Dance Series + Lower Fees + Youth = Dance Series

by Jens Dill, President, Bay Area CDS

Ten years ago, we were struggling with concerns about the longterm viability of our dances in the San Francisco Bay area. Attendance at our dances was dwindling, our population of regular dancers was aging, and several competing dances had started up in the surrounding area. The general answer was obvious: we needed to do a better job of recruiting and retaining new dancers, especially younger ones.

We started by talking. For several years, the Board of Directors scheduled annual all-day "intensive" brainstorming meetings, often inviting participation from dance managers, regular dancers, and some of our more vocal critics. When CDSS Youth Intern, Ethan Hazzard-Watkins, passed through the area in 2009, we took him up on his offer to hold a meeting to discuss youth recruiting and related issues, and invite representatives from all the regional country dance societies. These meetings were highly successful: lots of ideas put forward, lots of connections forged, but not very fruitful. It was hard to find volunteers to do the work and not much of a gain from the things we did manage to do.

But the discussion did work in a way. It raised awareness about the experience of contra dancing, with the real result of an overall improvement in making our dances friendly and welcoming to newcomers. There is an emphasis now at our dances on greeting newcomers, making sure they get experienced partners, and helping them learn, and there's a lot more emphasis on being willing to dance the "other" role if the gender balance is off; this has been helped enormously by the local popularity of genderfree dances.

The key breakthrough came without our being aware of it. One of our local musicians asked us to institute a special student price for our Berkeley dance so that he could encourage more of his on-campus friends to come to the dance. We tried it, as we were trying lots of other ideas, and it worked. (It worked at that dance, but not at our other dances in Palo Alto and San Francisco, even though they were just as close to a major university campus.)

What we learned is that special youth pricing doesn't work just by itself. You have to get the word out. You have to buttonhole people, one by one, and sell them on the event. Once they are (a) aware of it, and (b) think it might be fun, then the fact that there's a special discount price for them ("They want me!") kicks in and seals the deal. But just putting the price in your publicity materials doesn't often make the sale. The fellow who brought the idea to the Board also acted as a recruiter, bringing his friends, some of whom brought their friends, until the youth presence was a self-sustaining element of the dance.

I can't emphasize it enough. Set your youth price, and then get out there and sell it to people. The golden key is finding people with the charisma and drive to bring a group of their friends along with them. Once you have a core group of young people, they will help bring in more. And when you get them, get them involved—invite them onto the Board, ask if they are interested in learning to run the sound equipment, put them in charge of something. Not all will respond, but the ones that do are the leaders of the future.

Our youth price policy at regular dances is to charge about half the going nonmember rate, proportionally more if we have a "special" dance with a higher door price). We define youth as under thirty or with a valid student ID.

The next successful thing we did was to offer youth scholarships at our camps and weekends. Sharon Green, who took the reins of our Fall Frolick dance weekend, proposed offering free admission to young people and pay for it by soliciting for donations from the more well-to-do campers. We admitted the young people as work-traders, which meant that the scholarships only had to cover the lower work-trade admission rate. It worked. This year, we ended up with twice as many youth scholarship applicants as budgeted for. Sharon put out an email solicitation for more donations to cover the scholarship costs and had pledges in hand within twenty-four hours.

Some of our other weekends opted for a more modest policy. Our urban contra weekend advertises a youth price of about half the full admission, and doesn't tie it to work-trade. But the young people are eligible to apply for a $25 work-trade discount, which brings the admission price down into the pocket change range. If they're willing to take on a double work-trade job (working most of Saturday afternoon in the kitchen cooking dinner, or the like), they can get in essentially for free. In the first year of the camp, we had some very efficient recruiters, and now we have a core of young people on our committee and in the extended volunteer crew who pass the word to their friends.

For our weeklong summer camps we worked through the CDSS Youth Scholarship program, where

young people get free admission funded in equal shares by CDSS and by their home dance organization, which sponsors their application.
So we got a handful of youth scholars each year for each of our camps.

It wasn't enough when the recession hit. At one point, we were about a month away from the start of our American Dance and Music Week, and looking at a registration shortfall that would have us losing on the order of twenty thousand dollars (twenty-five to thirty campers). Our Board looked at the situation, and decided to go ahead with camp and make a last minute effort to recruit a couple of dozen additional young people, offering them free admission in exchange for their participation in a workshop focused on how to make camp more attractive to young people. Sam Weiler, who has worked with the CDSS Youth Dance Weekends, was one of the key leaders of that workshop.

It was a success. The young people brought energy and excitement to camp, the workshop produced useful ideas, and the whole experience revived the camp and put it on a new footing. Our twenty thousand dollars loss became an investment in the future.

American Week now has a sliding scale of admissions with three different prices for three different age groups, with the upper bracket basically covering their food and lodging costs, and the younger ones paying less. This year, American Week had close to thirty percent young people, and the camp rocked!

Paying the youth price at American Week also puts you on the work-trade crew, which is now much less work, since there are so many people on the crew and we've moved to a location where we don't have to clean the bathrooms. But the work-trade piece is important. It provides an extra way for the young people to bond as a team, and it gives them a share of running the camp that is both rewarding to them personally and good training for future dance community leadership. It's important to give the young work-traders as much responsibility as they can handle, which also happens to ease some of the load from the older-and-tireder volunteer crew.

It's also important to note that young people are much more likely to sign up for camp at the very last minute. It's not unknown for someone to learn about camp the night before it starts, and even if camp is not full, getting them signed up and in can be a bit of extra trouble. But it's worth it, and the youth price makes it possible.

Our Spring Fever dance weekend also took a look at the advice from the American Week youth workshop. The young people at the workshop said they'd rather pay an affordable price than get a completely free ride. Youth scholarship donations were solicited to make up the difference between the youth rate and the work-trade rate, and the young people were added to the work-trade team. By this time, we had pretty good leads on where to do our youth recruiting, and it worked. The weekend was full of youth energy, and we have great hopes for the future.

At the Board level, we've also been busy. We've set up three new internal funds for collecting donations for youth scholarships, musician scholarships, and need-based scholarships. Our membership and most of our camp and weekend registration forms now include a section soliciting donations for these scholarship funds, which can be used to bail out a camp that has more youth scholars apply than it can fund from its own donations. These funds are relatively new, and I don't yet have a sense of their impact on the finances of the organization. Most camps are still managing to cover their youth scholars with donations they collect from their own campers.

In response to the recent recession, we added a "or pay what you can" policy to the admission pricing for our regular dances. It's something that doesn't often get used, although some of the longterm unemployed use it regularly. It's a way of letting people know that the community is more important than money.

About half of our camps and weekends have a special rate for the unemployed or financially needy. The net result is we get a fuller, more exciting camp that will attract more people next time. So far, I haven't seen signs that it's being abused. The committees for our annual balls and special dances haven't done as much with youth or need-based discounts; the pricing of these events tends to still be affordable, and there's less of a need for work-traders. For our big balls, we've got a tradition of "angels" paying the admission price for people who they think should attend but might be in financial need. So far, we haven't put a more formal program in place there.

We're still learning as we go, but we're quite happy with what we've learned so far, and we think that a properly-supported youth scholarship program can be an excellent investment.

Parts of this article were posted on the English Country Dance Discussion List in October 2011; our thanks to Jens Dill for adapting and expanding it for us. To learn more about Bay Area Country Dance Society, a longtime CDSS affiliate, see their website.