

“Don’t Stop Dancing,” author tells symposium

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Recently author and CDSS member Judy Chaves demonstrated the ageless benefits of dancing with the help of members of a retirement community.

English country dance made its debut the last week of March 2012 at the University of Vermont’s annual Gerontology Symposium, a gathering for elder service providers in Vermont. As part of the Symposium’s showcase of “new ideas for engaging elders in social and creative activities,” I gave a presentation on English country dancing (ECD) that included 11 members of the ECD class at Wake Robin, a retirement community in Shelburne, Vermont. This is a group that Val Medve and I have been teaching for seven years and was featured in a Summer 2010 CDSS *News* article (“[Cheers for the Canoneers!](#)”) and formed the basis of a guidebook to teaching ECD to older adults that CDSS recently published ([Don’t Stop Calling!](#)). The average age of the group is 82; its oldest member is 91.

When I originally approached the organizer of the Symposium with the idea of a dance demonstration, I’d imagined us performing during a break, squeezed into a hallway alongside vendors, hoping to catch the attention of attendees wandering by. So it was exciting to be asked to do an actual presentation in front of the full conference audience. ECD was one of three “new ideas” presented, in addition to fitness hooping and slow yoga.

Our presentation began with a brief performance of “Old Wife Behind the Fire.” I then spoke of the many benefits that dance in general has for older adults: physical benefits, like lowering blood pressure and preventing osteoporosis; social and emotional benefits, like prevention of depression and reduction of stress; and mental benefits, like decreasing the likelihood of developing dementia. I also spoke of benefits specific to ECD: its being so very social and cooperative an activity, equally welcoming to individuals and couples, and great for an age group that can often feel isolated. And I spoke of the considerable mental activity ECD entails, the very sort of decision-making that’s been shown to ward off dementia.

With the dancers back on the floor, I explained the basic workings of a typical duple minor so the audience could see exactly how these social and mental benefits come about. I explained how the progression causes dancers to engage with everyone in the group, and how it requires dancers to think and make on-the-spot decisions throughout the dance by causing them to execute the complicated patterns continually with new people, in new positions, and in new roles.

We then danced a bit of “Portsmouth,” to illustrate the pattern of a hey for three, and, after I explained what a canon is, we danced a couple of times through “John Tallis’s Canon,” to show just how complicated things could get! Any doubt I had as to whether the audience understood what was going on was erased when I later watched the [video taken of the group](#) doing the “Canon” at the Symposium, and realized you can actually hear the audience’s delight when the dance begins its second time through and everyone is in the right place, at the right time!

Audience questions focused on how to start up such a class: what resources were available; the minimum number of participants needed. I assured them that they’d be able to find ECD folks all over Vermont, New England, and the country (CDSS was listed on their handout of resources), and that most people with ECD-teaching experience would be happy to be invited to take on such a project. Perhaps some of us will get calls!

The Wake Robin folks and I drove home from the Symposium feeling elated. Not only had the group totally aced the three dances (“That was awesome!” someone from the audience shouted when “John Tallis” was done), but the delight in the room had been palpable: delight at the dances and music, and delight at the clear potential ECD held for older adults.

Gerontology Symposium, held March 20, 2012 in Burlington, VT. Sponsored by The [Center on Aging](#) at The University of Vermont.