of youth who will not make the same mistake I did. They are the seniors who graduated last June from Great Meadows Morris and Sword, a teen rapper and morris group run by my father, Tom Kruskal. The parents this year racked their brains trying to come up with a way to thank Tom for teaching the last four years. The experience had been so rewarding for their children, they wanted something that would be really meaningful to him. My mother was the one who finally came up with the gift idea and passed it along to the group. Each graduating senior was given a year's membership to CDSS by their parents as a way to thank Tom for helping introduce them into the community and to try and ensure that this group of youth stays involved even after they leave the nest.

Being "involved" doesn't have to mean joining a board, as I did. It simply means staying connected and continuing to do what you love; introducing a friend to dancing perhaps and keeping it alive, even if you're miles away from your home community. CDSS is a national organization, let's not forget, and it is trying it's best to help people create their own dance communities wherever they are. But while doing so, it is my hope that they won't forget the importance of intergenerationality and the wonderful cycle of learning that passes from one generation to the next. After all, we youth won't be young forever and one day we will find ourselves having a harder time leaping off the floor, and will feel the need to teach that morris caper or favorite song to a new generation.

Lily Leahy is a CDSS Board member and member of its Youth Task Group, She dances with Orion Longsword and attends contra and English country dances in the Boston area; she has also been active with Revels, Inc. productions and recordings. Lily coordinates an afterschool program, bringing to it the music, dance and drama that she learned at Family Weeks at Pinewoods.

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