

Chris Ricciotti's History of the JP Contra Dance

by Chris Ricciotti - December 2013

I started my first gay and lesbian contra and square dance in Providence, RI in March of 1987. Through the following year, I continued to organize this series with people driving in from as far away as Hartford, CT, and Boston, MA to attend this dance. It was interest from a group of women who drove in from Boston, most notably Kathy Ann Gianino, who said that this would be a great event to start in Jamaica Plain, MA, that got my interest.

I did some research and eventually made contact with the First Church in Jamaica Plain in June of 1988 to ask if they would be open to renting their space to such a group. They warmly welcomed us in. We started dancing in Jamaica Plain in September of 1988. At that time, I opened the hall, provided all the snacks, collected the money, put out flyers, signed people up for our mailing list, made the announcements, called the dances and cleaned the bathrooms. It was a labor of love for me.

I decided to schedule this event once every two weeks to see how it would go. Each time, I drove from Providence to JP and then back again, sound equipment in hand, which consisted of a tape deck with cassette tapes, a turntable with LP's 45's and 78's, and a small pair of 40 watt speakers. Our first dance had 12 dancers. It was a quiet but enthusiastic group of attendees. My friend, Robert Coad, who assisted me at the time, said on the way home that evening, "Oh, I don't know Chris, this dance seems kind of small. It might never make it." I said, "Robert, I've got a feeling about this group and this place. Let's give this some time." Two weeks later, those 12 brought 12 more. Two weeks after that we had over 30 people. Two weeks after that we had close to 40 people. By January of 1989, we had almost 90 people attending this Saturday evening dance. We had so many people that there was some talk about moving this series to a larger church hall closer to the center of Boston, but thankfully, we ended up staying where we still dance today.

When the JP dance started in 1988, much of the gay social scene was in the bars. In fact, for a short while in the spring of 1988, I hosted a series of gay and lesbian contra dances in the Randolph Country Club, still a gay bar today. Our dance community in Jamaica Plain was something very new, and it ended up being a big draw for many as it filled a need for building community in a fun and interactive social environment. Boston is home to one of the biggest folk dance scenes in the world and our group was a big draw for gays and lesbians who has previously been part of the Boston dance scene, including the Boston Gay and Lesbian Folk Dancers who danced from 1977 thru about 1985.

During our first few evenings of dancing, we would often start off with a contra set of all women and a contra set of all men, which was a surprise to me, and wasn't exactly what I had in mind for building community through traditional dance. Thankfully introducing mixers as a part of the dance repertoire got everyone dancing together and helped foster interaction and social connections with everyone who attended. According to Read Weaver, Boston's somewhat unusual history of gay men and lesbians coming together in other social and political organizations certainly contributed to this.

It was also about this time that other gay and lesbian dance groups started to pop up all around Boston, including Gays for Patsy (country and western), ballroom and swing, soon to be followed by tango. Though this eventually cut into our numbers, we maintained a core group of about 50 people who were regulars at our series.

In our early days we only used recorded music, which was what we could afford back then, and it was unclear to me at that time if musicians would feel comfortable playing for a gay community dance. Eventually by January of 1989, a band named "Nantucket Sound" got in touch with me to see if I would be interested in hiring them for our newly formed dance series. I fell in love with their sound and hired them on the spot. Through the spring of 1989 and into 1990, they were our house band, and I was the caller. Over time, in Jamaica Plain, we gradually shifted from a mix of evenings with recorded music and some with musicians, to all live music.

That first band, "Nantucket Sound", consisted of Linda Henry on piano, her husband Bob Snope on concertina and Amy Richardson (now Amy Larkin) on fiddle. Nantucket Sound was the band at our first dance camp back in August of 1989 at the Otter Lake Conservation School in Greenfield, NH. Our first camp consisted of 29 very enthusiastic attendees, made up of people from the Providence, RI, Jamaica Plain, MA, Hartford, CT, and Albany, NY, dance communities. It was a magical weekend for all of us, so much so that we continue to have two camps a year to this day.

Coming full circle, both Linda and Amy will be playing for us as a part of the band Locomojo for our 25th anniversary dance. We are honored to have them all as a part of our 25th anniversary celebration.

Originally the gay and lesbian country dance groups were organized under an umbrella network which I called "SEGAL" (the South East Gay And Lesbian Country Dancers) - as most of our dances were in southeastern New England. But as this movement spread to other communities throughout the NY and New England area, in the summer of 1989, we changed our name to NEGAL (the North East Gay And Lesbian Country Dancers) to be more inclusive of all the communities around New England who danced. In 1992, we voted as a committee to change our name to the Lavender Country and Folk dancers (LCFD), as a way to be more inclusive to all the diversity that was starting to make a home in our dance community. LCFD still continues to help organize dance camps and provide support to local gender-free dances and camps as well as help promote gender-free traditional dancing around the USA and elsewhere.

Over the years the JP dance group, much like all the dance communities we have assisted, has gone through some major changes. In 1988 we were primarily a gay and lesbian social and recreational group. Over the years people from the bisexual community came out to join us, and were able to find a home in our group. Eventually cross dressers, and people from the trans community joined them. And all during this change, we built bridges with straight dancers, callers and musicians from the Boston area dance community until now, we have a great mix of people of all ages, orientations and genders who come out and help build the magic that makes our dance community a truly unique, warm and welcoming dancing experience for all.

Not only did our community change over time, but we also changed our name from the Jamaica Plain Gay and Lesbian Contra Dancers to the Boston Gender-Free Contra Dancers. On Saturday, December 14th, 2013, we came together as a community to celebrate 25 years of dancing history together! We had an afternoon and an evening dance with eight callers and three bands. Between the two sessions we had a PotLuck and the viewing of a historical video of this dance and the dance camps between the two dances.