

The Birth of Seattle's Easter Swing

by

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Seattle's Easter Swing 2011 attracted a sell-out crowd of nearly 800 enthusiastic dancers. With Jim Minty as chair, SES has become one of the best events on the swing dance circuit.

Some have asked how this convention got started. This may surprise many but SSDC's voyage into the convention world didn't begin with the first SES convention in 1993; it actually began about six years before. Here is the story.

"WHAT'S A CONVENTION?"

In the 1980's dancing wasn't all the rage like it is today. When it came to West Coast swing, Seattle Swing Dance Club and a few bars with dance floors were the only places to dance. To get our West Coast swing "fix" - a few SSDC members traveled to California to attend conventions, especially the events that were held in San Francisco and San Diego. We enjoyed these events because we could participate in or watch competitions we didn't have in Seattle, and enjoy dancing with others from different swing clubs around the country all weekend long under one hotel roof.

Conventions now can exceed 1000 attendees, but they were smaller in those days and the level of dancing was nothing like it is today. Judges were not nearly so qualified – in fact, couples got points for "cookin'" – which perhaps was the precursor to showmanship. Shapely women tended to win.

At these events some would ask us why Seattle didn't have a convention - although not too many asked because Seattle was not known for its champion dancers, and California was proud of being the center of Swing. Around 1987, Robert Bryant, who headed the United States Swing Dance Council, asked Seattle to host the 1990 event for him. The USSDC held an event in a different city every year, and he thought Seattle would benefit from hosting, especially since 1990 was the 25th anniversary of SSDC, the oldest Swing dance club in the nation.

Ron Lamkin was president in 1987 and Dean Fisher was elected president in 1988 and 1989. To host or not to host this event was a huge decision. SSDC had never organized anything bigger than a picnic and a club dance. The thought of organizing a national convention was completely overwhelming, even though Robert and Connie Bryant would sell the tickets, hire the staff of judges, teachers, and deejays, do the scheduling, and manage the event. All we had to do was find the hotel and provide the volunteers but, nevertheless, the fear of failure was ever-present. Dean was responsible for researching the hotel cost and availability.

Seattle's Silver Swing

Many, many meetings later the decision was made to accept Robert's offer to host the event April 13th – 15th, 1990 at the Westin Hotel in downtown Seattle. SSDC was to receive \$2.50 for every ticket sold. Having the event at the Westin was particularly appealing. The Westin was located in downtown Seattle close to Nordstrom, and also, the ballroom had 5000 square feet of a REAL wood dance floor. This was a selling point. Dance floors at events in those days were small, portable, and came apart frequently. Dancers complained bitterly.

Fired up with our big, "real" dance floor as a new reason why dancers should come to Seattle, SSDC buzzed with excitement about its convention. We named the event Seattle's Silver Swing since it was the 25th anniversary of SSDC. Ray Gerring, a long-time club member and acclaimed artist, designed the logo. My husband, Dean Fisher, and I were appointed as co-chairs – as if we knew ANYTHING about running a convention.

What SSDC lacked in dance champions, well-known instructors, sunshine, and national recognition it made up for in friendliness, enthusiasm, working hard, and being organized. Our first challenge as co-chairs was to find people who were willing to organize tasks and be in charge of volunteers. We were afraid to ask anyone to be a "committee chair" because it sounded too business-like and we thought they would resist. So, we ask them instead to be "Leads". That seemed to be acceptable - and they are still called Leads today.

For the 1990 event we had Leads for local tickets, post-convention activities, pre-convention activities, publicity, exhibitors, decorations, signs, transportation, contests, judging, door greeters, awards, video, sound system, maintenance, hospitality, and workshops. Whew! And we weren't even managing the main work of the convention!

In preparation for SSS, we organized over a hundred volunteers. We baked cookies and muffins by the dozens and smuggled them into the hospitality room in shoeboxes (Thank goodness the hotel looked the other way about the rule that all food had to be provided by the Westin.) We had tee shirts made in Easter egg colors and plowed right through the resistance to require the volunteers to wear them when performing their jobs. ("How can I get girls when I am wearing a lavender tee shirt with an egg on it!") We put welcome baskets in the dance teacher's hotel rooms and met the teachers and judges at the airport. Friendly was our motto.

Oklahoma Here We Come!

The USSDC's 1989 event was held in Oklahoma City and so off we went, resplendent in our shiny new snow-white SSDC jackets with our logo on the back, and armed with lists of things to ask about. We met with their event directors, Robert and Connie Bryant, and with anyone else who could help us.

Anxiety about our upcoming event did not stand in the way of our having a good time. We laughed, danced, and formed close bonds with our SSDC friends. That event was the first time we saw Carolina Shag – danced by Charlie Womble and his new, beautiful wife, Jackie McGee. What an amazing experience. Dean and I talked endlessly about what it would be like for SSDC members to see dancing like that! Little did we know that that dream was to come true in just a few years?

Swinging Through the Years

The experience of Oklahoma helped us continue toward making Seattle's Silver Swing a memorable event. It was just one year away. Many of us wanted to do something special at our event to commemorate its 25th anniversary, but what could we do and would anyone volunteer? We had already stepped beyond what any SSDC member had been asked to do before.

With the help of SSDC member and US Council Representative, Shirley Jo Ange, we found a play called "Swinging Through the Years." We hired a professional director, Donna Ray Davidson, to polish the writing and started – with great trepidation - to recruit more volunteers.

The response was amazing! Over 60 members turned out for rehearsal every Saturday for six weeks at the Lake City Elks, and many couples and small groups rehearsed during the week. On off nights those who could sew were in demand because 60 costumes had to be designed and sewn.

The stars of the show were the co-emcees, Joyce Graham and Steve Otrosa – still members today - who had been selected from tryouts by the director. The show told the history of Swing in Seattle. Dance routines performed by couples and groups featured balboa, rock, disco, and many other versions of Swing, all interspersed with humorous dialogue and singing between Steve and Joyce.

All this took place in front of a stand-alone wooden backdrop of the Seattle skyline that was about 30 feet long. This stunning mural was designed by Ray Gerring and built and painted by Ray, Al McLenahan and Kirk Larson. Dancers entered and exited through this "city", and speedy costume changes occurred behind it. (Any need for privacy was trumped by a bad case of nerves and just 30 seconds to change costumes. After all, this was Show Business!)

Success

Six hundred and nine people attended this event, and Seattle was on the map. Most of the top dancers were there. The owners of the US OPEN, Jack and Mary Ann Bridges, attended and so did Annie Hirsch and Jack Carey. Skippy Blair was Head Judge and Phil Trau and Ed Cirio were the deejays. Occasionally they still comment about what a great time they had.

There were a few kinks. I still remember coming into the ballroom on Friday at 6 PM when the doors opened and the music started to find that someone had put piles of dance wax all around the floor every few feet. Visions of lawsuits and broken hips flashed before me as I rallied volunteers to "sweep this stuff up!"

This was a wonderful time to be a part of SSDC. Yes, there were differences, but they didn't overshadow the tremendous pride in what we were accomplishing as an organization. New friendships were forged. People who hadn't spoken to each other for years worked side by side and dating couples held waning relationships together until after the event.

SSDC membership soared to the highest in our history until recently - 399 in 1990.

From a Co-sponsored Convention to Seattle's Easter Swing

SSDC basked in the SSS success for a while. Then, many noticed that the special energy the convention created was absent, so discussions began about creating our very own event.

Even though we had never hired a dance teacher, seen a convention budget, created a brochure, thought about an event schedule - and were so intimidated by the great dance teachers from California that placing a phone call was terrifying - Dean and I agreed to co-chair the event. We had enjoyed organizing Seattle's participation in Seattle's Silver Swing. When Maria Marabella, who became a SSDC member after attending the 1990 event, volunteered to handle the tickets and other members assured us that they would help, we began to look for a date and location that would allow us to have our own event.

Back to many, many, many meetings. Easter weekend was not a popular choice because of the religious significance, but it was the only choice. Hotel rates were lower on Thanksgiving, Christmas - and Easter. The Westin would be our location because the California guests loved being downtown.

Then we had to pick a name for the convention. This, too, was controversial. The event was almost called "Swinging in the Rain," but we felt that name would not appeal to those who loved the sun. Seattle's Easter Swing won out. Again Ray Gerring, who had created the backdrop for Swinging Through the Years, created the original egg logo, which has held through the years. (One of our great ideas that didn't work was to hold a contest for a logo design. We got one design - a bunny popping out of a cracked egg holding a Space Needle!)

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions

Doing an entire convention ourselves was much more difficult. Without Maria's help and the dozen or so leads it just wouldn't have happened. We felt our way along with what seemed to make sense - always with an eye on staying profitable, creating a quality event, and working in a business-like fashion.

We selected our Leads to manage all the responsibilities and met monthly from June through December and then twice a month until the convention. Everybody had major responsibilities they had never fulfilled before so we had to write job descriptions, coordinate who would do what, and figure out how many volunteers everyone needed. These meetings were always held in our dance/recreation room in Edmonds and combined work, fun and food. Often we went to lunch, to dinner or dancing afterwards.

We whittled down the number of Leads from 1990's SSS, but we enhanced the role of the Lead for volunteers. This person's job was to organize, schedule, and arrange training for all 100 plus volunteers, and we established the policy that the Lead would procure and train his or her replacement. This strategy contributed greatly to the success of SES and it has been adopted by other events.

The last lead's meeting the Saturday before the event was the all-day walkthrough. Since we had never been through a convention weekend we had to assimilate one. Since this was before computers that managed these details, we taped newsprint to the wall to create a gigantic grid about 12 feet by 12 feet. Down one side we listed every hour of the convention from Thursday at 5 PM to Sunday at midnight. Across the top we wrote each lead's responsibility.

We went through every hour of the event tracking what was happening in every room. This was tedious, but it stopped us from scheduling an instructor to judge the same event they were competing in, and from scheduling a workshop with a teacher before they had been picked up at the airport! Today, of course, there is no need for this because everyone is so familiar with the hotel and has managed their responsibilities before.

We had no money for initial expenses so we established a Kick-off dance in October to pre-sell tickets to cover initial expenses. This strategy - create urgency to buy your SES ticket now - worked well. We never once used any of SSDC's money. Since the kick-off dances were organized around a visiting national dance couple the SSDC dance that evening was well attended. We created a raffle and a drawing to award several front row seats to SSDC members because some were miffed that they had to sit in the back at their own event.

We were so concerned about expenses that we gave NOTHING away. Dean and I worked all year - and paid for our own tickets into the convention and bought our Bonus Books just like every attendee. We expected the leads and volunteers to do the same. We got pretty good at explaining why you should buy a ticket to the event and then spend all weekend working as hard as you would ever work in your life! After a couple of events we were able to relax that standard.

We worked creatively to offer an event that would provide attendees with many experiences they wouldn't normally have. We wanted to encourage participants to attend workshops - so Dean thought up the idea of the Bonus Book, which allowed attendees

to take workshops for a discount. (This has now changed to a wrist band that is purchased.) We couldn't afford to provide a meal to our attendees like the California clubs because we had to pay for our instructors to travel. – so, we added a coupon in the Bonus Book for a lunch.

We wanted to provide quality workshops so Skippy Blair helped us organize our workshops by levels. Her advice and influence in getting good teachers like Mary Ann Nunez, Wayne and Sharlot Bott, and Kelly Buckwalter was invaluable. Our event is still known for its workshop program because workshops are organized by levels so attendees at any level of development have a choice.

The event was a huge success. It was also the most profitable event we have ever held. We were encouraged – exhausted, depleted, but also very, very grateful. I clearly remember the Tuesday after the event. I sat in our family room and personally hand-wrote thank you notes to all one hundred volunteers from Dean and I for their help. I was writing from my heart.

Seattle's Easter Swing - 1995

We moved forward with the 1995 event, relieved to have at least some experience to base upcoming decisions on.

The event in 1995 was held at the Sheraton Hotel in downtown Seattle. It was successful and profitable but not as well attended as our first event. SSDC also sponsored a Regional event that year in the fall. After both events, the SSDC volunteers were worn out. In addition, because SES was held the same weekend as another popular event in Dallas, the two events were competing for the best teachers and convention attendees. With all those factors in play we decided to "give it a rest." There was no Seattle's Easter Swing in 1996. We thought we could have an event every other year, perhaps alternating with Dallas, but more than anything else, we thought we needed a break!

NASDE Membership

That plan changed, too. During 1995, the National Association of Swing Dance Events (NASDE) was formed by Jack Bridges, founder of the prestigious US OPEN Swing Dance Champions, and Barry Durand, an East Coast event director. The purpose of this organization was to provide an extra incentive for the top dancers to attend a NASDE event by allowing them to accumulate points for winning competitions all year long at those events. Additional prize money would be awarded to the four female and male dancers with the most points at the conclusion of the tour, which was going to be the US OPEN Swing Dance Championships in November.

NASDE would consist of the top twelve events in the nation. Our competitive juices churned. We wanted those top dancers in Seattle, and we wanted the prestige of belonging to NASDE. We applied in 1996 and we were rejected. Dallas was already a member and members couldn't have events on the same weekend. Skipping 1996 worked against us because members had to have yearly events. We applied again after our 1997 event and were accepted because we now had a yearly event and because Dallas dropped out of NASDE.

SES Again in 1997

Without the convention in 1996 SSDC lacked energy and a goal to work toward. So we aimed for 1997 with fewer leads and more confidence in how to get the event organized and keep it successful.

We kept the same format – many workshop choices, private lessons, champion teachers and competitors. We moved the event to the Doubletree in Bellevue because the prices of the downtown hotels had become prohibitive. Dean and I continued as co-chair with Maria Marabella working closely with us still. Mark Johnston also joined the planning committee. Together, the four of us did most of the planning with the Leads beginning their jobs in January.

We looked for other ways to make SSDC's event even more successful. We needed the incentive of good prize money to attract the best dancers – so we started the Sponsorship Program, adding \$6000 in prize money that did not have to come out of SSDC or convention revenue.

We wanted to provide our attendees with dance education and our instructors with more income so the Private Lesson Program was born. This was another one of Dean's ideas because he believed that those who pay to take a private lesson should have a floor to dance on and music to dance to. Alicia Leo organized and led this program and it is still the most effective Private Lesson Program in the nation.

Those who want lessons are scheduled in advance and the fee is collected. Up to 8 or 10 lessons can be taught at one time in various spaces around the hotel and usually 75 or more lessons are taught during a convention weekend. Each space has a floor and music. The instructors are simply handed their schedule and are directed to a teaching space. SES charges just \$10 for that service.

We also needed to encourage the best teachers and judges to come to Seattle because we were competing with other events for the presence of the dance champions. We continued to do everything we could to make them feel special. We met our staff at the airport and transported them to the hotel. We put snack baskets in their rooms, and we assigned them an assistant if they needed one. To this day many instructors return every year to our event. Many events now offer these niceties, but we were the first.

The conventions from 1997 – 2000 got in a groove. The format worked and every event was profitable. For the first time in its history SSDC had a healthy cash reserve from convention revenue. Experienced volunteers were now repeating responsibilities and things went smoother every year. One occurrence stood out during these years more than any other - and that is when we were...

...Lightless in Seattle!

This particular Easter weekend a storm was raging. Just when we were ready to begin the Invitational late Sunday afternoon the lights flickered and went out. Hundreds of dancers sat stunned in the windowless ballroom. The hotel was dark and silent.

After we realized what was happening we organized as best we could. We found flashlights and pulled the 16 Invitational dancers in a room where they voted to dance to boom box music and split the prize money evenly. Dancers felt their way back to their rooms to recover batteries, boom boxes, and anything that would provide light. Dean inched toward the bowels of the hotel to get the latest report on battery power. The hotel got out the votive candles, which gave a nice glow to the person you were sitting next to, but did little to light up the cavernous ball room.

Our Master of Ceremonies that year was our very own Mark Johnston (no relation). We had to keep 400 people occupied in the dark so he began telling stories. He got through the clean jokes he knew and then headed toward stories that got more and more off-color. Mark and I still laugh about me striding out on the floor with a scowl on my face to “thank him for his time!” The audience roared. Then, Buddy Schwimmer took over the floor and danced and sang his special version of “Up a Lazy River” – Go figure!

Just when we had everything organized with fresh batteries in the biggest boom box we could find and the first Invitational couple walked on the floor – the lights came back on! Back to the room with the dancers. Another vote. They still danced to entertain and split the prize money equally.

Obtaining a good Master of Ceremonies each year was a challenge. In 1994 and 1995 Pat Locantore had the job. In 1997, after our year of rest, our very own Mark Johnston teamed with Sue Wagner, a dance teacher and MC from Portland. Since SES began we had been trying to hire the US OPEN MC, Kenny Wetzel, and in 1998 we finally succeeded. In 1999 Mark Johnston handled the job himself and in 2000 Barry Jones, champion dancer from Dallas, took the microphone. Then, from 2001 through the present Grace Killellea Meadows has been the choice.

The format we developed continued until 2000. By this time we were really tired. Dean and I had been volunteering our time to organize events since 1988, which was 12 years. We had chaired the 1990 event and six Seattle Easter Swings. We had traveled to 4 or 5 events a year and worked the whole weekend to promote SES and to hire the best dance stars. It was time for us to either go or be paid. This caused a huge, heated discussion in SSDC, which was resolved through two coinciding events.

First, Dean and I became co-owners and Event Directors of the US OPEN in 2000, which automatically meant we would have no time for SES. Secondly, Alica Leo volunteered to chair SES when she took a leave of absence from her job IF we agreed to work with her for her first year, which was the 2001 event. We enthusiastically agreed.

Our Personal Favorites

As co-chairs we had a unique perspective about what made the event special. No, it wasn't the dancing. There is no time to dance when you are running an event. It wasn't even the performances because, since we traveled to 4 or 5 other events a year, we had probably already seen them.

Personally, I had two favorites. The first was the party we had at our home in Edmonds on the Wednesday before the convention, which was a tradition we started in 1994. The Leads, out-of-town attendees who were in Seattle and any teachers or judges that would come in a day early were invited to a catered dinner at our home with dancing afterwards in our downstairs recreation room. Thirty-five – forty-five people attended every year and we had a blast!!

This was my favorite because we loved to entertain in our home and also, since the event was catered, we could relax and enjoy everyone. I still remember when Robert Cordoba went around the room and asked every one of our female leads to dance. Made our day!!

My second favorite was the church service at 9 AM on Easter Sunday. After the first year, when we learned that having a “real” minister would not work, our service was facilitated by someone at the event. Jackie McGee and Barry Jones were two staff members who led this service. Everyone would sit in a semi-circle and participate in wonderful, spiritual discussions about the place of dancing in our lives and what Easter meant to each of us. You never knew who would show up and you left refreshed and grounded in the real meaning of community.

Special Thanks

The danger of naming names is that someone may feel left out, but there are just some special people without whom we could not have been successful.

Maria Marabella

She was the “co-chair’s chair” and appreciated quality as much as we did. She sold tickets for the first few years, was the competition lead, and then served on the planning committee. She proofread every document, brochure, and letter.

Mark Johnston

Mark was on the planning committee for many years and kept us laughing the whole time. He was our MC for two years and was always along when we attended other events.

Bob Young

Bob was our Facilities Lead for all these years and was Mr. Reliable. He picked up equipment at the rental facilities, got the ballroom lights right, charged batteries, put out chairs, and did anything that needed to be done.

Alicia Leo

Alicia’s Private Lesson Program was exceptional. She followed us as SES Event Director.

Other NASDE Convention Directors

They all shared information and encouragement willingly through our many trials.

Skippy Blair and Annie Hirsch

Skippy and Annie encouraged us when we didn’t know what we were doing.

SSDC Volunteers and Leads

Gosh, we had fun doing all of this! Without all of you SES couldn’t have happened.

So that’s the story from the beginning.

Every year we enjoy watching hundreds of dancers having the time of their lives at Seattle’s Easter Swing and we feel rewarded that we played a part in helping to create a forum for these memories.

Written by Karen Johnston – February 2004, revised May 2011