

Puttin' on the Dance: Field Report

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By: Max Newman

I'm pleased to bring you a report from the recent Northeast Organizers Conference, [Puttin' on the Dance](#).



Why a Conference?

This conference is the latest of a series of conferences for organizers that CDSS has helped sponsor in the last few years. I was privileged to attend the [Southeast Dance Leadership Conference](#) last year. These conferences have provided an opportunity for organizers of contra, English, and community/family dances to get together and create a shared discourse. Why might dance organizers want and need a conference like this? The Puttin' on the Dance mission statement gives a concise explanation:



[I]t is absolutely crucial to support those dance organizers, whose commitment of personal resources (time, energy, spirit, and sometimes money) manifests in such positive ways. We are thrilled that the Puttin' On the Dance conference can be a vehicle for nourishing many of the people who are dedicated to "puttin' on the dance" in their own home

Attendees collaborate on volunteer ideas, in this case "How do you train your volunteers?"

That is to say, under the veneer of a volunteer effort, organizing a dance is a lot of demanding, complicated work, usually orchestrated by those caller/organizer Ralph Sweet has been quoted as calling "the overactive 10%". It's also fairly isolated. Dance organizers don't get much of a chance to talk shop.

There are so many details that go into making a dance happen and it is essential to find ways to share the burden. David Millstone shared an amusing anecdote about the Nelson, NH dance, where every week they make the announcement "Who's bringing cookies next week?" Often a volunteer emerges, but if silence ensues, the announcement is made, "Ok. No cookies, no dance." Invariably someone volunteers for cookies and the Nelson dance continues.

After seeing two conferences, I can say they are a vital idea — a time and place to give and receive support, share ideas, make helpful contacts, and elevate the level of the discussion. Conference organizer Linda Henry described how attending the [2009 conference](#) in Virginia helped her go from being about ready to give up on her dance to figuring out new and better ways to make it happen.

Here's what it was like for me....

Getting There

I arrived at Puttin' on the Dance, pulling up to the Hotel Coolidge in White River Junction, the lovely building the conference was taking over for the weekend. I had been asked to lead presentations on promoting youth participation and intergenerationality, based on my experience being the Youth Projects Intern at CDSS, so I sat in the lobby putting the finishing touches on my notes. This gave me the opportunity to watch as 78 dance organizers from throughout the Northeast United States and Canada (plus a few ringers from farther afield) converged. These were organizers of small



dances, big dances, contra dances, English dances, family dances, gender-free dances, college dances, and dance weekends. As a musician who has visited a lot of the Northeast, it felt to me like we had a quorum of the Northeast here.

Emily Addison (of Ottawa) and Alex Krogh-Grabbe (of MA) give their joint presentation "To Facebook and Beyond: Online Marketing for Dance Series".

There was a lot to discuss over the next few days and the anticipation of jumping into discussion was palpable. Organizing dances is usually a volunteer affair, but it's almost a job, with a lot of things to keep track of. There are a host of questions from the mundane to the philosophical. (How do you organize a committee? How do you keep up attendance? What do you do when an emergency arises? What is your *vision*?)

Dinner conversation was animated and energized, which continued to be the case at meals throughout the conference. And the plentiful amounts of tea and coffee became most welcome as the weekend wore on.

After dinner, we carpoled out to — what else? — put on a dance in local high school gym. Keeping the point of event close to our hearts, we'd also go out and dance the next night in Norwich, VT, where besides having a lot of fun in an amazingly packed hall (thanks to a huge group of high school and college students), we all got our picture taken. (See below.)

The Conference Gets Under Way

Vision. That was the topic we focused on as a group when Saturday morning began. The best organizers I know have clear (and usually written) visions and mission statements, so I was happy to see such an emphasis placed on the value of articulating a dances' vision, as well as taking some time to workshop our visions with each other.

The late Larry Jennings' wonderful and provocative writings — as in *Zesty Contras*, *Give-and-Take*, and [The Contra Connection](#) — have been an influence to me and others on the "vision" topic. His influence was particularly evident in this session. Session leader Bob Henshaw paraphrased the "Larry Jennings Principle":

- The dance belongs to the organizers, but remember that the dances are given for others. Make it what you want, if the dancers will come.
- The dance may be for others, but do it only if it gives you joy and satisfaction, or it will burn you out.

We discussed how simply saying "I want a fun dance" is not specific enough. After all, what makes it fun to you? An articulated vision is also a key way of letting the callers, musicians, and especially dancers buy into making the dance together.



One of the "rules" of the un-conference session.

Afterwards, I headed off to lead my session, *Promoting Youth Participation: Ideas and Practical Tips*, where I presented a number of concepts I'd learned and developed as CDSS Youth Intern. Seventy minutes to present meant a brain-dump of information. I talked about NYC's post-dance diner culture (which seems to have really helped attendance) and the hands on role organizers can (should?) take with fostering the next generation of callers and musicians. I also touched on pay-what-you-can sliding scale pricing structures that might better accommodate post-college youth

(who might feel less rich than college students) and how Thursday is the "hidden weekend night" for college students (since they don't really go to class on Fridays). I got through most of what I wanted to say, and those in the room also shared further great ideas.

The rest of the day proceeded with a variety of sessions. And the place was buzzing. Topics ranged from *Dance Money Mechanics* led by Rob Lindaur's (CT) to *Leading Effective Meetings* from Lisa Sieverts (NH) to *Booking and Working with the Talent* from Lisa Greenleaf (MA). There was also a track for folks interested in learning about the often-overlooked topic of sound from Tony Hernandez (CT). ([Read the full list of topics.](#)) The session leaders were all experienced and respected individuals with a lot of information to share and presentations.

The conference was also built with a several creative, collaborative, and non-hierarchical periods designed to elicit the collective knowledge of this substantial group of organizers. Open space aka the "Unconference" was one such, with breakout sessions led by whoever had a topic they were interested in.

On Sunday, I co-led a discussion on intergenerationality, of which, perhaps 10% was spent saying that 9-syllable word. If my session yesterday had been about the practical questions of getting more "young" people, today was dealing with the more philosophical. The fact that the conference had a significant age range helped as we collectively encountered a number of interesting and (to me) tough questions, such as "What is it like to be judged because of your age?"



We wrote down a goal we wanted to be held accountable for and folded that into a paper airplane. We then became responsible for checking in on the person's airplane we picked up.

I then presented with David Millstone on "The Dancing We Do: Past, Present, and Future!" That last one was a lot of fun, reflecting on where we've come and where we may be going in the dance community. Plus playing [Perpetual e-Motion](#) to a room full of dance organizers (to

demonstrate the use of technology in contra dance music) makes me smile.

The event ended with a session on "Bringing It All Home" led by the conference organizers — Chrissy Fowler (ME), Delia Clark (VT), Linda Henry (MA), and Mary Wesley (VT) – which focused on effectively utilizing the information from the event. There was also some paper airplane throwing (see photo).

As people left the hotel, they reported being exhausted and inspired. One challenge that was presented at the final session was to focus on one or two things. Speaking with attendees, it was clear to me that the conference had been of great value.

What did I get out of it? I learned a lot, not least about ways to make my own presentations more effective and informative. I also considered how the event I work with most closely, [Youth Dance Weekend](#), has benefited from some of the creative ideas we used and discussed and how we might incorporate other ones next year. This year, for example, we had discussion topics on tables during meals. That was directly inspired by the Southeast Dance Leadership Conference. For the next YDW, I'm thinking... paper airplanes?



Conference attendees at the Norwich, VT dance.

So what's next?

I'd been in touch with the organizers over the past year they had been putting together the conference and must say what they did (and what attendees brought) exceeded my expectations. But it's not over. There are several ways in which the momentum continues.

- Sharing the collective knowledge
- Notes from the conference are being compiled and will be posted on the [website](#). (I'll let you know.)
- More discussion
- [Shared Weight](#), a listserv co-designed by attendee Chris Weiler continues to be a resource.
- Conferences
- There are also conferences being planned elsewhere, including one in Ohio next August. (More on that later, too.)

It's an exciting thing to continue to see resources built for organizers. Let's see what happens next.

— Max

p.s. Sincere thanks to Quintin Aspin for allowing me to use his excellent photos.