

The Young Dancer Initiative and Your Club

We often speak of the aging of our dancers and the fact that more and more of us are having to either cut back or even stop our dancing activities due to age-related health issues.

We worry about where the next generation of Callers and Cuers is going to come from.

We bemoan the fact that many of our older retired dancers are opting to spend longer and longer periods of time in warmer climes during the winter months leaving clubs struggling to keep even one or two square on the dance floor.

We decry the reluctance of youth to take up either square or round dancing and then excuse them as being "too busy" or "reluctant to dance with their grandparents".

And we watch our total membership decline year after year, knowing that if this keeps up, soon no one will be dancing at all.

But what are we doing to change things? How are we attempting to turn things around?

Many clubs in reading this will point to their very successful annual recruiting campaigns, which consistently bring in new dancers. This year for example, across Eastern Ontario there are over 100 new dancers registered with EOSARDA. But the simple fact is that we are losing older dancers at a greater rate than we are recruiting new ones, and this trend has been on-going for at least the last 10 years, not only in our region, but across the North American continent.

At the same time, Callers, Cuers and other dance instructors (myself included) report that when they go into schools to teach dancing, the kids react with a great deal of enthusiasm and from all reports, enjoy themselves immensely. Yet efforts to attract these same kids to our regular club nights have been spectacularly unsuccessful.

Obviously all is not well in Camelot.

So what are we going to do about this?

One answer is to simply shrug, accept that this is how things are and just keep on keeping on.

The problem is that if nothing changes, we will not be able to keep on keeping on for much longer. At some point the number of active dancers is going to decrease to a point where the financial viability of most, if not all, of our clubs will be seriously jeopardized.

Of course, there is always the possibility that the problem will resolve itself; that we will suddenly have a huge influx of new dancers; and that as a result all will once again be well in the dancing world. And that COULD happen, just as any one of us COULD win the next big lottery.

But none of us would want to plan for our retirement years based on the possibility of a big lottery win. Nor should we gamble on the future of square and round dancing based on the possibility that the present situation will somehow correct itself. As ex-President Bush (Sr.) would have said, “ That wouldn’t be prudent”.

So again I ask, “What are we going to do about it ?” I’m glad you asked.

Working with the Council of Dancers, your EOSARDA Board of Directors has evolved an action plan that we call “The Young Dancer Initiative”.

The aim of the Young Dancer Initiative is to:

*Develop and actively promote a **sustainable and on-going** square dance program for youth in our region.*

Basic Young Dancer Initiative concepts

- the program is intended to be implemented across Eastern Ontario and not just in one central location
- the program will be community-based
- in recognition of the fact that local conditions vary considerably, a flexible approach to will be adopted. There will be no one-size-fits -all approach
- \$ the dance program will be structured around 20 hours of instruction during which time the entire Basic and Mainstream programs will be taught
- \$ the dance program will be delivered by experienced Callers
- \$ initially the program will be delivered through a select number of locally-based groups
- \$ the number of groups in the program will expand as interest grows and resources permit
- \$ while it is expected that the program will eventually become self-funding, in its initial stage the initial program will be subsidized by EOSARDA
- \$ the program should allow for both the continued recruitment of new dancers and the eventual advancement to Plus and Advanced dancing of those who have completed the first 20 weeks of instruction

So what’s in it for your club? Why should you get involved?

At the very least, this program offers the possibility that your club membership will be significantly increased by the addition of a number of new youth dancers. But those dancers also come with parents, siblings and relatives, which opens up a whole new recruiting opportunity for your club. “Hey Mom and Dad, I’ve started square dancing and it’s a lot of fun, you should try it!”

The program also gives your club the opportunity to take on a significant community service by providing the youth in your community with a healthy, low cost, locally-based fun activity.

And of course it provides the square and round dance movement with a new generation of square and round dancers and potentially of Callers and Cuers as well.

Wait a minute I hear you say, Callers? Cuers? Round Dancers? Where do they fit into this

project?

First of all, there is nothing in the Young Dancer Initiative that excludes it from being adapted to Round Dancing should the opportunity, interest and resources permit.

Secondly, traditionally the largest source of new round dancers has been the square dance community. So the more square dancers we have the more potential there is for recruiting new round dances from within that group.

Similarly the largest source of new Callers and Cuers has been the pool of active dancers. Anything that increases the size of this pool increases our chances of finding people willing to take on the challenge of Calling and/or Cueing.

But all of this is dependent on **your** club and **your** dancers looking around your community to identify and exploit opportunities to reach out to youth. It is your local knowledge and contacts that will provide us with the foot in the door, that initial contact that could lead to getting kids up and dancing.

But let's be honest, that is only the first step. It will not be enough just to identify possible opportunities. There will also be a need to plan, organize and run any youth groups that are established. Callers will be needed, supervision will be required, halls will have to be rented and so on.

EOSARDA can help with all of this, but we cannot do it for you. Ultimately this will have to be done locally either through groups of dancer volunteers or through our established clubs.

Our aim is to have the first youth groups up and running on or before the Fall of 2016. If your club is interested and would like more information, please contact me and I will arrange for someone from the Board of Directors to meet with your club or your executive to discuss implementing the Young Dancer Initiative in your community.

Let's get them dancing!

Dave Western
President
EOSARDA