

# Datebook: Contra Dancing Has Room For All

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By Laura Kennedy



Martha Tyner drew a bow across her fiddle and grimaced at the resulting sound.

“I’m a very squawky fiddler,” she explained with a grin. She finished warming up under the cool glare of the fluorescent lights in the Normal Public Library’s Community Room, then turned to the small gathering of people there and with a wave of her bow called out: “Are we ready? Anybody want to dance?”

Fiddler Martha Tyner is the caller the autism-friendly contra dancing, guiding the dancers through a series of figures.

Credit Laura Kennedy / WGLT

Tyner is not just a fiddler. Tonight, she’s a caller for a group of contra dancers.

"It's the caller's responsibility to make sure that everyone is having a good time and that everybody is included. I have to know how the dance goes and explain the figures so that everyone can do them together. A lot of it is coordinating so that the dancers are successful."

Making her dancers feel welcome and comfortable is extra important this evening, as it's the monthly edition of autism-friendly contra dancing. Sponsored by the Normal Public Library, the dance is meant to give those on the autism spectrum, and their family and friends, a chance to socialize and have fun learning a historic type of dance.

"I call it Jane Austen line dancing," said Virginia Moody, laughing.

If you've seen any of the many film versions of "Pride and Prejudice," you've seen contra dancing in action. Very civilized action. Lines of dancers face one another and move in figures like allemande and do-si-do. Contra dancing was popular throughout Europe beginning in the 17th century. When European immigrants came to America, they brought the dance with them.

"People couldn't afford dance lessons, so they hired a caller to call out moves because they didn't have them memorized," Moody explained.

This monthly event takes the historic dance style and makes it fully accessible to everyone, including those on the autism spectrum. It was Moody's idea to establish the autism-friendly contra dancing. She learned about the positive impact of the dance in the book "The Moral Molecule" by neurobiologist Paul Zak. Moody was struck by what Zak discovered about oxytocin, a powerful hormone that acts as a neurotransmitter in the brain.

"He measured the oxytocin levels of all sorts of social interactions, before, during and after events - weddings, going through college, exercise, dancing. And the group that had the largest surge of oxytocin was contra dancers."

Moody had never heard of contra dancing. "But I thought it might be a great thing for autism."

She was determined to get a monthly dance off the ground. But first she had to convince John Fischer of the idea. Fischer is the manager of adult services and circulation at NPL. Like Moody, he knew nothing about contra dancing. "But she said look it up on YouTube, you'll love it. So, I looked it up and I did my research, as a good librarian should."

Fischer liked what he saw. "I was excited, I thought it was a great idea. I thought it was another opportunity for us to welcome more community members into our library that might perhaps never felt welcome or never thought they had a place or had never experienced the library."

Virginia Moody's son, Alex, is on the autism spectrum. Virginia Moody said the more she learned about contra dancing, the more she realized how adaptable it was for people with autism.

About 20 dancers have gathered on this evening for the monthly event. Martha Tyner called out over the fiddle playing a variety of moves for the dancers to follow. Allemande ... promenade ... circle left ...circle right ... star.

Although contra dancing involves hand clasping, those who prefer not to touch can easily opt-out.

Credit Laura Kennedy / WGLT

The star figure involves four dancers clasping each other's wrists and walking around in a circle. That particular move might be a problem for those on the spectrum who prefer not to touch. Fortunately, contra dancing is very adaptable, said Virginia Moody, and can be adjusted to everyone's needs.

"With arm movements, if you don't want to touch, you just don't lift out your arms. Or maybe you'll do one move and not another. You don't have to make eye contact. So, we go a little more slowly and you don't have to make that eye contact if you don't want to. And everybody's just so accommodating with it."

"In some ways it's tough," admitted Virginia's son, Alex Moody. "It's a bit hard to do. It's a bit of a stressful thing to do. You have to do a lot of moves and it's difficult to keep them straight sometimes."

"It can be difficult at times," agreed dancer Ben Harney. "But it doesn't really matter. I get used to it."

Tyner tweaked her style a bit to help the dancers be successful.

"This is more like a workshop. In a regular dance, we'd go ahead and plunge into a dance a little faster. We've been doing this step-by-step, learning specific figures, going over them enough times that people are familiar with them and know where they're going, rather than letting them just fend for themselves as much as the average dance crowd might."

"I think all the contra dancers sometimes get lost," Virginia Moody admitted with a soft laugh. "People get lost in the line and then people pull them back up. It's just a wonderful community feeling."

The swing is a popular step in contra dancing. Tyner has yet to introduce that particular move. "Typical contra dances have a lot of partner swings, which is a pretty intimate figure – you're close, arm-in-arm with somebody. So, the one concession I have made for this group,

I've not done a partner swing yet. We do a lot of do-si-do's, which take the same amount of time, or just a hand turn."

The dancers may yet learn the swing.

"As it has turned out, the participants that have come are not squeamish about things," said Tyner. "They've been really willing; I think partly because they're so well-acquainted. So it hasn't been an issue."

The mood at the evening is buoyant, and Virginia Moody admitted feeling confident about the future of the monthly dance.

"At this point we're saying that all people are welcome. We accept everybody in terms of what they're able to do when they dance."

Autism-friendly contra dancing is every third Thursday at 6:30 p.m. at the [Normal Public Library](#).

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