

News From Petaluma, California

Teens Answer the Call

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By Janet Parmer

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Petaluma's youth hop to a new beat and learn it's fun to dance to a different tune!

Aleksandra and Danielle Olivera once dreaded being dragged to square dances. Now the St. Vincent High School students are largely responsible for the dramatic increase in teenagers learning to square dance in Petaluma.

They've lured many of their friends to the Tuesday night Adobe Squares club, and most have returned voluntarily to learn more dance steps.

The Adobe Squares beginning square dance class, which meets at the Petaluma Women's club, is anything but traditional, with teens almost outnumbering adults.

To keep it pulsating and lively for the youthful crowd, professional square dance caller Scot Byars plays songs like 'YMCA' and 'Sweet Home Alabama' along with Motown tunes, Japanese techno, disco and even rap tunes.

Boys wearing baggy jeans and T-shirts allemande, swing, weave and promenade side-by-side with men in pressed slacks and western-style shirts.

Teenage girls dress in either poufy skirts, which they call "fluff," or jeans, while most of the women show up in traditional square garb.

"Veteran square dancers realized they had to recruit new dancers if the club was going to survive, and they're encouraged by the response to the summer class", Adobe Squares member Mel Tody said.

Only 37 people are officially members, but nine of them are teenagers, according to his wife, Margaret.

"This is our future. They bring a fire to the club, and they make the older folks seem younger," she said.

During a recent class, 56 dancers formed seven squares, with about 25 teens and children mixed in with many people old enough to be their grandparents.

"Our friends had fun of us and I told them, "Next time we're bringing you," said Aleksandra Olivera, who began attending the dances five years ago. "We were forced to come and stay the entire time.."

Her Mother, Eva Olivera, said her husband was eager to square dance, and so it became a family outing. They initially attended classes in Sebastopol. The couple serves on the Adobe Squares board of directors.

Aleksandra Olivera, who is the publicity chairman, was responsible for an ad that ran in local newspapers promoting the classes.

She suggested using photos from actual square dance event rather than the Adobe Squares logo featuring an illustration of two dancers. One photo shows a group of about 20 teenage dancers.

The ad copy says, "Many people define fun as something interesting and upbeat. Want to try something new for a change? Squared dancing is all of that, and more!... Be there or be square!"

Olivera is pleased with the response to the ad, but only takes partial responsibility for the dramatic increase in teen dancers

She said a lot of the young people have learned about the square dances through word-of-mouth.

Tony Dizmang, 18, drives from Napa to dance with the Adobe Squares each week.

He learned to dance when he was 12 by accompanying his parents, and later took classes in Vallejo.

"At first a lot of this is awkward, but this club is amazing for the youth," Dimzang said. "It draws people back. I think the appeal is the camaraderie and fun. And this is definitely a good workout."

Byars, the square dance caller, travels from Sacramento for his weekly gig. He's a polished entertainer and livens up the evening by cracking jokes, singing competently along with lyrics, and calling dance commands briefly in Spanish or French.

On occasion, he'll change outfits several times during the night.

"This is not typical of square dancing," Byars said, referring to the Adobe Squares turn-out. "The average age is probably between 55 and 65 years old."

To attract youthful dancers, he knows he must play music that appeals to them.

"I use alternative music," he said. "I'll use disco, instrumentals, karaoke, and Dixieland music."

Byars, who has been calling square dances for 33 years, said he is seeing a resurgence in popularity with youth.

"It's wonderful to teach young people. Kids learn quicker. The younger they are, the shorter the attention span," he said. "High school or college age kids have an attention span that's perfect."

Eva Olivera, Aleksandra and Danielle's mother, said square dancing enriched her family.

"It's a good safe environment and keeps them off the streets. They really like it. Nobody is twisting their arms to be here. There's a sense of community, of family, that goes way beyond dancing," she said.

The Adobe Squares is finishing up its seven-week beginner's class and will start another class for beginners soon.

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