



## Nontraditional Funding and Focused Mentorship: How We're Growing a New (Awesome) Contra Dance Community in Portland, ME

by Dela Taylor

Ever thought about starting a weekly contra dance series in your community, but don't know how to pay for startup costs, train new callers, and nurture that warm, fuzzy feeling you want to feel when you get together with other dancers? I'm Dela and I've recently gone down this road with contra dance caller Dugan Murphy (he's my partner in life, in business, and now in dance organizing!). We have some lessons to share.

Our new dance series is called Portland Intown Contra Dance (PICD). As we grow this community, our eyes are on:

- Creating a zesty, thriving, loving, safe, and respectful weekly dance scene that is welcoming to all people.
- Having a solid organizational foundation that's sustainable well into the future.
- Honoring our roles in preserving and evolving contra traditions by supporting both statewide and national dance communities.

Here, we'll share how we're raising money, how we're mentoring new performers, and how we're spreading the love.

### Smart Affiliations and Fundraising

We know we need ample financial backing and relationships with aligned organizations to keep this boat afloat. So, first thing, we became a group affiliate of CDSS. We like being connected to this wider network of knowledgeable and enthusiastic people and perks like group insurance and nonprofit status seal the deal. CDSS affiliate membership also enabled us to apply for and receive a grant from the Outreach Fund, which helped us pay performers as we got up and running.

As soon as we got that nonprofit stamp of approval, we asked our people to donate. The rush of excitement gained from two excellent pre-series test dances inspired a flood of tax-deductible donations: twenty dancers pooled together almost a thousand dollars in only a few weeks.

Looking adjacent to the world of traditional song and dance, we applied for and received grant funding from the Maine Arts Commission, an independent state agency supported by the National Endowment for the Arts. They see folk arts as a cultural asset and were very supportive of our proposed program to fill key talent gaps now so our traditions can maintain their heartbeat later. The DownEast Friends of the Folk Arts, a nonprofit that nurtures and promotes the living traditions of folk music and dance statewide in Maine, is serving as a fiscal agent.

Integral to the closeness we want in our community are meeting spots where dancers can gather and buzz. We looked to our neighborhood and a sponsor found us. Because we had marketed the dance so widely on social media, a local restaurant emailed, offering to sponsor us in exchange for advertising post-dance meetups. A new contra themed late-night menu and happy hour were bonus treats.

Another group that found us were a few bouncy college students eager to work with their schools to provide funding and marketing support so more students can find the joy of contra. We're charged to offer student discounts (reimbursed by the schools), themed dances, and other exciting perks in the coming months.

### **Mentoring Emerging Performers**

When PICD went weekly, we realized we were increasing the number of dance events in Maine by about one-third. While we were sure our ample musicians in the state could absorb that increase, we decided the small number of callers could not.

To fill this need, Dugan and I developed a "Contra Calling 101" curriculum—a five-hour basics of calling class we've hosted in Portland three times since January 2016. More than 25 people have completed the course. Now, this class idea has turned into a robust mentoring program partially fueled by Maine Arts Commission funding.

Dugan offered guest calling spots at PICD dances to students from these classes who were both astute and keen. When they're ready, we offer a half night gig, then a whole night gig. Dugan mentors them throughout the process, offering insights and

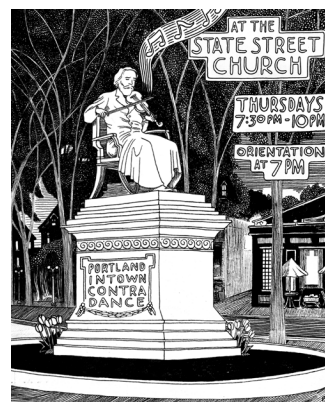
encouragement before, during and after. Thirteen emerging callers are in the program now. Ongoing feedback tells us they're hooked! They feel well-trained, confident and eager for more.

Our next steps are to continue the work with caller mentees and expand the program to include emerging contra dance musicians, who will receive training in the last quarter of 2016 and take the stage as 2017 begins.

### **Closer Community**

The folks coming to PICD are a mix of experienced, yet latent, local dancers who want to ride their bikes or walk to a dance, our regulars in the scene, and carloads of dancers from out of state who live in that just-palatable-enough-to-drive range. Our crew is now cross-pollinating across state lines even more than they already did. And we're seeing their rah-rah turn into more and more dancers on the floor.

And, with an average of 20 new dancers each week, we're promoting other Maine dances like mad, encouraging carpools and dinner dates to more closely knit ourselves to geographically far-flung dance series.



Most of our marketing occurs on Facebook through event promotion and cultivation of a strong group (to see what we're up to, search "Portland Intown Contra Dance"). We also send a monthly email newsletter, make announcements at other series' dances, and have one-on-one conversations. We com-

missioned a local artist to create compelling art for us (see above), which we use online and in print. This gives us a consistent, interesting look that lets people instantly know it's us.

### **Join Us**

We couldn't be happier to be passing on traditions to new, modern audiences. We extend a hearty thanks to everyone involved with PICD. And we invite you to join us next time you're in Portland, Maine on a Thursday night. Check us out and get in touch at <http://www.portlandintowncontradance.com>.

Drawing by Pat Corrigan