

# Live Free and Dance

## New Hampshire's Traditional Social Dances

### Ossipee, NH GALA Contra Dance

Researched and written by Elizabeth Faiella, July 2015

**Location:** Ossipee Town Hall Gym,  
55 Main St.

**Schedule:** 7pm, monthly  
January-April or May

**Website:** <https://galacommunity.org/>

**Cost:** \$7, \$5 students and seniors, \$3 under age 12

**Current organizer:** Josh Arnold, GALA

**Contact information:** [josh@galacommunity.org](mailto:josh@galacommunity.org)



For Josh Arnold, organizer of the Ossipee contra dance, community social dance is an environmentally sustainable tradition. “I think this kind of dance, cultivating that sense of place and sense of community, is really what the sustainability movement is all about: community resilience. Strengthening relationships, so we know our neighbors and build trust with them. We know who needs what—equipment, time, knowledge, and skills—and we create a space where those things can be exchanged in a fun, recreational atmosphere.”



The Ossipee contra dance is put together by Global Awareness Local Action, or GALA, an environmentally-focused, Ossipee-based nonprofit, whose mission is based on building sustainable community. Other GALA programs include homesteading workshops and sustainable home and yard makeovers, also known as “Sustain-A-Raisers.” “We’re coming to find that the work is as much, if not more, about strengthening community, and relationships in that community, as it is about protecting watershed,” says Arnold, one of the organization’s founders.

Contra dances fit in well with that goal. A former GALA board member, Mike Haeger, was a contra dancer, who had attended the Tamworth contra dances in summer and winter,



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and suggested that GALA sponsor one to fill in some of the months when there were no Tamworth dances. “At first there was a community together. It was an intergenerational crowd and a wholesome and healthy activity. People would bring eggs that they’d exchange, and they’d be meeting new people.”

The first dance was held in 2011. The dance started out at the Todaro Center in Tuftonboro, but soon moved to the Ossipee Town Hall, where it’s been held ever since.

Dances are held monthly, January through April or May.

The dance has a different caller and band each month, mostly drawn from the local area. Bands have included the

Fiddling Thomsons, String Equinox, and Puckerbrush. A house band called Briar Hill, that GALA co-founder Michael Haeger plays in, always opens the season and donates the proceeds back to GALA. Arnold says that having a different band each month helps build interest. “And for people who come just to watch the band, that keeps it new,” he says.

The music played at the dance is usually traditional New England contra dance fiddle tunes. There is usually a break with potluck refreshments about midway through the evening, and the dance always ends with a waltz.

About 35 people attend the dance on average, though the range is 20-60 dancers. The dance is geared toward beginners—and includes a beginners’ session from 7:00-7:30pm—though a few dedicated, experienced

bit of confusion—is this mission drift?” says Arnold. “But when we started it, we saw how it brought the dancers come. “It’s great, because the experienced dancers are interspersed on the dance floor, to help others who are getting the moves down, which is always really helpful—to have a mix of experience on the dance floor,” says Arnold. Dancers of all ages attend, including some families with children. “Some of these young kids know the moves in and out,” he says. Dancers come from the local

community and from farther afield; Arnold says that some Ossipee residents walk to the dance, while others drive up from the Seacoast Area of New Hampshire.



Every year, GALA’s annual seed swap is held right before the dance. The community is invited to come and bring any seeds they want to share. Many people who come for the seed swap stay for the dance.

One of the benefits of having the dance organized by GALA, says Arnold, is that the infrastructure for publicizing it is already there, in the form of GALA’s organizing committee, mailing list, and existing presence in the community and online. The dance relies solely on what comes in at the door for funding.

Though he didn’t grow up contra dancing, Arnold says that organizing these dances has really gotten him hooked. “Now I love it, and I seek other dances,” he says.

*Source: Josh Arnold, interview by Elizabeth Faiella, July 2015.*