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# FREE to be ME!

**For 40-plus years, Special Friends have been lighting up the dance floor at Fri. night dances**

**By Darrell Halen  
 MethuenLife Writer**

As the popular Aretha Franklin song "Respect" was played in the Methuen YMCA gymnasium on a recent Friday evening, 14 adults danced along – many of them with smiles on their faces.

Many of the dancers, and the people watching them, were wearing leis and the tables there had been draped over with pink and light green covers for this fun, Hawaiian luau-style event.

The two-hour dance was one of the Y's monthly Special Friends Dances. They are very special to the dancers and the people who come with them because they provide the participants – disabled and developmentally challenged individuals – a comfortable and enjoyable social outlet.

There is lots of energy. Lots of smiles. Lots of nice memories being made.

"It's a social outlet with their peers," said Executive Director Anne Whalen. "It's a fun night out. It's a very special event. We look forward to them every month."

With the exception of only July and August, the Y hosts the themed dances the



**Joanne Cavallaro and Kevin McCarthy dance to the Phil Collins song "Against All Odds (Take a Look at Me Now)."**

*MethuenLife photos by Darrell Halen*

first Friday of every month for adults age 22 and older.

Some of the participants attended dances for people with special needs that were previously held at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church by another group. Jim Blough and his wife, Donna, Lowell residents, have been

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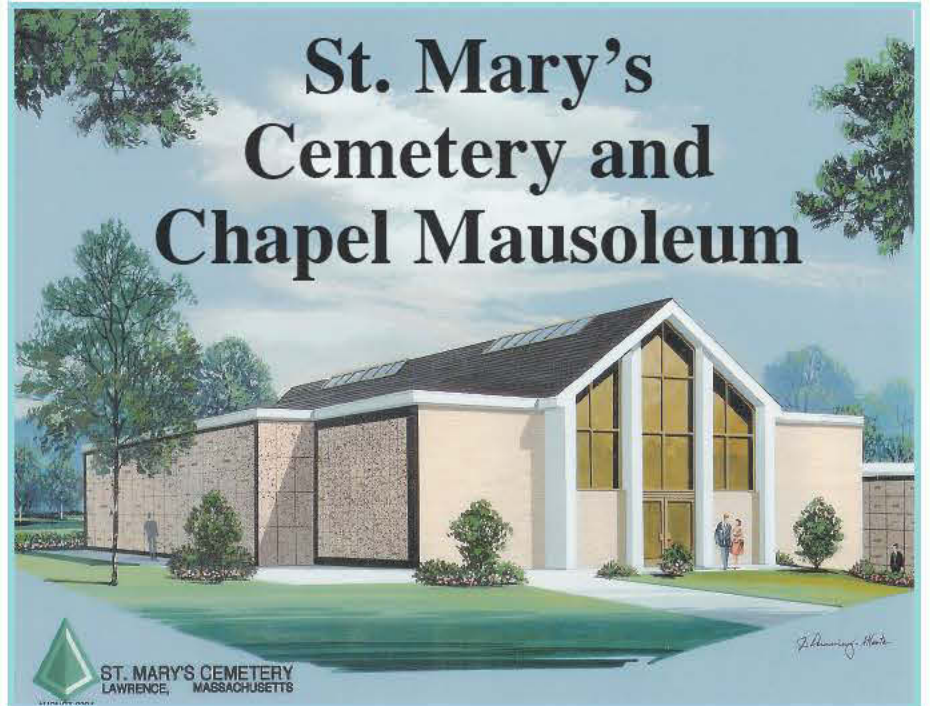
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coming to dances for about 12 years. Their autistic son, Joel, 34, is a regular attendee. Socialization can be a challenge for folks with disabilities, said Jim, who added that dance participants become friends.

"You walk in and there is this whole world of folks with disabilities. They're socializing. They're comfortable," Jim said.

"For (Joel), coming to the dances – it's a familiar surrounding. Everyone knows what to expect. I think all the folks are relaxed here. There are some environments (elsewhere) that are not so comfortable. ... This is a really comfortable environment," he added.

During the night, participants danced to a variety of popular songs, including "Sugar, Sugar" by the Archies, Chicago's "If You Leave Me Now," "Shake It Up" by the Cars, "The Safety Dance" by Men Without Hats and Wham!'s "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go."

Music is played from a laptop controlled by someone on stage.

"You guys were lighting up the dance floor!" Whalen said to several dancers.

The dances are a success thanks to the people who help out, and Whalen credits Y employee Marisol Paredes for the role she plays at the dances. She has become a hit among the participants.

"She is usually on the dance floor, getting them going," Whalen said. "They adore her. They are always giving her hugs. The

participants really love her."

Although these special dances have been offered at the Y for roughly five years, dances for people with special needs have been running in Merrimack Valley for more than 40 years.

In 1975, Gertrude Bowes and her daughter, Joanna Bowes, and a friend of Joanna's began dances at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Lawrence. Their mission was to provide a social outlet for Gertrude's son, John A. Bowes Jr., who has Down syndrome, and his peers with disabilities.

The dances were held on the first and third Fridays of the month from September through June in the church's parish hall.

In 1999, Gertrude retired to Florida and asked another daughter, Trudi Driscoll, and Trudi's husband, George, to host the dances with Joanna.

Knowing that the Lawrence church had a stairwell that was difficult to navigate, the Driscolls sought and received permission from their church, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Methuen, in September 2000, to hold dances in its parish hall.

Thanks to being handicapped-accessible and having larger floor space, attendance grew from 45 people at the dance's former location to 100 to 150 people at the new site.

The name of the dances was changed from "The Friday Night Dance" to "The Friday Night Specials" and were open to the disabled and to developmentally and



**John A. Bowes Jr. was the inspiration behind the dances, which started in 1975.**

intellectually challenged residents in the Merrimack Valley and surrounding communities.

"It's a community within a community," said Trudi Driscoll, a Methuen resident. "It allows them to be themselves and no one saying they are acting funny or differently. It gave them the opportunity to be themselves, to express themselves. It gave them a social outlet that wasn't there."

St. Andrew's provided use of its parish hall, light and heat and as a community outreach. A \$2 donation – organizers knew the participants didn't have much money – was requested of each attendee at each dance to cover the cost of a DJ, refreshments and supplies, according to the Driscolls.

The dances enjoyed the support of many people, including community service volunteers from Central Catholic High School, parents, dee-jay Jim Fraas who provided music for more than 20 years, and parishioners, including Beth Regan and Betty McKay.

Over the years, however, some volunteers were lost to age and illness. Joanna moved to Florida as John's guardian after the death of their mother. John, now 56, lives with her in Florida.

The Driscolls, who along with Regan were the remaining mainstay supporters of the dances, retired and searched without success to find an individual or a group to take over the dances.

Trudi eventually heard that the Y in Methuen, coincidentally, was going to hold dances for disabled and developmentally challenged individuals. After visiting with Whalen, Trudi knew that the dances benefitting people with special needs would continue and grow.

"It was an answer to our prayers," Trudi recalled. "If we had closed the doors they would have been devastated. This

## SPECIAL FRIENDS DANCES

Special Friends Dances are held Fridays, 6:30 to 8:30pm at the Methuen YMCA, 129 Haverhill St. They are open to adults age 22 and up, and cost \$5. Participants requiring assistance must be accompanied by a caregiver or family member who can attend free of charge.

Here's the 2018-2019 dance schedule and theme for each night:

Sept. 7: Totally '80s

Oct. 5: Costume Party

Nov. 2: New England Patriots

Dec. 7: Holiday Dance

Jan. 4: Happy New Year

Feb. 1: Valentine's Dance

March 1: St. Patrick's Dance

April 5: Country Western

May 3: Red Sox Nation

June 7: Hawaiian Luau (includes light dinner)

community gets so much from these dances."

An alternating schedule of dances at both locations provided the participants who had been dancing at the church with a smooth transition. The final dance at St. Andrew's was held in June 2013.

To promote the Methuen Y dances, Whalen reached out to various groups and agencies that serve people with special needs and to the Service Club of Andover which holds annual special field games for special needs athletes.

The June 1 dance this year drew more than 40 people. Artie Scott of Methuen, who likes to help out, is a faithful attendee.

"He's usually the first to arrive and the last to leave," Whalen said.

Mike Pauk and Jessie Hampton sat together at a table, waiting for a favorite song to be played to dance to. Jessie said she likes meeting new people, and Mike said he enjoys listening to the music.

At another table, Linda Fay, a case coordinator for CLASS Inc., a Lawrence-based provider of services for individuals with disabilities, watched people having a good time on the dance floor. She had brought several people to the event.

"They socialize. They love to dance," she said. "They love the oldies."

Whalen, who has a relative with a disability, knows the challenges people with special needs face. And she knew, prior to starting the Methuen Y dances, that people with special needs benefit from programs intended to support them.

Prior to coming to Methuen, she worked at The YMCA of the North Shore in Beverly where programs for people with disabilities, including dances, have been provided.

"Inclusion, we know, is important as much as possible but there's also a need for specific programs," she said.



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