

Milestone Award
49th CALLERLAB Convention
Tuesday, March 26, 2024
Presenter: Tony Oxendine

I am here tonight to present the CALLERLAB Milestone Award. The CALLERLAB Milestone Award is the highest award CALLERLAB can bestow on any individual. The nominee is judged against rigid criteria in five separate categories. A nominee must meet the criteria in all five categories to receive the award. The primary purpose of this award is to recognize those individuals, whether CALLERLAB Members or not, who have made outstanding and significant contributions to the field of square dancing. This is often a difficult decision, for there are many outstanding people in our activity.

The Milestone Award is presented to individuals who have met the following five-point criteria in the field of square dancing and have been selected by the Executive Committee (EC) to be honored in this way. The vote by the Executive Committee must be 100% in favor of the award presentation – All 5 members must vote Yes. One single negative vote and the Milestone is not awarded. As you can guess, many, if not most, nominations are denied initially. With that in mind the five - point criteria are as follows:

- 1) The recipient must have worked in UNCHARTED FIELDS.
- 2) The individual's contributions to the activity must have STOOD THE TEST OF TIME
- 3) These Contributions must have been UNSELFISH.
- 4) In the course of making those contributions, the recipient must have displayed true LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONALISM.
- 5) Finally, the recipients' work must have had a BROAD INFLUENCE on the activity.

It's at this point in most Milestone presentations that the presenter starts going through each of the five criteria and how the recipient fulfills these criteria. So, I may as well divulge it now. I realize that part of everyone's fun is guessing who the recipient by the vague clues in the presentation. Perhaps some of you figured it out when you realized that I was the presenter. I can guarantee that most of you will recognize this person as soon as I explain how this person has fulfilled the first criteria by working in UNCHARTED FIELDS. If you have been under a rock for the past 50 years, then you may need to know how this recipient's contributions have STOOD THE TEST OF TIME. There may still be some of you that don't realize exactly how UNSELFISH this recipient has been with his knowledge and talent. As I divulge this person's identity, I also intend to explain this recipient's LEADERSHIP and PROFESSIONALISM both with our organization and in square dancing in general.

There may still be one or two of you who are still in the dark about this recipient's identity. So I'll just have to tell you exactly who it is – But before I do, you should know that this recipient has had perhaps the most BROAD INFLUENCE of any caller in the modern era. I know I promised to tell you the identity several minutes ago, but before I do, there's something you should know. Although I wasn't on the Executive Committee that approved this award almost two years ago, I was on the Executive Committee that received another well thought out recommendation and presentation for this recipient. This

presentation was denied because it had already been approved the year before. So, Charlie Robertson and Jet Roberts, I owe you a big apology. I had to inform you that your presentation, though thoughtful and well laid out, was denied. You were just a year too late. So now, at least two of you know the recipient's identity – Well.....Maybe three since the third Amigo, Larry Letson is in attendance tonight. Yup – I had to lie to him too. Actually, all it took a phone call from our Executive Director to get him to show up.

This presentation is very personal to me, and may be a bit longer than most, but this recipient was an incredibly special person – Some would say the most gifted caller of modern times. Many would call him the G.O.A.T, and there is much to be said for that. Personally, I (and many others) would say that this person was probably the most naturally talented caller of our time – and I probably knew him better than anyone - shy of his immediate family. In 2000 the CALLERLAB Board of Governors wisely removed the restriction against presenting this award posthumously. Since I am sure that most of you have guessed this recipient's name by now, it is my distinct honor and privilege to inform you that CALLERLAB's highest honor, the Milestone, FINALLY goes to my best friend – Jerry Story.

Many of you only knew Jerry as the “famous travelling professional square dance caller and festival doer”. There are others – which include (as best as I can count) many past and current Committee Chairmen, many past and current Committee Vice Chairmen, many past BOG Chairmen(I think Ted may be one of the lucky ones), many past and present Executive Committee Members, many past and present Board of Governors Members, many fellow record producers, and most of his close friends (present company definitely included). I may still be leaving a few out - who knew him from being on the receiving end of one of his infamous, blistering emails or phone calls. It was kinda Jerry's way of showing you that he cared. So..... for those people and for the rest of you, allow me to tell you a little more about him.

Jerry was born on June 21, 1955, in Keokuk, IA. His uncle Milo taught him to play guitar at an early age – 7. Jerry was an apt student, and by the time he was 12, he was giving guitar lessons. Shortly afterwards, he formed a country western band where he played guitar and was the lead singer. Fortunately, for the square dance world, Jerry's future was not destined to be in the country music field. Jerry's parents were avid square dancers and they dragged Jerry to lessons. Again, he was an apt student and by the time he was fourteen, the calling bug bit him and a future star was born.

With his parents as his chauffeur, Jerry quickly started calling and teaching lessons for the clubs in his immediate area. In 1972, two of his early students were Phil and Mary Laux. Phil and Mary just happened to have a cute little fourteen-year-old daughter named – You guessed it – Kristy. After they graduated, Phil and Mary allowed Jerry to ride his dirt bike on their farm and on one of his rides he saw Kristy sitting in her front yard. 17 year old Jerry was immediately love struck (according to Kristy). Jerry graduated from high school in 1974 and the two were married in 1976. Later that year, their first son, Joshua, was born. Their second son, Jacob, was born in 1981.

After their first year of marriage, Jerry and Kristy moved to Fairfield, IA where Jerry went to work in the Laux family business – All American Pest Control. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Jerry Story was a BUG KILLER. As you can guess, with a wife and a small child at home, expenses for the Story family were kinda tight. Their family car was the pest control business station wagon – complete with two big magnetic signs on the front doors. By now, Jerry's calling circle was getting a lot larger. He was calling dances all over Iowa – driving to them in his “family” car. He converted his work car to his family car by

simply removing the magnetic signs prior to driving to the dance and putting them back on the next morning.

By the late 70's and early 80's, Jerry's enthusiastic style and flowing choreography enabled him to start touring nationwide. Fortunately, by now, he could afford his own car and had started his progression from bug killer to full time travelling professional caller. By this time, Jerry had begun to record for Chaparral Records' subsidiary label – Roadrunner. Jerry formed a group of road clubs throughout the Midwest that he aptly named The Roadrunners.

This is where I came into the picture. I met Jerry in 1980 in Lancaster, Ohio. We did our first weekend together in Lancaster in August 1980. We rehearsed singing calls in a dance couple's kitchen for most of that first night. After about 8 hours and maybe a case of Miller Lite, we came up with a handful of showtunes for the weekend. That weekend led to a lifetime friendship. In the years that followed that one weekend morphed into over 30 annual weekends, week long tours together, and institute square dance weeks scattered all over the world.

During this time, Jerry and I were on separate square recording labels- he was on Rhythm Records, and I was on Ranch House Records. For you younger callers, records are those things that kinda look like CD's – just a little larger and a different color. We were doing so many things together, it only seemed natural for us to be on our own label. So, in 1985, we borrowed enough money from Kristy's father (Phil Laux) to pay for a recording session and to pay for a year's advertisement in the two national square dance magazines. In a true definition of "Country Come to Town", we went to Nashville, hired seven musicians, a studio and an engineer and in just slightly over 12, hours recorded our first six tunes. This was the humble beginning of Royal Records. Now, almost 50 years later, with Kristy Story as my new partner, Royal Records continues to produce square dance music - some of the best square dance music in our industry – music that is performed by callers all over the world.

In the middle of all of this, Jerry got an offer to move to Mission, Texas to do a winter square dance program. Again, Jerry's charm, infectious personality (not to mention being a helluva caller) quickly won over the dancers in the Valley. The Peppermint Palace became THE place to dance. Jerry wound up doing multiple sessions throughout the week and travelling out on weekends. There was a slight problem, however. Popularity can be a scary thing. Now bear in mind this was before callers were using computers and Vic Ceder's Square Rotation Program was just an idea. Jerry had to use computer cards. The problem was that the cards that were currently being used only went up to 20 squares. For many of Jerry's sessions, multiple sets of cards had to be used to accommodate the 40+ squares he attracted multiple times weekly.

Even being this busy, Jerry still found the time to help form the local callers association in Mission. Jerry was also instrumental in getting the Mission Chamber of Commerce to sponsor square dance lessons. For many years the combined class that all of the area callers did on Monday mornings attracted more than 50 squares.

In 1997, Jerry and Kristy, Larry Letson and I met some local Charlotte square dancers – Everette and Virginia Curlee (that last name may ring a few bells with some of you 😊). This was the beginning of another lifetime friendship. Sometimes, it is amazing how things can come together. Jerry and I, at the time were doing a square dance week at Kirkwood Lodge. We had done previous week long

institutes at English Mountain, Copecrest, and in Sweden. It was during a conversation about these week long institutes that Jerry and Everette came up with the idea of doing something similar in North Carolina. It was also during this time that Jerry and Kristy bought a motor home and discovered the wonderful life of RV'ing. Jerry, always the shrewd businessman, came up with an idea – Why not try and combine his love of calling with his love of RV'ing. Jerry and Kristy started searching for just the right campground to make this happen. In 2001, they came upon a campground in Maggie Valley, NC that was on the market. Larry Letson and I were invited in on the project and in that same year the group of us purchased Pride RV Resort.

The RV Park had an open-air pavilion that was simply perfect for square dancing. Jerry immediately went about setting up square dance weeks featuring callers from all over the country. Jerry was the resident caller and would be at all of the weeks. After a few successful years, Everette decided to build another building that would both serve as a square dance hall and also as an attractive venue for weddings and corporate meetings. In 2007, The Pride Center was born – complete with custom sound, floating hardwood floor, and finally AIR CONDITIONING!!! At our inaugural dance in June of 2007, 22 squares of dancers celebrated with us. Today, Jerry's dream, Maggie Valley Square Dance Vacations, is still successful and entertains hundreds of square dancers annually.

For the next 9 years Jerry spent half of the year in South Texas and the other half at Pride RV. In 2016, Jerry decided to slow down, and he retired from calling in South Texas. Jerry and Kristy moved back home to Fairfield, IA and bought and opened up The Hideaway – a local Fairfield bar – Now that's a scary thought, but that's for another time. The Hideaway quickly became a "go to" place for the Fairfield locals. I remember spending a week there with Jerry and Larry one night.

Thus far, this presentation has been somewhat lighthearted. Part of the reason for this is it gives me time to get my emotions in check. Also, this presentation may be a little different from others. As I stated in the beginning, if you look at the five criteria for this award, there is no doubt that Jerry checks all the boxes. Let's see exactly how they're checked.

The first, "Must have worked in Uncharted Fields", is really easy. In the early 1980's Jerry was among the first (if not the first) caller to call in Saudi Arabia. At the time there were many Europeans and Scandinavians working there for various oil companies. At the same time, there were very few callers in Sweden and Denmark. Most of the dancers in Sweden and Denmark were taught not by callers but by square dance instructors. Many of these Scandinavian dancers had never danced to a "real" caller – other than on tapes. The Scandinavian dancers that were stationed in Saudi recorded Jerry's dances and took them back home. There, many Swedish and Danish dancers grew up dancing to Jerry's tapes. I first went to Sweden in the in the early 1980's. By then, callers like Robert, Ingvar, Stephan, Richard and many others were already mimicking Jerry's enthusiastic calling. In the years that followed Jerry's influence spread all over Europe as well as Scandinavia. I may miss one or two, but Jerry has called in Canada, Mexico, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Germany, Austria, The Czech Republic, Japan, Taiwan, Great Britain, Belgium, Australia, and Saudi Arabia. The terms National and international caller are tossed around frequently. Jerry remains one of a handful of callers who are truly household names across the world.

I am going to combine #'s 2,3 and 4– Contributions that have STOOD THE TEST OF TIME, Contributions that were UNSELFISH and Contributions that displayed true LEADERSHIP AND PROFESSIONALISM.

Jerry, singlehandedly, turned the world of Caller Education on its' ear. No one had ever heard of the word "CRaMS" until Jerry came up with it. He took relationship calling to a new level. Prior to Jerry and CRaMS, caller coaches spoke very highly and knowledgeably about Formations and Arrangements and Sequence. Most CALLER Coaches sort of breezed over the term 'Relationships' whenever FASR was discussed. Surely none of us had ever tried to use it as a method of calling. Jerry was all about Relationship calling. He eventually had callers all over the world talking about "Dixie Grand Lines" and "I got yours and you got mine". Now, because of Jerry Story, you see Relationship Calling discussed in almost every caller school.

Jerry spent untold hours teaching both CRaMS and promoting SSD worldwide – More often than not for no fee. There are more than several callers in attendance here tonight that are the beneficiaries of Jerry's wisdom. Jerry was always quick to volunteer for panels at CALLERLAB and at the National Square Dance Convention. Jerry was chairman of the SSD Committee and was very active on several other CALLERLAB Committees. Jerry served several terms on the CALLERLAB Board of Governors.

Had it not been for Jerry, there would not be this new dance program we now have. Jerry was the first caller to actively promote this "Sustainable Square Dance" that was the predecessor to SSD (Social Square Dancing). Many of the sequences (or as Jerry called them – Poems) that were published in several of the SSD teaching documents were courtesy of Jerry. Prior to Jerry, no one had ever described calling as "poems". There was no and there still is no bigger proponent of SSD than Jerry. To the many SSD programs worldwide – You owe Jerry a big thanks!

Finally, we get to #5 - This is the one with the "SAUCE". "The recipients' work must have had a BROAD INFLUENCE on the activity.". Where do I start with this one? As a fellow professional caller, I honestly think that Jerry Story has been one of the most influential callers of the past 50 years. It has been said that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery", and Jerry Story is probably the most imitated caller in the history of square dancing. With that in mind, look around you. How many times have you heard "celebrate" at the end of good getout. What about "Super Sweep" or "walk, walk, walkin"? Maybe "Four girls promenade – Men pick her up over your head" – or '8 chain 3 ½ - Courtesy Turn – You're Home". I lovingly call these "Jerryisms". Many of you would call it "research". Regardless, if something is good – it sticks around - And these, and other "Jerryism's" will be around long after most of us are in that great square dance hall in the sky. If you want further proof of this just Google "Jerry Story Square Dance Caller". I did, and it came back with (drum roll please) 1,390,000 hits.

On a personal note, Jerry and I were best friends for over 40 years. Perhaps best friends doesn't quite describe our relationship. Jerry and I were pretty much brothers. There were times that we spent more time together than we did with our families.

There was always a friendly competition between the two of us. This competition made both of us better callers. Jerry forced me to become a better caller, and he made me realize that if I was gonna share the stage with him then I'd better know what I'm doing, and I'd better be able to deliver the goods.

A very large portion of my calling career was being on the stage with this larger-than-life person. Calling with Jerry was always a "fish or cut bait" experience. But..... when the two of us were together.....It was something special - We were a hard act to beat. And had there not been a Jerry Story, I'm not too sure that there would have ever been a Tony Oxendine.

But, he didn't just affect me - He made so many of us better callers, and through this influence, his legacy will live on. He'll be looking down on us every time we "CELEBRATE" at the end of a great sequence or every time there's a "Four Boys Promenade" on the closer of a singing call. You know, I have a feeling that he's looking down on us tonight.

Yes, Jerry could be abrasive, and he certainly had no time for fools. But underneath this sometimes-brash exterior was a man whose passion for this activity is unparalleled. Truly, my friend and brother, Jerry Story lived his life and his career by the credo - "Lead, Follow, or get the Hell out of the way"

Sadly, Jerry passed away on December 19, 2020. But, in his 65 years on Earth, he touched an untold number of people. And now, his passing will leave a hole in many of our lives, as well as leaving a gaping hole in our activity that will be impossible to fill.

Sadly, Jerry cannot be here to accept this amazing award. So, it gives me great pleasure and it is my honor to present this Milestone Award to The Story Family - Would you please join me in welcoming to the stage Jerry's wife Kristy, and their sons, Josh and Jake Story.