

The Flurry Festival: Growing Better Year by Year



Fern Bradley

A single Saturday, three dance halls, a few workshops, 30 performers, and 300 dancers at a school in Guilderland.

That was the birth of the Flurry Festival in 1988, 24 years ago. From that successful start, the Flurry has blossomed in size

and duration, changed venues, survived crises, built a loyal following of dance and music lovers who return year after year (many with the second generation in tow), and inspired a wide range of dance series offered year-round.

Festival founder Paul Rosenberg picked Saturday, February 13, for the first Flurry so that dancers could enjoy a full weekend of dance fun. They could attend the Eighth Step contra dance on Friday night (dancing to Jay Ungar, Molly Mason, and Mary Des Rosiers), go to the February Dance Flurry (as it was then called) on Saturday, and then travel to Brattleboro on Sunday for the Dawn Dance (an all-night dance event). "A lot of contra dance fanatics did the whole weekend," says Paul. "We were younger then!"

Actually, that first Flurry was not the first dance festival held in the Capital Region. In 1986, the Old Songs organization sponsored the Old Songs Winter Dancefest. Bob Henshaw and Sharon O'Connor laid the groundwork for that weekend festival by traveling to Boston, Connecticut, and other Northeast sites to spread the word and offer home hospitality from Capital Region hosts for those who came to Albany for the event. Dancefest was a success, but it was not repeated in 1987. Paul recalls that missing the Dancefest was part of his inspiration to start the Flurry.

A Big Leap For the second Flurry, the festival was expanded to a two-day event and moved from Westmere Elementary School to the Farnsworth Middle School. Patti Melita joined the organizing committee that year and took over the financial management.

In that pre-electronic era, Patti handled all Flurry mailings by hand. Her dining room table was “command central”

and her daily routine involved processing ticket requests, stuffing envelopes, and walking across the street to mail things out.

The response to the 1989 festival was very enthusiastic—more than 1,000 people attended! With that solid foundation, the festival continued for the next several years at the Farnsworth School.

Mixing in Some Jam Right from the start, the Flurry included both English Country dancing and swing dancing as well as Scandinavian and international folk dancing. While Paul envisioned a festival that would offer contras throughout, he'd also enjoyed the diversity of dance offerings at New England Folk Festival Association's annual spring festival (NEFFA), the Old Songs Festival, and Albany's Festival of Nations. Each year, Paul and the festival committee worked to make that vision a reality. "I wanted to include African dance and so much more. I brought groups like Polkabration Dancers to the Flurry," Paul says.

Year One of the Flurry was all dance, but “I wanted to expand it to be a little bit like Ashokan [the dance camp held near Woodstock].” Paul says. “I liked all the music workshops and jamming.” He planned organized jams with designated session leaders, but he also wanted to encourage people to jam wherever there was space. “The jamming really caught on after a couple of years,” Paul says. Now walking



Photos, from top: Katherine Wardle, Lawrence White, Dale Windsor, & Katherine Wardle



through the hotel lobby is a unique auditory journey where you pass a group of old-time fiddlers, then a group centered

around a hammered dulcimer, guitarists swapping licks, and still more fiddlers. Doug Haller, Flurry administrative director from 2006 to 2009 and in 2011, notes that recent organized jams have been assigned to spaces where people can participate congregate without having to buy a festival ticket, such as in the atrium near the Patti Melita Ballroom entrance.



Top and middle photos: Lawrence White

Young People at the Flurry Early on, there was some hesitation about scheduling activities for families, mainly because of a concern

about insurance

and liability. But as early as 1989, the schedule included the Ivy Vine Players and a "Silly Songs" session led by George Wilson. The Flurry soon came to offer a whole program track of family-oriented sessions. Paul says an important goal was to encourage teenagers to come to the Flurry and the focus on teens began in about 1996 or 1997; it "took about 5 years to blossom. It brought tears to my eyes to see it happen." In fact, today's Flurry goers would probably find it impossible to imagine the Flurry



The Backyard Circus entertains families

without teens and young adults. Young people are active as both dancers and performers, including several youth fiddle groups who play concert sets and an all-teen band who played for one of the contra dance sessions at the 2011 Flurry. Doug recalls his excitement for his son and other members of a Guilderland High School club, when they stepped in at the last minute in 2001 to lead a hip hop dance workshop after the teacher had to cancel.

Performances The Flurry has also evolved as a place for music and dance performance. In 1998, Patti Melita (who had taken on the role of festival director that year) suggested that the Flurry take over booking musicians for the hotel's High Rock Pub venue. The hotel manager agreed and, for several years, festival goers seeking a break from dancing have refreshed their spirits and their palate while enjoying jazz combos, Celtic bands, Jamaican dance hall music, honky-tonk, samba, and a mix of singer-songwriters. Flurry performances have also spread to venues such as the Parting Glass Pub and Caffè Lena.

"One new feature that has become extremely popular is Saturday evening's percussive dance performance organized by Livia Vanaver," says Bob Henshaw, who has been in charge of the sound crew for at least 23 years. Trish Miller, popular clogger and singer, hosts the program which is anchored by the Vanaver Caravan dancers and band. About 15 performances are presented in an hour and a half, and Bob makes certain he assigns some of the most able stage managers to make the rapid change-overs. The percussive traditions represented can range from Southern clogging to African ceremonial, Black South Step, Spanish Flamenco, and beyond. The Flurry's community spirit is in full force at the event as the audience helps with the challenge of quickly converting the Saratoga Music Hall dance floor to audience seating for over 300 and then back to a dance floor.

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My new fiancée introduced me to the Flurry in 1993. I drove us there in my manual-transmission car, which he could not drive. Snow fell heavily on the trip from Syracuse to Albany, continued through dinner with his godmother's family and it was still snowing when we checked into the hotel. As we entered my hotel room, he asked if I needed to do anything before we went dancing. I turned to him with a stunned look. Driving in the snow and meeting new relatives-to-be were tiring, and I was ready to turn in. But he wanted to dance: That's what he came for! Dumbfounded and speechless, I drove us to the Guilderland school, where parking was difficult. Readers, I married him anyway. But now we always take a car we both can drive when we go to Flurry.
Gretchen Pearson (wife of Carmen Giunta)



Real-Life Flurry Legends

Two stories that stand out among Flurry legends relate to water and wind. About two weeks before the 1994 festival, water pipes burst in the Farnsworth Middle School, flooding portions of the building and destroying the floors. Repairs would not be complete in time for the festival. "I thought right away, 'We will get

another site,'" Paul says. "I refused to give up. I immediately started thinking we would have to look for other middle schools, or even larger elementary schools. We struck out right and left." The managers of some venues were very receptive, but those venues were too small, and it was Marion Altieri who made the Saratoga connection.

Some of the festival organizers agreed to the relocation "with great trepidation. The question was, 'Would it work to go so far [from Albany]?' says Bob Henshaw. Fortunately, the organizers found a great ally in Joe Dalton of the Saratoga Chamber of Commerce, who enthusiastically helped to find spaces, cobbling together sites at the Saratoga Music Hall, the City Center, and Skidmore College. Patti Melita remembers a huge logistic issue: notifying festival goers of the move to Saratoga in that pre-Facebook and nearly pre-email era. Postcards were mailed to the whole Flurry mailing list, and the word spread. In the end, she recalls, only one person showed up at the Farnsworth Middle School on Flurry weekend.

Doug Haller, a DFO Board member at the time, said that from the first, "It felt like a resounding success" to be in Saratoga. There was no question that the festival had found a new home. Paul quotes a front page "Saratogian" headline from 1994 saying "Group Promises to Return Next Year."

Then there was the 2006 festival when "dancing in the dark" became the motto. On Friday morning, a huge wind storm flattened trees and power lines, leaving the entire city of Saratoga without power. The City Center rented a huge generator and the committee scrambled to arrange a much-condensed version of the Flurry. Festival attendees were largely unfazed, dancing in dim light, coping with dark and cold hotel rooms on Friday night and hoping for the best on Saturday.

However, with no heat, electricity, or hot water, most of the activities had to be cancelled and the end result was a huge financial loss, not to mention frustration and



I love the Flurry because the atmosphere is inclusive and warm and trusting. My fondest memory of this last Flurry was when Mike Newton and I met up and attended the drum workshops. Everyone was drumming wildly yet in rhythm. Someone right in front of us left the drum and Mike (what a gentleman!!) invited me to take a go at it...exhilarating! As Mike took his turn, two young women began to dance to the rhythm in the middle of the circle. It was primal and spontaneous—LIFE being lived in the moment. It was very touching to me, an experience that will keep me coming back.
Melinda Durler

I was at a late-night swing dance at the Flurry, sitting near the windows and watching wistfully as graceful couples sashayed around the floor. This extremely attractive guy kept catching my eye—even while dancing with other women. Eventually, he approached and, with an adorably cocked eyebrow, asked me to dance. I accepted, despite my aching feet (who wouldn't?), and we didn't leave each others' sides for the rest of the night. He made me a better swing dancer; I made him my husband. Lily Feldman

disappointment for performers, festival goers, and the festival committee. The final outcome, however, was the Flurry community's extraordinary response that began with some performers tearing up their paychecks on stage and ticket holders donating the cost of unused tickets. A fund-raising campaign brought in over \$90,000 and restored the DanceFlurry Organization to financial stability. The 2007 festival was planned and presented on schedule and with great rejoicing.

Festival Stewardship Attendance grew steeply during the first few festivals, continued to grow moderately and has been fairly stable for the past five years. However, the number of participants is only one measure of growth, and each year the Festival committee has worked to help the festival grow *better*, not necessarily bigger. Finding appropriate venues is a challenge. Due to increasing difficulties with transportation, scheduling, and cost, the Canfield Casino, the National Museum of Dance, and Skidmore College are no longer Flurry venues. The Saratoga Music Hall, however, "is a very popular venue we would never want to lose," Bob



Dances of India, 2010
Photo: Lawrence White

notes. Currently, committee and Board members are researching how to improve on the vinyl-covered concrete floors in some of the City Center's large dance halls (see page 3).

The overarching challenge is to continue a commitment to the diversity of the dance and music styles offered at the festival. While some festival attendees only wish to dance modern contras from start to finish, there has been a quantitative shift toward swing dancing to accommodate other dancers. "The diverse dance offerings draw favorable evaluations every year," Bob says. The Flurry relies greatly on evaluations from over 300 dancers to plan the next year's event.



"I've evolved to thinking that having contras all the time is not healthy," Paul reflects. He encourages every attendee to try a different type of dance at least once during the

weekend, to take a break to visit the vendors and listen to a group jamming. Paul says, "I have mixed feelings about whether the Flurry should grow more or not. It's like one of the best things in life, and we want more people exposed to it. To have it all over the city would be wonderful, but it would be way too much work."

Always An Adventure I (Fern Bradley) agree with Paul that expanding the Flurry throughout Saratoga would be an overwhelming task, but I don't think the festival needs to get bigger. Even though I've attended almost every Flurry for the past two decades, I still have new dance experiences every year. Sure, I do a lot of contra dancing at the Flurry, and I'm sure I'll never give up contra. But one of my favorite things about the Flurry is the

adventure of slipping into a workshop of a style of dance I've never tried before. I make sure I try at least one new style at every Flurry. Sometimes I love it, sometimes I don't, but it truly is a pause that refreshes. What stands out in my memory?

- * Stumbling a bit as I adapted to the unusual and sometimes challenging rhythmic patterns of Middle Eastern dance, then getting into the groove.
- * Learning to slow down and move with my partner in a new and different way for Argentine tango.
- * Trying out Texas two-step, and not really liking it, but *loving* the music of Girl Howdy!
- * Working up a sweat in an exhilarating Guatemalan dance session taught by a dynamic young member of the Vanaver Caravan.
- * Twirling, laughing, and testing my limits in the Rueda de Casino (Cuban salsa wheel dancing) workshop.

And I always try to dance awhile during Ralph Sweet's singing squares. Even if you've never square danced, or *think* you don't like square dancing—you've gotta try it! Or maybe you've gotta try to learn the hambo, or do some African dancing, or zydeco, or Well, you pick. Just be sure you break out of your groove at least once each festival, whether you're a dyed in the wool contra dancer, or swing dancer, or English dancer. There's no better place than the Flurry to have a dance adventure. 🌀



Lawrence White