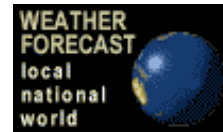


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Dancing into the night on Saturday at the amphitheater just off the square in Mt. Vernon. At upper right, Meet in the Middle tango festival organizer Karen Whitesell.

**Few  
know  
both.**

## Annual tango festival in Mt. Vernon defies the heat for a good time

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Meet in the Middle draws nearly 100 for dancing, rural hospitality

Few if any dances are as seductive or engaging as the Argentinean tango. Like American ragtime, it began in the seedy subculture and developed into an art form. Today, popularity of tango dancing is rising and becomes irresistible for its participants.

At the fourth annual Meet in the Middle Argentinean tango festival in Mt. Vernon this past weekend, one of the instructors was Hsueh-tze (SHU-tzee) Lee. A PhD in biology and instructor at Wellesley College outside Boston, Lee decided "teaching was getting in the way of my dancing." She quit her job, and now spends her time as a tango instructor, in demand at event after event across the country.

Festival organizer Karen Whitesell reported her festival "is small but well liked. I'm the best thing between Denver and Atlanta," thus justifying the "meet in the middle" name. This year's event drew nearly 100 people, down from 120 last year. Whitesell attributed the drop to high gasoline prices and higher plane fares.

The 100-degree temperatures further impacted traveling. Commercial jets cannot get the same lift in high temperatures, forcing delays across the country and passengers getting bumped to lighten the load. Ramu Pyreddy took 28 hours to get in from Philadelphia by way of Memphis. A storm Thursday delayed travel, forcing a missed connection, then repeated bumps to lighten the plane pushed his arrival back farther.

Nonetheless, Whitesell had festival participants from 17 states and Montreal. There was a large contingent from Tulsa, as well as groups from Kansas City and St. Louis, Little Rock, Topeka, and Lawrence, Kansas. College towns, she noted, have been a great source for tango dancers, and she had many from area universities participating.

The festival's routine offered instructional sessions on Thursday night and through each afternoon, and the formal dance (the Milonga) long into the night. Whitesell had numerous instructors: Chas Gale, Gaia Banovich, Tomas Howlin, Lee, and Pyreddy who taught and provided recorded music. In Pyreddy's absence on Friday night, Lee's inventory of downloaded recordings on her laptop saved the day.

Whitesell had classes in her studio at Murray's Vintage Venue on the square in Mt. Vernon, and also had the studio for Ann's Dancers a quarter mile away booked for the second consecutive year.

The music could be heard floating out of the buildings, the exotic syncopated beat that was obviously not typical fare in southwest Missouri. Whitesell pointed out with amusement that in a town of 4,000, her tango community is larger on a per capita basis than hugely populated cities like New York and Berlin.

Howlin had commented that in all his world travels, there is no place like the festival in Mt. Vernon. Festival attendees, Whitesell recalled, "all say it's relaxed and friendly here. They love the country feeling, the friendly townspeople. I explain country people are brought up to be hospitable, and welcome visitors."

To make the festival work, without mass transportation, Whitesell organized her own weekend taxi service to get participants back and forth from the motels, and had catered meals. She arranged housing for the instructors at the homes of local supporters.

The two favorite things festival goers confessed to craving, she revealed, were homegrown tomatoes, and the 2 p.m. ice cream break, when the local truck pulled up outside Murray's.

The mix of people was part of the event's charm. Mostly professionals, the festival participants could remain as anonymous as they wanted. Pyreddy observed that when he started getting into tango in 2000, he was in graduate school, and he tended to only see people in the same line of work. Once he got into dancing, he came into contact with people in all walks of life.

All the participants had stories. Jeffrey Maddox was from Indianapolis, and he was there with girlfriend Rae Dedmon from Springfield. They met at a tango event in St. Louis. Dedmon had been introduced to Argentinean tango at a massage therapy conference in Montreal, where a colleague's boyfriend was flying in to give tango lessons. Dedmon read about Whitesell in 417 Magazine. This was her third time coming to Meet in the Middle, and Maddox's second.

Maurine Perry from Tulsa had only been dancing the tango for four months. She had come in with others from Tulsa. She was particularly enjoying the instructors, and commented, "The opportunity to dance with other good dancers is a top priority."

John and Candy from Tulsa were in Mt. Vernon for the first time as well. Candy commented on how she liked the atmosphere in Whitesell's second story studio, its high ceiling with chandeliers and long windows.

Carol Ilvonen heard about Meet in the Middle from tango teachers in Denver. Working now in Fort Leonard Wood, she was another first time visitor to the Mt. Vernon event. Her goal was "primarily to enjoy the tango experience, to learn and be involved with it. The tango is a mind dance. You're thinking while responding. You're constantly learning. It's never the same. It's not a pattern of steps. It's always interpretation, a process."

Pyreddy described the tango further. "It's a very naked dance. You can't hide yourself. It really magnifies the personality."

Janis Richmond of Springfield has been to all the Meet in the Middle festivals, and assists Whitesell. She has been taking tango lessons and dancing for five

years. The thrill for her is "the music, and the connections between the dancers. It's like you're dancing with the whole room."

That too is an observation Whitesell made. Watching the Friday night dance, her favorite song playing, Whitesell commented, "The whole floor was dancing as one. All that connection--it was perfect. I got teary eyed."

It may all seem like magic, but the instructors stressed the idea that the dance is really attainable by anyone. Lee told her introductory class tips about "vertical lift," for the women to feel that there is a string attached to the top of their heads. like a marionette, lifting them into the dance. Lee talked about posture, leaning a little bit into one's partner to apply pressure to slow, or to feel the leader's intentions.

Like a Zen master, Lee connected with her class, and seemed to explain some concepts almost in reverse. For example, she recalled how some especially skilled dancers, when commended on how they take the lead, will simply credit their fluidity to being a follower, not a leader.

Lee explained the lead dancer extends the invitation, expressing intentions by body movement. The follower accepts the invitation and steps first. This is especially true in complex sequences. Lee talked about being in tune with the invitation, and avoiding backward stepping where it seems the follower is running away from the leader.

Part of the mystique of the dance for the women is the shoes. As a woman dances on the balls of her feet, the sleek aeronautic three-inch spike heels put her in the perfect position. A table full of amazing shoes, an assemblage of elevated open-air straps, sat inside Murray's during the festival, available for \$150 and \$200 a pair, gleaming in the room's light invitingly to onlookers. Whitesell explained the shoes were available through a boutique run by an out-of-town tango enthusiast.

Shoes were treasured by their owners as well. Saturday night activities were punctuated by an outdoor demonstration by many of the interested festival participants in the Mt. Vernon amphitheater, a block off the square. A wood floored dancing area was positioned in the arena for the dancers. Pyreddy had his sound equipment set up in front of them, hooked to his laptop so he could offer an instant and wide ranging selection of music from his 15,000 song inventory.

After returning to the studio, one of the dancers carefully took her best dancing shoes out of a bag, and slipped them back on her feet. She explained dancers had been warned not to risk their prize shoes on the concrete, even to walk to the dancing area. It was like her dress, a gauzy light weight number. "When you find a dress like this that fits, you want to take care of it," she said. Therefore she had no intentions of sitting down at the amphitheater, and risking having her dress snag on the gritty concrete seats.

The dance in the amphitheater was more successful than expected. Whitesell said more than 200 people turned out. "It was just like Field of Dreams. They came out of cars from all over." Whitesell has been promoting the Arts in the Park program in Mt. Vernon, and felt the attendance reflected a hunger for more arts opportunities.

For the evening Milongas, the ladies had very fine dresses--not tight sleeve-like prom gowns with floor length skirts, but dresses with billowing knee-length skirts, some with high cuts for movement. Sleeveless and often low cut, the dresses were a declaration of freedom in themselves, and suited for the warm weather. The men, without their jackets, could barely look in the same league, though many switched to more formal long-sleeved shirts for the evening, rolling up the sleeves.

Part of the success of the dances depended on the music selection. Pyreddy explained with the growing popularity of the tango, a lot more recordings were being released. Many older recordings were also being re-released, a treat for music lovers. Yet, he noted, many of the densely played and exciting pieces are not necessarily easy to dance to. His job was to shape the music to meet the dancers' needs.

"I never thought I would dance," Pyreddy commented. "Now it's a big part of my life. It will change your life in ways you never imagined."

Whitesell was pleased with the festival overall. How her century-old brick building held in the air conditioning was a big plus. It took her a week to move the accessories for her stained glass studio out of the lower level of Murray's to make room for festival meals, and she expected it would take another week to get everything back to normal.

One of her ongoing goals, echoed by assistant Janis Richmond, is getting the word around locally about how much fun dancing the Argentinian tango is, and getting more people involved who can enjoy regular lessons in Mt. Vernon. Whitesell is starting plans for next year's event. She is a little concerned about future accommodations if the studio for Ann's Dancers sells, but finding a place to dance has always been a challenge. But that's for the future. For now, she is revelling in the memory of another dance well done.

Murray's Vintage Venue offers weekly tango lessons on Thursdays, starting at 7:30 p.m. during the summer and 7 p.m. during the winter.

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