

Client: Toronto Lindy Hop, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the progression and preservation of Lindy Hop and Swing dancing

Project: Article to be published in the winter 2008 issue of *Dance Time Toronto*

Objective: Promotional piece for Toronto Lindy Hop

COPY EXCERPT:

Toronto Lindy Hop: Creating a Welcoming Dance Community

Social dance communities often face the challenge of developing ways to retain members and increase the overall enthusiasm within their scenes. A new dancer may take an introductory lesson, linger for a few songs into a dance and leave. Perhaps they feel intimidated, or even snubbed, when the more experienced dancers arrive and show off their skills on the dance floor.

“The first dance I went to, almost all the dancers ignored me,” says Lindy Hopper, Julia Boma-Fischer. “I nursed my beer at the corner of the bar, feeling left out. Finally, one wonderful person sat down and welcomed me to the Toronto scene.”

Toronto Lindy Hop, a nonprofit organization, developed a way to build community while making new dancers, whether they are beginners or new to the city, feel welcome. In the Dance Ambassador program, experienced Lindy Hoppers volunteer as hosts at weekly dances. They wear distinctive T-shirts and participate in the introductory lesson to meet the beginners. Then, they dedicate the entire first set to approaching new dancers to help them gain confidence and have fun on the social dance floor.

“The idea came from what I heard about a similar program that runs in Australia,” says Krister Shalm, President of Toronto Lindy Hop. “Toronto already has a friendly, social and welcoming dance scene - but there is always room to improve.”



Toronto Lindy Hop Dance Ambassadors, wearing the red T-shirts, welcome new dancers at a Saturday Night Swing Dance at the Dovercourt House.

When selecting the first Dance Ambassadors, Toronto Lindy Hop chose people who embody some of the best traits found in Lindy Hoppers worldwide – friendliness, enthusiasm and a desire to share the joyfulness of their dance with others. “All of us in the Dance Ambassador program, and probably everyone in the Lindy Hop scene worldwide, dance because we have fun,” says Stephen Cardie, Dance Ambassador Coordinator. “We are, quite literally, ambassadors for our dance, and we want to show off the most important value that keeps us coming back.”

The organizers also hoped the initiative would bring back Lindy Hoppers who had fallen away from the scene. “Part of strengthening the community is trying to regain dancers who may have lost their passion or motivation,” says Cardie. The opportunity to volunteer for a fun, community-building program gives those people a reason to spend more time on the dance floor.

The program not only provides new dancers with an initial positive experience to keep them coming back, but it also encourages experienced dancers to meet people

outside their regular circle of friends. “A scene that becomes stagnant and full of cliques ceases to grow, as there is no room left for anyone new to break in,” says Shalm. “If people are passionate about their dance form and their community, they need to go out of their way to encourage the next generation of dancers.”

The Dance Ambassador organizers believe that welcoming everybody is the best way to increase the number of dancers, as well as the number of friendships, within the community. Erin Nazario shared an inspiring experience she had as a Dance Ambassador. “I met a new dancer who said he was about to propose to his girlfriend,” says Nazario. “At the next dance, he came up to me as soon as he saw me to tell me the good news. An instant friend!”

Toronto Lindy Hop has received much positive feedback since the initiative kicked-off in May. “Knowing that we have a program like this says a lot about the community itself,” says Mandi Gould, Director & Head Dance Instructor of Bees Knees Dance. “It sets us apart from a competitive or money-driven organization and sets the tone for our community’s uniquely social culture.”

In the near future, Toronto Lindy Hop would like to develop a larger volunteer base and run the Dance Ambassador program at more Lindy Hop events throughout Toronto.

To meet the Dance Ambassadors and learn how to Lindy Hop, stop by one of Swing Toronto’s Saturday Night Swing Dances at the Dovercourt House (805

Dovercourt Road, just north of Bloor). For more information and dance schedules, please visit www.torontolindyhop.com and www.swingtoronto.com.

About the Author:

Rachel Foster is a freelance writer and Executive Board member for Toronto Lindy Hop.

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“Rachel’s ability to write in a clear and engaging manner is behind the success of a popular bimonthly e-newsletter she writes for the community, and the articles she has written on dance-related topics have become an important resource for the community,” Krister Shalm, President of Toronto Lindy Hop.