

Time To Tango: Hartford's Metro Tango Hosts Monthly Parties



Margaret McLaren of West Hartford dances the Argentine Tango with instructor... (Cloe Poisson, cpoisson@courant.com)
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A man and a woman move around a dance floor in an embrace so tight their upper bodies are one, their eyes closed, their legs moving in impromptu steps, but so coordinated that it seems she is reading his mind.

they are. The two are not lovers. Then again, maybe

"We may never see each other again or talk to each other, but for 10 minutes, we are lovers," says Kim-Yen Vu.

Vu and her partner were dancing at a Tango Mundo, a social dance sponsored by Metro Tango, which meets every third Friday of the month in the Metropolitan Community Church in Hartford.

"At first, I thought, 'Tango, that's not for me. How can I be so intimate with a stranger?'" says Vu, who drives down from Kittery, Maine, to tango with the Tango Mundo group. "But by the time I learned to dance it, it was for me. Now I can't live without it."

Tango Mundo, which is open to the public, is organized by Jaime and Alexandra Alvarez of Northampton, Mass., who also teach tango at the Hartford location. The couple, immigrants from Colombia, also hold regular dances and classes in Willimantic and Amherst, Mass.

Jaime Alvarez, 74, has been dancing tango since was a child in Bogota.

"My grandmother had six boys and six girls. All of them had at least four kids. Once a month we would all get together and dance the tango," Alvarez says. "I wasn't good at first. I was dancing with a girl once and I fell and took her down with me. And then when she was coming up I stood on her dress. I was embarrassed. I thought, I have to learn this."

And he did. He came to America in 1967 and danced for recreation. He has been teaching tango and organizing tango-dancing events since 2000. His specialty is

Milonguera style, or close-embrace, Argentinian-style tango, in which the dancers hold each other close from the waist up, with only their legs moving separately.

"You have to learn to embrace first," he says. "The dancers have to move as one unit."

Alvarez says the kind of tango popularized on such shows as "So You Think You Can Dance" and "Tango Fever," is "fantasy tango," meant for performance rather than social dancing. Nevertheless, those shows have caused a resurgence in the popularity of tango all around New England, with other tango events, such as the Connecticut Tango Festival, growing in numbers.

At the August Tango Mundo, each "milonguero," a person who spends time dancing social tango, has a different story about how they became devoted to tango dancing.

"I was out with my girlfriend, Alicia, and we went out to dinner and after dinner everybody pushed back the tables and started doing the tango," says Stan Huntley of Glastonbury. "All these men were asking Alicia to dance. I was just sitting there. I said 'I don't know how to do this.' That was just a few months ago."

Huntley taught square dancing for years. George Gibson, another Tango Mundo regular, has a dance background, too: The physics professor is faculty adviser of the ballroom dance team at the University of Connecticut.

Margaret McLaren, a Hartford pediatrician, also is a longtime dancer. She trained in ballet in her youth. She began taking lessons from Alvarez a few years ago, when she was going through a divorce and wanted to develop some new interests. "I didn't know anything about the different types of tango. I envisaged the cliché, a woman with a rose in her teeth," McLaren says. "It's given me a whole new artistic life, a rebirth of the passion I had when I was younger. I was a healing process."

Brynn Deprey, who grew up in Southington, does not have a dance background. She took up tango in Cambridge, England, where she lives now, as a way to meet people. "It's a great connection with someone. It's all improvisation," she said. "When you connect with someone, it's wonderfully addictive."

Roy Burge doesn't have a dance background either, and he grew up listening to other types of music. "I'm from Jamaica. We have reggae there. The beat of reggae is fast. Tango is slow," Burge says. "It is taking me a while to learn. I came to meet people."

Alvarez has a degree in physics from a college in Colombia and a doctorate in counseling from UMass Amherst. He had a private practice in Holyoke, Mass., for 22 years before retiring. He said his counseling experience helped him be a better teacher. "One of my specialties was nonverbal communication. In tango, the dancers have to communicate nonverbally," he said. "The man needs to telegraph what she needs to do. The connection is so intimate."

More than anything else, however, tango is a way to socialize, get some exercise and stay young.

"You never get old if you can dance and embrace a woman," he says.

METRO TANGO meets at the Colt Cadwell Memorial, in the back of Metropolitan Community Church, 155 Wyllys St. in Hartford, on the third Friday of every month. Jaime and Alexandra Alvarez arrive at 6:30 p.m. to introduce new people to tango, and social dancing begins at 7:30 p.m. No partner is required. Leather-soled footwear is a must. The Alvarezes teach classes every Thursday at the Colt Cadwell, beginners from 6 to 7 p.m. and intermediate from 7 to 8 p.m., followed by two hours of dancing. Lessons are also held at Kramer Gym, 322 Prospect St. in Willimantic, every Sunday, beginners at 2 p.m. and intermediate at 3 p.m. Lessons are \$15 a session, or \$60 for five. Metro Tango social dance events are \$10 a person. To join the classes or the Tango Mundo events, call 860-922-1420 or 413-585-9695 or 617-308-7370. For other tango events in Connecticut, visit cttangofest.org and tango.havetodance.com.