

LETTER FROM
AMERICA

Effie Caldarola



A glimpse of Jesus at a country dance

If it's Thursday night, it's a free outdoor concert at a local mall. It's a pretty spot – a courtyard right next to an Italian restaurant with outdoor seating. Lots of flowers, a small stage, a few iron benches.

There's a different band every Thursday, and this one wasn't bad. The place was packed by the time we arrived. Over 200 people with folding chairs that stretched out toward the sidewalks. The parking lots were jammed.

We met my brother and two of his children. It was a perfect June night, temperatures in the 70s, the sun making a slow descent behind the jewellery store on the west side of the courtyard.

Around the stage, tape marked off a little dance 'floor' and a few couples, mostly older, gamely took advantage of the music. I smiled at the senior citizens who would give each other a little kiss each time a song ended.

In the middle of the dancers was my nephew Ethan, who is 16 and has many of the traits of late adolescence: shaggy hair, tufts of whiskers that don't really constitute a beard but badly needed shaving nonetheless, a few skin blemishes, baggy shorts.

Ethan may have been the only 16-year-old in attendance. There were plenty of babies and elementary school kids there with young parents, lots of singles looking for something to do and plenty of older citizens. But this was not the teenage mall scene.

Ethan, however, has Down syndrome, and that changes up his social life a bit. And besides, there were prizes to be won and Ethan loves to compete for those. And music? Ethan loves it. Put *Mamma Mia* on and he's all over it, and at a recent performance with his 'Special Musicians' group', he belted out an impressive *We Will Rock You*, as a Queen fan will.

So, with a few couples dancing around him, Ethan stood in the middle, swaying to the music and remaining oblivious to the occasional elderly smooch.

Then an interesting thing happened. The band struck up *I Will Always Love You*, the ballad made famous by Whitney Houston. A cute blond woman, maybe late 20s, in the front row, dressed for a night out with her hair in a bun on the top of her head, got up and asked Ethan to dance. He accepted and they put their arms around each other. Obviously, someone's taught Ethan a few steps because he was smooth and held the woman gracefully until the song ended.

She went back to her seat with friends, and Ethan went back to swaying to the livelier tunes.

And me? I wondered what would prompt someone to make a gesture as that woman had. In a certain way, it was a risk. Would Ethan accept? Would she look foolish? Would he know what to do?

Jean Vanier, who founded L'Arche communities for the physically and intellectually challenged, once said, 'If you are blind to the poor, you are blind to God.'

Ethan is poor, but only in the sense that we are all poor in our distinct ways. Each of us has been alone on the dance floor sometime. Each of us has been the 'other' who longed for an invitation to dance.

Sometimes at Mass we sing, '*Lord of the Dance*.' I love that image of a dancing Jesus, dancing for the scribe, the Pharisee, the fisherman.

And I thought maybe I spotted Jesus dancing at the mall that night, with a cute outfit and a blond bun, leading us all as the dance went on.

[FROM A RECENT SCOTTISH CATHOLIC OBSERVER]

