



Eleanor Fahrney

## A Stellar Scholarship Adventure Changes the Lives of Youth

by Eleanor Fahrney

The fifth annual Stellar Days and Nights was held February 19-22, 2009, at Adventure Unlimited Ranches in Buena Vista, Colorado. The event featured incredible contra music by Lift Ticket (Seth Houston, Rex Blazer, TJ Johnson and Russell Shumsky) and fun swing tunes by Liz Masterson and the Augusta Swing Serenaders (Liz, Marv and Kathy Reitz, Ray Leake). David Kirchner (St. Paul, Minnesota) called contras and squares. Lindy Hop, taught by David Vinson of Denver, was enthusiastically received. Our delicious food was spearheaded by Beth Gibans of Joseph, Oregon.

In addition to the fabulous talent, this year's "Stellar" stood out from previous years because of the greater mix of participants. Forty-six percent of those attending received scholarships of varying amounts. Scholarships were offered on a need-basis<sup>1</sup> in exchange for volunteering and, in particular, to youth. When we solicited feedback after the event, a second-time participant wrote: "There is very little that I can think of as a suggestion . . . Best of all I like the scholarship program and all the young people present."

Despite the involvement of the young Arkansas Valley Music and Dance (AVMAD) board that organizes Stellar (all of us are under 40), we had low involvement of young people at our weekend over the past four years.

This year, our goal was to increase under age 35 year old participation to twenty percent of total attendance. Our brainstorm with CDSS's Youth Intern, Ethan Hazzard-Watkins, proved very helpful. Consciously working to increase youth participation was critical to getting youth to want to attend on their own. To meet our goal, we implemented a number of strategies, including:

- Because Lindy Hop is attractive to young people, make swing dance (specifically Lindy Hop) the focus of the couple dancing classes
- Convert previously paid roles (such as dining hall managers and dishwashers) to volunteer positions and recruit young people to fill those slots in exchange for full scholarships
- Enlist local young people to volunteer in key roles (such as registrar, photographer and facility support) in exchange for full scholarships
- Offer full scholarships to six youths under the age of 35 who wouldn't otherwise be able to attend
- Amp up marketing and fundraising efforts

Wendy Graham, a young caller and organizer in Durango, Colorado was our marketing and fundraising diva. She attacked the challenge with enthusiasm. In addition to implementing previous marketing tactics, including advertising on regional and national contra dance websites and emailing event reminders, Wendy advertised the dance weekend and scholarship opportunities in non-dance publications throughout Colorado and on Facebook. Her fundraising efforts also supported the weekend's

ability to fund scholarships. Fun and stylish Stellar "swag," including t-shirts, aluminum water bottles and fleece vests were offered to donors: one item for \$20, two for \$35, etc. Those who donated \$35 or more in a given day were put in a raffle drawing for CD prizes donated by the weekend's music talent.



Stellar merchandise; photo: Seth Roberts.

Our efforts to expand the weekend's scholarship-giving ability paid off and

we reached our goal! Of the 123 people who attended, twenty-four were under 35. CDSS funds paid for room and board for seven youths to attend. All of these recipients except one had not attended a music and dance camp before. In addition to the CDSS scholarships, full scholarships were given to five local high school students in exchange for washing dishes

and to three young adults for running the dining hall. Others under 35 were given significant scholarships for helping in other capacities.

The positive feedback from the CDSS scholarship recipients is overwhelming. Megan Smith is a twelfth grader, schooled at home in Poncha Springs, Colorado. She, and her two siblings, Amanda and Jacob, play fiddle, mandolin and guitar, respectively, at the monthly dance in Buena Vista (where Stellar is held). Megan wrote about her experience at Stellar:

"I learned how to swing and contra dance better, respond to my partner more efficiently... After Stellar I know that I'll never be able to look at dancing the same way. Before, it was an option. Now it's a passion. Offering scholarships and inviting kids is the best way I can think of [to get youth involved]... Jesse (the other fiddler at the community dances) already said to sign him up for next year, and a couple other friends of ours are interested, too..."

Sam Roberts, a secondary education and English major at Fort Lewis College, regularly attends the monthly Durango contra dance. He really enjoyed the quality of the music, the calling, and the dancing. He also found it valuable to connect with those in his future line of work—teaching. As a result of the weekend, Sam's writing a screenplay for a class with a scene where the characters are contra dancing and waltzing. He's also going to continue his effort to get friends and coworkers to go to his local dance. He plans to attend another weekend and says, "I probably wouldn't have gone [to Stellar], couldn't have gone, but now that I've been, I'm more apt to squirrel away money to go to a weekend."

A couple of the recipients don't regularly attend their local dances, but love contra dancing and the opportunity given to them to attend Stellar. Bryce Jennings, grandson of caller/choreographer Larry Jennings, attends University of Colorado-Boulder, and came to Stellar last year with his dad. While he had a great time, it was noticeable that he was the only person his age. Once we posted our scholarship information this year, Bryce was quick to respond. Kat Sanden, a senior at Princeton University majoring in math (with whom I collaborated on a youth event last year; see *CDSS News*, November-December 2008) wrote this about Stellar:

"I got to feel the magic in folk dancing, the magic of community and music. I loved the hip-hop contra dance<sup>2</sup> and the combination of modern movements with traditional rhythms. The best way to keep young

people involved in Stellar is to keep flooding it with *more* young people. One of the attractions to me was the fact that other college students were gonna be there. It gave me kids to relate to, kids to share the experience with. Many young people avoid contra dancing 'cause they think it's not "cool" or "hip." But when you see other fun, lively college students doing it, you suddenly see it as cool and exciting after all. The energy of young kids was building on itself during the weekend."

Cliff Fowler, a music education major—with a focus on trombone—found out about Stellar from his mother who is a contra dancer. He had never danced before but had decided he wanted to learn.

"I was stoked that everybody was so nice and welcoming—and patient," said Cliff. "No one *didn't* want to dance with me because I didn't know how. If anything, more people wanted to dance with me to help me. . . Seth, the keyboard player, showed me the ropes—showed me the melody during the open band. I thought the open band was really cool—I played trombone. The musicians were really kind—and excited to get everyone in on the music."

When asked how Stellar changed his life, Cliff said, "[It] opened my eyes to how much more fun I could be having—getting together with a community—everyone usually gets drunk until they can't walk. It made me realize there's a lot more I can be doing with my life, especially recreationally."

The week after Stellar, he took six friends to the Durango swing dance class

led by Wendy Graham. He also plans to attend the monthly Durango contra dance, would like to play in a dance band, and will probably attend another dance weekend in the future.

Despite the many successes, Stellar had several areas of growth and learning. We submitted our grant application later than hoped and received the grant from CDSS only one month before Stellar. By the time we received the grant, we were already putting women on the wait list. Though we set out to recruit "youth (under the age of 35, ideally college age)" for which our grant had been written, we advertised specifically for "young, single guys." This meant that we had to turn down several women who hoped to receive a scholarship. However, we believe that young men are less likely than young women to attend a weekend event, so targeting guys is an important approach to ensure diversity in the youth who attend. The women who received scholarships had been recruited prior to receiving the grant (in hopes of getting financial aid) due to their leadership in their communities.

The timing of the grant also complicated the financial picture. While this was the fifth anniversary of Stellar, it was only our second year "filling up" and our first year making effort to give away significant scholarships. We also were working to implement an online registration system that, while in development, limited our ability to see the total number of registrants. Before we knew it, we had granted too many scholarships for the number of full-paying people we could accommodate. Unpredicted expenses also arose at the last minute for sound and talent compensation. Donations for Stellar

Left to right: The welcoming community of Stellar; Cliff Fowler and Megan Smith at one of the Lindy Hop classes (photos: Seth Roberts). Lindy Hop instructor David Vinson, helping volunteer scholarship recipient Pat Stear (photo: Heather Barron).



gear, along with sales of photo compilation CDs, leftover food and donated clothing items, netted \$1068, more than ever before! Stellar's income from last year and the donations of 2009 participants also proved invaluable in covering this year's imbalance. We feel the momentum of youth involvement built and the lessons learned this year were well worth the financial investment.

We are already excited about next year and implementing improvements, such as how to grow our marketing and fundraising efforts. The Scholarship Coordinator has created a new and more thorough spreadsheet of the volunteer hours (and equivalent scholarship money) needed to sustainably run this event. Using that information and a reassessment of our capacity, I've been able to create a more accurate budget for next year.

David Vinson, this year's Lindy Hop teacher, is also helping spread the word amongst his swing friends about Stellar and about contra dancing. Prior to Stellar, he had never contra danced before. Although hesitant at first, he had a great time. Stellar weekend "was so fantastic for ME, on so many levels," wrote David. He was inspired to organize a "swing dancers go contra dancing" night in Denver with his friends.

As Megan Smith indicated, she is already recruiting friends in the local homeschool group for next year. Meanwhile, we have been in touch with other college students in Colorado who are interested in coming and are willing to help recruit peers. We hope that several youth who attended this year will return, paying what they can, and volunteering in exchange for the rest of the fee. We are also considering having youth help us plan and implement an event to raise funds to support other youth being able to attend Stellar.

Challenges that we anticipate for next year include keeping the event appealing to young people (next year's Stellar will include waltz and English instead of swing), continuing to adequately accommodate youth and help them get the most out

of the weekend despite school commitments (our event starts Thursday night), creating a clearer registration form and process for accommodating scholarship recipients, and increasing the participation of those in their late 20s/early 30s and of youth overall. Our goal for next year is to have forty percent of those attending be under 45. We intend to address these challenges by consulting with youth and other key players and creating solutions before our promotions go out in August.

As the lead organizer of Stellar, the journey of founding and organizing this event over the last five years has been an incredible one. I believe that starting something new, whether it's an event or a new approach at an event, requires a clear vision, a sense of purpose of why people's lives will be benefitted by that vision, and the faith that the resources will be there to meet the challenges that come our way. Effective delegation is also key to creating longevity, and that is a skill that I develop more every year. I've learned that delegation is most successful when it's highly individualized to support each volunteer's style and to build on their strengths.

My vision for this year was to be able to share the magic of Stellar with more youth than ever before. All would benefit from the seed planted by these efforts; greater intergenerational interaction creates a more vibrant event and the increased possibility of longevity of the traditions. With the support of our board, pursuing this vision required faith and the support of many volunteers. I can't imagine a better way to have celebrated the fifth anniversary than to have such youthful energy be a predominant feature of the weekend. We wouldn't be where we are without the support of all the participants and talent who believed in us and this event over the years. The gifts from many of willingness, openness, time and money have created an event that will endure...and continue to keep the traditions alive while blessing youth of ALL ages!

<sup>1</sup> A New Mexico musician seeking a need-based and leadership scholarship was able to attend through both Stellar's efforts and through a scholarship from the New Mexico Folk Music and Dance Society (<http://http://www.folkmads.org/>).

<sup>2</sup> The hip-hop contra was called by Wendy Graham during our Open Mic Dance. In addition to all the campers who had played during the other contras, the hip-hop contra featured Kat and Morgan Williams beat-boxing with Russell Shumsky on percussion.

Wendy Graham and Sam Roberts. Photo: Heather Barron.

