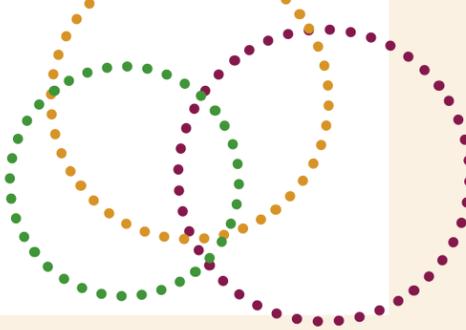


# ALL JOIN HANDS

## THE MANY JOYS OF COMMUNITY DANCING

By Marian Rose



Shortly after we were all sent on a virus-inspired vacation, a message appeared in the *Pourparler* listserve from Sue Hulsether, dance caller from Viroqua, WI. As an antidote to our collective malaise, she invited us to share happy, golden moments from our lives leading community dance. With some editing for brevity, here are the responses.

*I hope they brighten your day*

### SUE HULSETHER

One of my favorite moments at a school family dance is when the people are lined up in a longways set to do the first dance. The children have excitedly dragged their dubious parents to the set, and everyone is on either the happy end of edgy or the nervous end of edgy. I always include this instruction: “You know who your partner is, but let me introduce you to some other important people. The people who are next to you in line, I call your line buddies. Could you tap your line buddies on the shoulder, and say ‘Hi, Line Buddy!’? Now, introduce yourself to your line buddies.”

At that moment, all the edginess floats away, and people turn to each other and are chatting and smiling. They are real, and the experience is real. And human. And not too scary. I’m always tickled. It makes me smile. It reminds me why I love my work.

### PETER AMIDON

Sometimes when I am about to start calling a community dance of some sort, I am a little grumpy for no good reason (I have a good amount of grumpy in my genes). We get a quorum of dancers, and I start calling and dancing, and voila! I am in the groove and floating on the joy of the dancers.

When I was twelve (1961), I lived in Monterey, a village of 500 souls in southwestern Massachusetts. Every winter my family and I joined Monterey villagers of all ages traveling in a school bus to the homes of older folks who were shut in. Once at a home, we would step outside the bus and sing a few Christmas carols. After the caroling, we all went to the main hall of Monterey’s Gould Farm, where a man called

square dances to his own accordion playing. My friends and I were all good dancers because of an extraordinary phys ed teacher who had done a lot of square dancing with us all through elementary school. I remember that night getting a cup of hot chocolate between dances and thinking “this is the happiest I have ever been,” and I think it probably was.

### PAUL ROSENBERG

For maybe as much as 25% of my gigs, I dread heading out the door. It’s a combination of grumpiness, nervousness, fear, hopelessness. But once I get to the gig, all of those horrible feelings dissipate. The dancers, musicians, and I pool our energy to create joy that is healing and life affirming for all of us. It’s kind of like an addiction for me. Generally, I have a few gigs a week during busy times and at least one or two gigs a week during the slow times. The more days without a dance, the harder it is for me to stay joyful. (Thank goodness I have my daily runs and beautiful places to go in nature to enhance my runs.) Nothing beats the joy of a group of people participating in music and dance. One of my favorite Pete Seeger quotes is, “Participation will save the human race.”

At almost every school residency, I see very reluctant boys and occasionally some girls transformed into smiling, eager-for-more dancers. Especially since I learned Yan Petit is a great opening dance, appealing to boys who are into sports. Another dance that always gets children smiling and singing is Funga Alafia. Then I finally nail them totally with Old Dan Tucker. The gym, which started as a den of anxiety, becomes a hotbed of joyful excitement!

### BOBI ASHLEY

Paul’s share reminds me of when I used to teach my Tuesday night class in San Jose, CA. I worked as an elementary school teacher during the day and always had lesson plans and correcting to do at night. Getting home, then going out again on a Tuesday night was not my idea of fun. I was often tired and just wanted to relax. Yes, I would get grumpy and complain about having to go teach that night. But my husband reminded me, “You always feel so much better when you come home afterwards.”

What an eye opener that simple statement was for me. It was totally true! After that, I never complained again about going out on Tuesday nights. I taught that class for 15 years and called the people in it my “Tuesday night family.” When we retired and moved to another state, it was that class that I missed the most, and still do!

### MARIAN ROSE

In my school dance residencies, I use the Grand March as a teaching device with every class, adapted for age level, of course. This means that by the time we get to the whole-school family dance on Thursday night, the kids are pros. In order to get over any possible reluctance on the part of the adults, I ask the children to invite their parents to be their partner for the first dance and the last waltz. I just love to watch them proudly teach their parents to make the promenade position and coach them through the figures in the rest of the dance.

### PATRICIA CAMPBELL

When I started calling, I would be so nervous that my hands would be like ice, and I’d wonder, “Why am I doing this?” Then the music and the dancers would become my focus, and everything would change. Some time ago, my husband reflected that I transform when I’m calling. I know that the intense focus I need gives me the same “relief” from the world that dancing does—I can’t think about anything else while I’m doing it. Some of my favorite moments were having sixth, seventh, and eighth graders beg to do “just one more round” of Nine Pin.

### RICH SBARDELLA

One of my great memories in dance happened at an outdoor wedding rehearsal dinner dance for about 150 people. On the night of the dance, lightning struck a nearby transformer, leaving the facility without any electrical power. After a delayed dinner, the party goers were all a bit gloomy, and we were looking for some way to salvage the event. We decided to call a dance to hand claps and voices, so I summoned dancers on the dance floor, and clap we did. I called a hash/patter square, and Lynn and I called an acapella singing square. My wife had her travel guitar in the car, so we summoned the bride and groom, sat them down, and sang two love songs to them. They were so emotional.

Last October, I was asked to call weekly for a group of 10-12 seniors. They range in age from the 70s to 95. I enjoy calling for them and being part of their community, but the whole experience comes with frustrations. On one evening after doing the singing square, *Those Were the Days*, a

woman in her 90s came up to me singing the melody in Russian. She left her homeland in Belarus as a child, and this melody was still part of her. She was so happy, and perhaps tearful. The following week, before we started our dancing, she came up to me with a big hug, still so happy about dancing to her childhood song. Moments like this make all our efforts worthwhile.

### SANNA LONGDEN

I was in a gym in a southern Illinois school, introducing Sasha (of course!) to the second graders. It was a nice warm day toward the end of the school year, so the gym doors were open to the playground. Just as I turned on the music, a bunch of fifth graders who had been outside nearby at recess came bursting through an open door, yelling, “Sasha! Sasha!” and, barely waiting for my welcoming nod, grabbed second-grade partners and joined the dance. They were all so happy and, in spite of my tears, so was I.

Another gratifying event happened just yesterday: A music teacher from Indiana wrote to ask my permission to use my videos as part of her distance-learning lessons for the K-4 kids during this time. I’m proud that I am able to support someone’s efforts right now.

### DELAURA PADOVAN

We were at the King George Family Dance in about 1998. As usual, there was a huge crowd (for us, 50+ people). Month after month, the repertoire of the dance stayed much the same, including *Going to Kentucky*. I watched a toddler dance in the big circle while holding on tight to her mom in September... October... November... always too shy to go into the center alone. Until in December, “s-t-o-p, stop” pointed at her, and she stood up taller and marched right into the center alone. We help people grow!

### BROOKE FRIENDLY

One day toward the end of a 10-week session, I arrived without my dance database. Many dances I have memorized, but the third part of a simple Sicilian circle that I wanted to do eluded me, so we danced the first part (circles, stars), then I would call out a random thing for them to do in eight bars (with partner or opposite or all four), and they would actually do it, then forward and back and pass through. After a few rounds of this, I invited them to call out ideas. And they did... until we collapsed in laughter.

I used to always start the first class of the term with Sellenger’s Round and end the last class of the term with it as well. When I teach, I usually sing the tune. Many of the

participants continue from year to year, so they know this dance. One day the technology wasn't working at the very beginning of class, so while I was fiddling with it, someone in the class initiated a big circle and they all just did this dance while singing the tune themselves. It was magic.

#### STACY ROSE

My happiness story comes from teaching Highlife Pondogo to my community ed class. I usually had a large cardboard cheat sheet for prompting each move. Instead, that semester I assigned each move to a different dancer, who would be responsible for prompting the entire group to do their movement. They came up with the idea to stand in the circle according to the order of the movements. I had taught that dance in previous semesters, but this was the best! They took ownership of the dance! They did a super good job being successful as a group.

#### DEBORAH DENENFELD

I was hired to lead dancing at the fall retreat of a local Baptist college. I thought this denomination didn't permit dancing, so I was amazed to be contacted. The young woman said yes, they had special permission for this kind of dancing. It was amazing! There were about 300 college-aged people, most of whom had never danced a single step in their lives, in a huge hall with a fried chicken dinner and a sound system. I got them going with Sasha or another scatter dance, and they absolutely loved it. The guys got all goofy, showing off for the ladies. They all just lit up. Anyone sitting out joined in for the second dance, and we did the Virginia Reel and some other simple classics. They've been hiring me every year for the same event, and last year they decided to make a video to show at the college to encourage new students to attend. I spoke in it, saying something about how much fun we have. I was told when they showed the video in the cafeteria and my face came on the screen, there were huge cheers of, "It's Dancing Deborah!"

#### LESLIE GOTFRIT

I thought I started calling dances about ten years ago so I could "give back" what I'd been privileged to have my whole life. But I underestimated the joy I would get back from a room full of happy dancers and the incredible moments of delight that fill me right up.

I did a day at a school in a little mountain town. I only had an hour with each class, calling Anglo-American repertoire with a small old-time band. When I left at the end of the day, the fifth and sixth grade students were in

the playground doing a longways set of sorts. They had mashed everything together; one of them was calling moves and they were holding hands and elbow swinging, sashaying, and do-si-do-ing. No music, just lots of laughter and hollering. Enough said.

#### SALLY JENKINS

I have a favorite recollection of leading Hoe Ana years ago. Over time, I had developed some patter to help move the narration along while doing the moves. When we got up to, "We're looking for land," I asked rhetorically, "What kind of land?" A smart and literal-minded 10-year-old boy knew the answer: "Dry land!" I thought I'd never stop laughing.

#### STEVE WEINTRAUB

*Steve is a Yiddish dance specialist and has taught for many years at the Jewish Festival in Krakow, Poland.*

At the end of the week, we got to the sher, a square dance for four couples that I've taught countless times. I describe it as "a party with seven of your friends." As we danced, we were able to really see each other, to kid around and make little non-verbal jokes. For me, it was like seeing distant relatives, the kind you only see at big family functions. And it hit me the real value of a dance like the sher. Fifteen minutes of lively, intimate quality time with special people. It was pretty moving.

At one point I found myself moved to say, between dances, how happy the stones of the square must be to have this joyous Jewish dancing happening on them now. Ok, it was I who was happy, and I suppose I was projecting that onto the stones of the square, and the surrounding buildings and windows, but they did not rise up to contradict me.

#### DONNA FRANKEL

*Some wonderful feedback that she received after figuring out how to teach dance online:*

"I grew up poor and we could not have afforded dance lessons, and I found I just love to dance. As long as I am dancing, I stay off my meds; dancing in your classes is like taking 'happiness pills.' I was sad to have to miss all this term due to my double mastectomy on Tuesday. But with your Zoom class, even though I can only watch and dance in my head for now, I don't have to miss it after all."

Happiness? You bet. My life has meaning, I can't let these folks down. All I am doing is introducing dances and dancing to ever more students. How fun is that?

#### CLAIRE TAKEMORI

At my very first paid gig, I mentioned our local BACDS Family Week camp and handed out brochures. The next year, one family came back and thanked me profusely for inviting them to the camp. They said it was the best thing for their family and that they are now all dancing, playing music, and truly found their community. I've always felt that if I could touch just one person and have them realize they can dance, or find joy or laughter or community, then I would feel fulfilled. Though I rarely get to hear the stories of how dancing has affected them, I'm pretty sure that when they come and have a good time, it's a big win.

#### SUE BAKER

I was calling at a wedding on a farm with a group in their late 20s. After a ceremony held under the branching oaks came a sit-down dinner of barbecued beef and salmon caught that morning, and then the dance. The old-time band Eugene Barnstormers set up in the venue, which was a working barn! The hay raised too much dust, so out came the water hose. People danced until the cake break, then came back and danced some more. Then they took a bonfire break, and came back and danced some more. That night was the only time I almost ran out of easy dances to call!

#### AMY CANN

*Amy was fiddling at a recent dance in East Putney, VT, and became fascinated by an immigrant family on the dance floor:*

The youngest son was a bottle rocket: boundless energy, literally bouncing off the walls and careening straight through the sets in a way that usually sets off all my alarm bells—but they weren't ringing. His timing was perfect. He was shooting between the circle-four-hands-round and through the long-lines-forward-and-back at the exact right times, and none of the dancers looked stressed. I started to relax and just watch. This kid knew how to skip, how to skip-change, how to do three quick running steps. He was learning the tunes, hearing the precise rhythm of the jig I played and sending it straight into and through his feet. This four-foot fireball from—Nicaragua? El Salvador?—was "playing" the music with his body just as truly as I was on the fiddle, as he bobbed and weaved through the dancers. It was the darndest thing I ever saw, and I couldn't stop smiling.

*This article is excerpted from the Pourparler (PP) listserve, members of which are community dance leaders from across North America. PP 2020 has been cancelled, but that just gives everyone time to prepare for November 2021!*

## Remembering

### SARAH GREGORY SMITH

By David Smukler



Our friend Sarah Gregory Smith died on February 2, 2020 at the age of 71. Many CDSS members will remember her as an accomplished dance caller, singer, and musician.

When she led contra and community dances, dancers were

often not aware that Sarah was totally blind. In fact, Sarah once shared with me that she felt her calling improved after she lost her vision, because she felt a keen need to be aware of everything happening on the floor, something she was able to do masterfully.

Sarah had an instantly recognizable voice, especially when she was singing. She often sang accompanied by her husband, Bill Smith. I associate her voice with certain songs and can still hear her singing "Kitty Alone," the Sir Walter round, or Sally Rogers's song "Lovely Agnes." Sarah played clarinet as a teen, but eventually gravitated to bass and guitar as accompaniments for her singing.

***"Being a musician was something I could depend on. Even when I couldn't slice a piece of watermelon, I could still sing a great song."***

—Sarah Gregory Smith, quote from Boston Globe, 1982

Some might be less aware that Sarah was also at various times a sailor, a gardener, a teacher, a disability rights advocate, a carpenter, a cook, a voracious reader, an avid birder, a trash-talking card-player, and a loving dog-owner (both before and after she lost her vision). Most importantly, Sarah was someone always involved with communities. She showed up. She had opinions. She gave. She shared. To know Sarah was to become a captive of her warm, earnest, and good-humored temperament. She entered every interaction and conversation with genuine curiosity, energy, and heart. Our world seems diminished without her. (Photo courtesy of Sarah's husband, Bill Smith.)