

**Sandie Bryant Milestone Award**  
**50th CALLERLAB Convention**  
**Monday, April 14, 2025**  
**Presented by Ted Lizotte**

The CALLERLAB Milestone award is considered to be our most prestigious and highest honor. It is awarded through a unanimous decision by CALLERLAB's Executive Committee, after examining the recipient's submitted qualifications utilizing five criteria. It's worth mentioning that not all submissions are approved, and some are submitted multiple times for discussion before being awarded.

The exact criteria is listed on our website for all to see, but I will paraphrase here for you for the sake of brevity. A Milestone recipient is considered to be an outstanding and significant leader within the Square Dance Activity. To have given selflessly to the activity as a whole – setting aside personal gains and rewards, for the betterment of others. Words like “high standards”, broad influence”, “standing the test of time” are hallmarks of the recipients of this award. I'll add “perseverance” and “overcoming obstacles” to the benchmarks as well.

During CALLERLAB's 50 year existence and with thousands of members to its credit, only 75 Milestones have been awarded to date. (And during my research to write this, I've probably read over half of the speeches given for them.) Tonight's recipient will join the ranks of past winners the likes of Gardner Patton, Carl Sims, and Jim Hilton.

I can sense that for some of you, that wasn't the list of names you expected. Let me further explain and remind you that, while awarded by CALLERLAB, the award recognizes excellence toward the square dance activity as a whole. That means thinking outside our bubble and perhaps recognizing folks you may not have a lot of personal knowledge about. Carl Sims is the main reason Square Dancing exists in Japan. Gardner Patton was responsible for digitizing thousands of documents over countless years to help preserve square dancing's legacy for future generations. Jim Hilton helped to create and set the standard around square dance equipment that many of us take for granted today.

Square Dancing's wide reach is what gives us our strength. We have clubs that cater to couples, singles, youth, gay and every combination therein. The square dance activity has a hold in over 15 countries around the world and includes dancers with knowledge from Basic to C4. This award looks at all of that.

But let's be honest when I listed past recipients, you expected to hear names of other Milestone recipients like, Jones or Seastrom or Ceder or Oxendine or any of the other honored recipients currently in attendance. As I begin explaining some details about tonight's recipient, I'm certain you'll agree that they too are icons that should be listed along with everyone else.

It's customary to try and disguise the identity of the award winner as long as possible and so far, so good. But our recipient tends to stand out in a crowd such as ours, so this becomes challenging from here on in. Let's just hit the highlights so you can C4 yourself.

Without giving away too much, let's say our honoree was born in the 1950s, they were introduced to square dancing before they were a teenager and danced for a number of years, before the club shut down. Our honoree left the activity at that time and began their pursuit of higher education. They

eventually went on to earn a major in mathematics and began to pursue an accounting career. While that was happening, Square Dancing was undergoing a huge change. CALLERLAB had come into existence, levels had started to form, and things were becoming more uniform.

In 1979, they rejoined the activity as a hobby and joined a beginner's class being taught by the same caller from their younger days, Swersie Norris, a black female caller based in Chicago, and a CALLERLAB member. Our recipient found that their mathematical mind hadn't forgotten much, and they were quickly assisting others in the square all while dancing the beau's position. Which is an important note if you realize that I'm about to change my pronoun usage to "she".

Swersie told our honoree to study up and come to the club level dance in a few days. Three weeks later she went to the State Convention in Michigan, happy to be dancing at the Plus level until she noticed people in her group dancing in the Advanced room. Which true to form ticked her off. She decided then and there that she would only sit out by choice, not due to the lack of knowledge.

This began her intense studying and to summarize for you, she ended up learning through C1 so she could dance at the highest level offered at the Milwaukee National Convention, which was good – except they had flyers for C2, C3 and C4 dances – which meant more studying. She completed that studying and was dancing C4 all within the first year of returning to the activity.

During this time, she realized that maybe she could actually call this stuff and not just dance it. When she asked Swersie about it, Swersie was smart enough to assist and mentor her, helping her start down a path that we are all so thankful she stayed on.

She attended her first CALLERLAB in 1980 and was also one of the dancers on the Phil Donahue show that Lee Kopman was calling to. She called her first Nationals in Detroit in 1982.

In 1985, she met her future husband at a square dance, who was smitten enough to ask her to be their club caller and to ask her out on a date as well. They were married in 1987 and had a daughter in 1990.

Besides Swersie, she lists some of her mentors as Dave Taylor, Mike Jacobs and Bill Heimann. But the reality is that, thanks to Swersie, she was able to meet and pick the brains of all the top callers of the day.

Over the years, she called at too many National festivals to mention, almost always singing the bass part in caller clusters. She was a staff member of AACE – the Academy of Advanced and Challenge Enthusiasts), eventually taking over its running until Covid. She is an icon in the IAGSDC community and is a fixture on staff at every convention, along with her friend Vic Ceder.

She has called in over 10 countries and 46 states, though that number will go up to 48 by the end of the year. She has led countless GCA Callers schools and mentors many new up and coming callers. Many experienced callers, me included, give her a quick call when we need to have a better understanding of something. There's no shame in knowing that she just knows more than I do.

She still teaches beginner classes at the Chi-Town squares every year, and travels extensively calling through C4. She is an ambassador of the activity that bridges many gaps - bridges between our average and challenge dancers, straight and gay clubs, our local, national and international brothers and sisters. She is extremely sought after for her incredible knowledge, skillset, leadership and friendship.

As prestigious of a resume as she has, the road to where she finds herself today was not easily traveled. As the story goes, when the Chi-Town Squares, Chicago's LGBTQ+ club called her to hire her for a dance, she said, "Sure let me get my calendar" and he said, "You should be aware that we are a gay club" and she responded with, "And I'm a female, black caller – you still want me to get my calendar?"

The resume and achievements I've shared with you would be impressive for any caller. For that caller to also to be female and black is literally unheard of – except in this one miraculous instance. Her love of this activity and of the people within it gave her the strength to endure hardships and obstacles that most of us will never understand nor comprehend. To excel to the heights she has reached should be an inspiration of what can be done with enough will to succeed, and I know it has inspired many to take up the activity and the microphone.

Her achievements and success embody the spirit for which the Milestone Award was created. She goes by many names, "Mom", Saundra and either the Good or Evil twin depending on the day. But as long as you know your Ding Dang Definitions, she will always be there to entertain, educate and assist you and any way she can.

Ladies and gentleman, with the assistance of her husband, Albert, it is my honor to present CALLERLAB's highest honor, the Milestone Award, to a lady who is still from the South Side of Chicago, Sandie Bryant.