

**Interview with *Flurry Festival* and DanceFlurry Organization Founders Paul Rosenberg and Pat Melita by Don Bell, December 2007 - (first published in the 2008 Flurry Festival program book)**



In 2008 The *Flurry Festival* Planning Committee decided to honor Festival founders Paul Rosenberg and Pat Melita by assigning their names to two of the venues used for the Festival. As a further tribute to their pivotal role in establishing the Festival, I recently interviewed Paul and Pat about the beginnings of the Festival and the DanceFlurry Organization.

In 1986 the Old Songs organization held a successful dance weekend at the Farnsworth Middle School in Guilderland called “Winter Dance Fest”. There about 30 to 50 musicians, callers and leaders and 400-500 dancers. It took place all day Saturday and all day Sunday. In 1987, Old Songs thought about doing it again but in the autumn of that year the director stepped down.

Both Pat and Paul were asked separately if they would direct it. Both declined.

Later in 1987, Nancy Gretta and Paul Rosenberg car-pooled to the Brattleboro, Vermont, Labor Day Dawn Dance. As they drove, they reminisced about how wonderful the one and only *Old Songs Winter Dance Fest* had been. Nancy asked Paul (partially in jest) if he would organize a replacement festival. Initially, Paul told Nancy she was crazy and that he was not interested in organizing such an event. However, a day or two later he reconsidered and decided to organize a smaller, one-day festival showcasing local talent.

Paul thought he could do it because of his previous experience working for nonprofit organizations and organizing dance events. In early 1987 he created *Hudson Mohawk Country Dancers (HMCD)*. This later became *Hudson-Mohawk Traditional Dances, Inc.*, and in May 2005 the dba name became the *DanceFlurry Organization*. In order to obtain grants, tax deductibility and other benefits, Paul obtained nonprofit status. It was formed as a chapter of the national *Country Dance and Song Society (CDSS)*.

In June, 1987, as the first activity of *HMCD*, Paul started a dance series in Schenectady. He went on to organize a dance for the Honest Weight Food Coop and a dance for Social Justice Center. As President of the Hudson Mohawk Road Runners Club, he had also organized races for runners for over 12 years, secured the organization’s nonprofit status and wrote and edited the newsletter.

In starting the *Flurry*, Paul’s goal was to showcase local talent (i.e. within a 90 minute driving range of the Capital region) and have a few out-of-town big names. The first *February Dance Flurry* was a one-day festival held at the Westmere Elementary School in Guilderland, NY, on February 13, 1988. Over 300 dancers attended a highly successful event staffed entirely by 38 local and regional performers, including Jay Ungar, Molly Mason, George Wilson, Selma Kaplan, Pat Rust, Mary Cay Brass, Van Kaynor, Alan Thomson and the St. Regis String Band. There were three events going on at once. There was a pot luck dinner and an auction to benefit the *Flurry* and the Pittsfield, Massachusetts dance series.

Despite the initial success, the festival almost died in 1989. Some key people resigned from the

organizing committee. Paul was just about to quit. Then Pat Melita and Tim Grant stepped in and convinced him to continue. They formed a new committee that included some really dedicated people, who were hard-working, selfless, and willing to engage in give-and-take.



The long term success of the Festival has been in large part due to the passion and teamwork of the founders during the early years. Paul and Pat put a lot of passion into the festival, working on the event every spare minute they had, talking for hours on the phone almost every night for several months leading up to the event. They were a great team. As Paul confesses, “I’m not well-organized”. Thus, Pat’s organizational skills were key to making the *Flurry* fly. She insisted on getting a separate *Flurry Festival* checking account to keep track of finances. She worked hard on taking care of little details. She was up early in the morning working on mailings that covered her dining room table. About year

three she became Treasurer, then assistant director. A few years later she became co-director. When Paul took a leave of absence in late 1997 (from the 1998 *Flurry*), Pat was the sole director.

Grants from arts organizations (e.g. New York State Council on the Arts) and the hard work of many local volunteers were also key to getting the *Flurry* off the ground in the early years. Volunteers that were a tremendous help at the beginning include: Mary Ann VanAlstyne, Brea Barthel, Phyllis Ochs, Natalie Hawley and Marjorie Geiger.

From 1989 till 1994 the *DanceFlurry Festival* was held at the Farnsworth Middle School in Guilderland. In 1994, about three weeks before the *Flurry*, cold weather had burst water pipes in the school's gymnasium and ruined the floor. The *Flurry* organizers had to scramble to find an alternative venue. They managed to cobble together a festival held at three different venues in the city of Saratoga Springs - the City Hall Music Hall on Friday night, the City Center and Sheraton Hotel on Saturday, and Skidmore College on Sunday.

Paul and Pat were very grateful to the Saratoga community for their positive support of the festival from the beginning. Marion Altieri encouraged Joseph Dalton to bring the *Flurry* to Saratoga. Joseph Dalton, head of Saratoga Chamber of Commerce, was key in getting the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the City Hall converted back into a wonderful dance and performance space. Many stores had “Welcome *Dance Flurry*” signs in their windows.

Over time, more venues were gradually added. At Doug Haller’s suggestion, the Canfield Casino was added in 1997. In 1998 Pat had the idea of using the hotel’s “High Rock Pub” for music concerts. Other venues that are used include the Parting Glass, the Dance Museum, and Temple Sinai.

In terms of programming, the first year of the festival had Contra, English, Swing, Cajun, Scandinavian, International, and African events. Paul’s ideas about programming were influenced by his observation of other festivals (e.g. NEFFA, Old Songs, Ashokan Northern Week). As Paul started getting involved in family dance events, children’s programs were added to the program in the early 1990s. Inspired by Northern Week at Ashokan, Paul then added instrumental workshops. Music jams were encouraged and eventually became a vital part of the festival. The little nooks and crannies, halls and stairways of the hotel now overflow with a cornucopia of live music during the festival.

From its humble beginnings in 1988 as a one day event in a school gymnasium with 300 attendees, the *Flurry Festival* has blossomed over the last 25 years into a major national arts event with over 600 performers and 300 *Flurry* staff and volunteers providing an exciting weekend of entertainment for nearly 5000 people from all parts of the country. Long live the *Flurry*!



**Addendum:**

During the February 2006 Flurry, a big wind storm changed everything when it knocked out the power for the entire festival weekend, suddenly leaving our small organization with financial losses of staggering proportions. It was only through the generosity of our performers, our dancers, dance organizers and the local community that we were able to recover and build a stronger-than-ever Flurry Festival.

February 2006 Flurry Festival photo by Lawrence White