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Some thoughts on attracting new dancers

The following is an edited version of a letter sent by Andrew Carnie to Helen Winkler in Toronto, after a discussion about attracting new dancers. The original (unedited) letter was published in the Ontario Folkdancer Magazine. This version differs in that it has been edited by the author to make it more appropriate for publication in *Let's Dance!*

To the editor, *Let's Dance!* magazine

Hi Helen,

Allow me to give you some background on our situation here in Tucson.

Tucson is a pretty elderly city; we are a place where many snowbirds come in the winter. In the summer, our population is around 400,000. In the winter it doubles. When I got here in 1998 there was one folkdance group in town: The Tucson Folkdance Club, which was rarely getting more than seven people. Now we have three groups (TFDC, which now focuses mainly on intermediate and advanced dances and gets around 10-15 people) The lighthouse YMCA club, which gets twenty on a bad night and thirty on a good night, and the University I-dance club, whose attendance numbers vary wildly depending on the time of year). At the beginning of terms we can expect 15-20. I currently run the lighthouse club. I founded the I-dance club, but was overwhelmed at work, so gave it up to another dancer about a year ago.

I have to admit I'm fairly autocratic in the way I run the lighthouse group and in how I used to run the I-dance club. That is, there are no committees and I make all the decisions, but I let people voice their opinions any time. This seems to work ok, although I know I can't keep everyone happy.

The university group is at least partly a fluke. In 2000, the Turkish Students' association here (which was very strong; they all went back to Turkey after 9/11) decided that they wanted to perform at our local heritage festival. One of them had taken a class with me and knew I went folkdancing so asked me to come and help. Along with another local folkdance teacher, I did a series of dance workshops with their community. First, we did a series of participatory dances. Then, with a smaller group, we also did some choreographies. The group of students that ended up being involved with this wasn't just Turks, but many of their friends, including a Colombian, a Russian, two Albanians, a Greek, a Costa Rican, etc. After the heritage festival, they decided that they wanted to have their own folkdance group. Many of them had tried the TIFDC and had trouble with the group, for reasons I'll try to articulate below. About a month later we had an open house and the I-dance club was born.

My other group, the Lighthouse Y club, started with a beginners class for Y members. However, it actually caught the attention a lot of former folkdancers (presumably through word of mouth), who had given up on folkdancing. Now they are back in full force. This group is actually the most stable (and fun) group in town in my opinion.

I think that the following are crucial for making a University club with young people work. I know that many of these ideas will be very unpopular with older more experienced dancers, but I feel if we can provide a venue for both

kinds of dancers (as we do here) then both communities can be served. Some of these ideas I came up with on my own, some are stolen from the Old World Dance Co-op, run by Rick King in Detroit.

1) You need a quorum or cadre of people in the right age group. When a young person shows up at FD these days and sees nothing but gray hair, they have a tendency to leave. A sufficient number of young people in the group is crucial. For getting this initial group, I'd suggest (a) offering classes at the University. Contacting the ethnic clubs on campus and seeing if they'd like to learn their dances, etc. (b) it never hurts to try youth groups at the JCC, etc.

2) One thing that seems to attract younger people is the possibility of performance. If you tie participating in the recreational dancing to being an integral part of a performance troupe (but not vice versa of course), it can really help.

3) Avoid the word "folkdancing" at all costs. We use "international dance club". For some reason the term folk dancing has very negative associations for many people.

4) Take the level of dancing way down. At the I-dance club, we rarely do dances with more than one or two figures. Here's the program that I used at our last open house: Zemer Atik, Savila Se Bela Loza, Kingston Flyer, Pata Pata, Istanbul Bar, Gori More, La Bastringue, Carnavalito, Ve David and Lesnoto.

The Y club is a little more advanced. I try to keep the program for that group really varied in level, with a gradual progression through the evening. My regulars know that when a new person shows up, I drop the level significantly for the first hour or so.

5) Keep the energy level of the dances higher that you would expect. Experienced folkdancers like to do a lot of slow pretty dances. New young dancers want to skip around.

6) No "crunchy" music. If you have a choice between a rock-and-roll version and a traditionally instrumented one, choose the rock-version. Once you have people hooked, then you can try to refine their tastes in music to more traditional sounds.

7) Mood lighting. If possible dance in a darkened room.

8) Couple and set dances. These tend to have fallen out of favor in most IFD communities, but they really are a draw to the under thirty crowd. (At MIT we used to offer an annual waltz workshop that was very well attended by students who wanted to learn how to waltz for their formals.) Mixers are really important.

9) Ethnic diversity. My heart is in Macedonia, but theirs is not. I really try to teach a real ethnic mix. I include dances from Scotland, England and USA (I call a couple of simple contras and squares). We've done Salsa (which was very popular). Where possible I've tried to bring in Asian dances, although they haven't stuck very well (which is funny because many of our dancers are Asian). We still do plenty of Balkan/Israeli, but I think they like the spice. My rule is one in five dances is a couple/set.

10) If you have some members who are particularly good at talking to people, set them up as the "official greeters", people who go over and welcome people in.

11) For advertising, try the international student clubs and the international student office at the university, they may have a computerized internet listserv. We get TONS of students from that. We also blanket the dorms with posters.

12) General attitude: I've found that it is important to get people moving and dancing. I teach styling but I don't emphasize it. Also the MAXIMUM time for a teach should be less than five minutes. If it takes more than five minutes to teach, then it belongs to the hard core group, not in the student club. I also try not to let there be significantly long breaks between dances. I have found that using my computer with mp3 files really helps with this because I can set up playlists.

13) Make it free. Our student club is free to everyone. We ask for donations in the summer to pay for air conditioning. We're fairly lucky in that the campus Catholic church lets us use their basement for free. The YMCA lets us use their gym provided we let Y members in for free; non-Y members pay \$15 a month.

14) Have free food. Students love free food.

15) I get the students to lead. I almost never lead dances. (Although I always stay nearby to coach if necessary!)

16) Students want to party, right? So don't schedule folkdancing during their favorite party times. Students have to study, right? So don't schedule folkdancing during prime study times. The student group here meets Fridays from five to seven pm. The Y club meets Tuesdays seven to nine. Neither goes late enough to interfere with student party/study plans. The student club used to meet on Saturday mornings. That nearly killed me but it seemed to work as well.

17) Keep it simple. I said it above. Our U club never really makes that much forward progress in level. It's always pretty much a beginner group.

However, I do encourage the more experienced dancers to try out the Y club and I still encourage the student club to perform. I have access to a fair number of costumes through our other performance group here. And I get the students to perform at least once a semester. There is an international student dinner where we perform regularly.

Now you may be saying "But these are rank beginners..." Well, many of them are. But I've found that hard footwork dances are not very interesting to watch anyway, so I've been working on choreographies that move a lot, with showy costumes. People rarely notice that the students aren't all on the same foot! You'd be surprised what you can do with a group of inexperienced dancers.

18) Play the music two settings louder than you personally like. It makes a big difference in the energy.

Best—Andrew Carnie

Andrew Carnie started out dancing in Calgary, Alberta, continuing in Toronto when he attended U of T, and has danced & taught at various places including MIT, Detroit (OWDC), Ann Arbor and Santa Cruz. He's presently dancing in Tucson, where he's an Associate Professor of Linguistics at the University of Arizona.

Bulletin:

Dancing at Max's Farm!

The tradition of July 4th and Labor Day dancing at Max's Farm will continue! Details to follow, but right now we need some volunteers to help with set up and other odd jobs. Please contact Mel Mann at meldancing@aol.com.

Anyone know how to make sticky buns?

Let's Dance! — May/June, 2006

BACDS Plans For Mendocino

By Sharon Green

Here's another option for those wanting an intense dance & music & party camp experience this summer: consider one of the two dance weeks offered at Mendocino Woodlands by the Bay Area Contra Dance Society.

American Week, July 1-5, offers contras & squares with Cis Hinkle & George Marshall (of Wild Asparagus fame), couple dancing with the illustrious Richard Powers, clogging with Kyla Brooke, singing with Margaret Ann Martin (who was a great hit when we were on staff at Mainwoods last summer) and the music of Footloose, KGB, and Mary Lea and Jim Oakden.

English Week, July 8-15. I have an incredible staff--Helene Corneliuss, the wonderful leader of CDS Boston Center's English program; Robin Hayden from Amherst, who led this November's BACDS Fall Ball; Tom Kruskal, founder of remarkable display dance teams for young people that have transformed Morris and rapper dancing back East; Robert Moir from England, a fine Playford teacher; Shira Kammen leading workshops in singing and band; plus New York's The Flying Romanos, Mary Lea and Jim Oakden from American Week, and our own Noel Cragg, Charlie Hancock, and that grand master of the piano, Chuck Ward. Far more workshops than anyone could possibly handle, plus late night ventures into couple dancing and international folk.

For more info, see www.bacds.org or sharongreen@post.harvard.edu

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