

MILESTONE AWARD PRESENTED TO KEN BOWER

Speech Presented by Buddy Weaver

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 who have made outstanding and significant contributions to the field of square dancing.

In the square dance world, there are few who are so highly regarded – so beloved as our honoree.

Background on our honoree – while working as a line pressman he was told by his supervisor pressman that if he liked working there, he should be at square dance lessons the following night. Not wanting to endanger his new job, off he and his wife went to lessons where they fell in love with square dancing.

Almost right away, he became intrigued with calling. Voice lessons he had as a child made trying singing calls seem easy and within a year of graduation, he was calling dances.

Unable to find caller teachers or mentorship, our honoree taught himself to call patter. Using Sets In Order magazines, he wrote and memorized complete 2 ½ hour long dances. He started to develop a style of patter calling of his own – eventually mastering an ability to get dancers to quiet down and hang on every word, building excitement through his vocal showmanship, he will send a floor full of people into a frenzy. No one had seen a style like that before – it was a style of calling that would become representative of most of today's top callers. Within 7 years, our honoree was a sought after caller throughout the region. Calling nights and weekends while still working in the print business. One story goes of calling a “night owl dance” which ended at 5 in the morning, then driving straight to work for a Sunday shift.

This pace couldn't last and following an appearance at the National Convention in 1968, which lead to a flood of invitations to call everywhere, the decision was made to become a full-time caller. Within a year, he was booked to call almost every night, which included weekly club dances that encompassed four neighboring states. Each week driving over 900 miles Monday thru Thursday plus the weekends.

In 1971, while calling for the Hawaii State Convention, he received a life- changing telegram - “extend your layover in California for two days – important.” He and his wife did and 48-hours later got back on the plane at LAX with a contract to become

this new thing called “resident caller” at an RV resort, a new home in escrow and no idea what they were doing. So they did what any of us would do – they went home, sold their house, loaded up 3 teenaged children and drove west to California - what would be their forever home.

In this new role as resident caller, our honoree and his wife taught multiple beginner classes and workshops. They went to every unit in the park to personally invite people to come learn to square dance. He developed a successful tiered system of square dancing, one for beginners, one for the occasional dancer, and one for the enthusiast. This was years before CALLERLAB and its programs. At its peak, his square dance program had 300 squares dancing very week.

He was one of only two people who were the first in snowbird programs and what he and his wife developed became a template for snowbird programs everywhere. He called in that field for 19 years in both California and Arizona. No one has ever done that and probably no one ever will

Tonight's honoree was one of the first to call overseas and the first to change the 1960s caller dress code, which was western shirts and string ties – introducing the world to callers wearing blazers. Even so far as a blazer with a turtle neck shirt.

As you might expect of a caller with this resume, he would be in the square dance recording field and here again, he has done what no one else had nor ever will. Since 1967 he has recorded every single year including 2024. He has 147 singles and has been staff recording artist for Rhythm, Blue Star, Chaparral, and Wagon Wheel labels. In the days when square dance music was country/western, he was the first to turn an Elvis rock song into a square dance singing call. He pushed the envelope in bringing a new genre of music to square dancing – pushing as far as the song “Darling Raise The Shade and Let The Sun Shine In, I Want To See All Of Your Beauty”. His vocal stylings build excitement, jumping on top of notes, and sending the dancers into orbit. He set a new standard that, again, is heard in today's top callers. In his 57 years of recording he has brought us hits like: “Your Time Hasn't Come Yet Baby”, “When You're Hot You're Hot”, “Mississippi”, “Bloody Red Baron”, “The Best Is Yet To Come”, “Cherokee Fiddle”, “Dim the Lights”, “Fever”, “First Thing Every Morning”, “Honky Tonk Heroes”, “I Will Survive”, “I Write the Songs”, “I've Loved Them Everyone”, “After the Lovin’”, “Joy To The World”, “Rockin' Pneumonia and the Boogie Woogie Flu”, “Someone Must Feel Like A Fool Tonight”, “Twelfth Street Rag”, “YMCA”, and “Hallelujah”. Plus, he did many recordings with his friends Jerry, Gary, and Beryl as probably the most popular quartet in square dancing – the Chaparral Four.

By now you may have guessed that I'm speaking of **Ken Bower**.

For those who know Ken, you also know that his incredible career is the product of a partnership. His wife and life partner – Dee – has worked side-by-side with Ken in the camps, in the snowbird programs, on the weekends and on the festivals. Out front and behind the scenes, from calling tours to dealing with the difficult situations. For as long as Ken has been a full-time traveling caller – it has been the team of Ken and Dee Bower. They have been the “power couple” in square dancing.

On behalf of a grateful square dance world, we thank Ken for a new way to call, for introducing us to a new kind of music, for showing us a new way to dress. We say 'thank you' for setting a high standard of professionalism, for bringing joy to thousands of people in a sixty three year career, for blazing many trails and leaving an indelible impression - a living legacy embodied in almost every square dance caller of today.

Ken and Dee could not be with us tonight but he sends the following message:

“I appreciate this very much. You know most of the thanks should go to my family – my wife and kids. They spent a lot of time alone. We had a lot of roads, but I've got to say over the years, its been a good ride. I am honored and very pleased to accept this award. Thank you very much.”

Ladies and gentlemen the CALLERLAB milestone award goes to **Ken Bower**.