

# Contra Dancing, the Next Generation— NEFFA Workshops

by *Brian Gallagher and Julia Nickles*

**NEFFA**—Also known as the New England Folk Festival, is a fabulous blend of dance, music, crafts and food from many lands. The 2008 Festival, to be held on April 25-27 at Mansfield High and Middle Schools in Mansfield, Massachusetts, will be the sixty-fourth annual Festival.

**The Next Generation**—A broad term for the younger age range generally underrepresented at contra dances and other folk events. This usually includes preteens, teens and college students as well as dancers in their twenties and early thirties. (Also a Star Trek series.)

**Contra Dancing**—The folk tradition we know and love.



Artwork by Julia Nickles; used with permission.

The room was full and plenty more people couldn't get in the door, but it wasn't a dance or song workshop—just a discussion! What topic could draw this NEFFA crowd away from their dancing?

In a 2007 workshop entitled "Contra Dancing, the Next Generation," we (two twenty-something dance organizers) spoke about getting younger participants involved in local contra dance. Given the size of the crowd in attendance, the topic seems to be relevant to many regions and communities. We presented some of our findings and then spent more than half of our session answering questions on this extremely broad topic. Here are some of the tips and insights we shared:

- First and foremost, when trying to attract younger dancers to your event, there are certain terms that you must avoid. Do not refer to your dance as "folk dance" or compare it in any way to square dancing. Not only do words like these evoke mental images of a pastime that is far from "cool," many younger dancers were forced to do an approximation of these traditions in middle school gym class—and very few look upon these times favorably. This presents a new challenge: how can you advertise a contra dance when we have just outlawed all convenient ways to describe it? The answer is to simply avoid describing it as much as possible. At Brown, Julia has had much success with posters sporting catchy slogans like "Ants? Pants? Contra Dance!" The less information, the better, since the best way to learn about contra dance is, of course, to do it.
- Charging students and other younger dancers money for admission is not generally a deterrent, but higher price tags certainly can be. College students may not have more than five dollars in their pockets, but they will probably be willing to part with this much. If it is feasible for your dance, a special student price can signal community acceptance of younger dancers and help to make them feel welcome.
- Affiliation with a college or university has definite advantages and disadvantages. A dance

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on a campus is likely to attract students who would be deterred from traveling even a short distance to a local dance. In addition, many campus-based dances enjoy partial or total funding from their schools as well as free use of facilities. On the other hand, university politics can be a headache and space reservations challenging to come by. Most schools will require a student leader to be at the head of the project before they will provide any of these contributions. Student leadership is a fantastic thing (see below), but it can also be a challenge for dances with a less established student constituency due to the transient nature of the college experience.

- Existing dance communities and experienced dancers can be a great resource. Incorporating newer (and younger) dancers into existing communities or bringing existing dancers to newer (and younger) dances helps to preserve the dance tradition and allows for quicker learning. For many students and younger dancers, the intergenerational makeup of contra dance communities is a new experience. At Julia and Brian's discussion, some members of older generations wondered how to avoid scaring off younger dancers who are reluctant to dance with people decades older. While Brian and Julia do not have the final answer on the matter, both agree that this issue usually resolves itself with time and patience.

- Once younger dancers make regular appearances at your dance, this is just the first step. In order to ensure a future for these beloved folk traditions, this "next generation" must find a place in dance community and leadership. There are many ways to achieve this. College students may be interested in leadership opportunities, and always incorporating younger students in your organization allows continuity across years. While it can sometimes be hard to involve these younger dancers, appreciate small gestures such as sweeping the floor. Ask for and offer the little things—this builds community and responsibility! Holding open board meetings, well-advertised ones at that, can be very helpful, especially if you make an effort to invite the younger dancers! Have food or even make the meeting happen right before the dance or at the break. All of this helps to safeguard the future of contra dancing.

To talk more about this and to ask your own questions, feel free to come to Brian and Julia's discussion at NEFFA 2008. You can also contact them at [gallagb@gmail.com](mailto:gallagb@gmail.com) and [julia.nickles@gmail.com](mailto:julia.nickles@gmail.com).

*Brian Gallagher, 27, is a middle school educator at a boys' school in Western Massachusetts who has danced up and down the East Coast and all over the Midwest for the last six years. Brian was asked to join the CDSS Youth Task Group in 2007 and has been nominated for the CDSS board. His degree in Anthropology has helped him be a non-biased observer in many contra and folk communities.*

*Julia Nickles, 23, is in her fifth (and final!) year at Brown University, and her fourth year of organizing Brown's contra dance, one of the most successful college-based contra dances in the country. As the dance organizer she books bands and callers, helps young callers get started, and cultivates dance community, and oversees endless other behind-the-scenes details. Early on, she initiated a new advertising strategy, which has doubled attendance at the dance and increased student participation fourfold.*

*Julia and Brian have been dancing together for four years, and have worked on youth issues in contra dance for much of that time, presenting workshops on this topic at NEFFA and at Pinewoods weeks. Together they moderate the "Contra Dancers" group on the social networking site Facebook, which boasts over fifteen hundred members, mostly students. Currently, they are working to host a dance weekend aimed at dancers under thirty-five (those who least frequently attend such events) to be held September 12-14, 2008 in Vermont.*

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