

From the Mic Episode 5 - Gaye Fifer

Ben Williams: This podcast is produced by CDSS, the Country Dance and Song Society. CDSS provides programs and resources, like this podcast, that support people in building and sustaining vibrant communities through participatory dance, music, and song. Want to support this podcast and our other work? Visit cdss.org to donate or become a member today.

Mary Wesley: Hey there - I'm Mary Wesley and this is From the Mic - a podcast about North American social dance calling.

Through conversations with callers across the continent we'll explore the world of square, contra, and community dance callers. Why do they do it? How did they learn? What is their role, on stage and off, in shaping our dance communities? What can they tell us about the corner of the dance world that they know, and love, the best?

Each episode we'll talk to a different caller, but they all have something in common - a spark, a desire to lead, to share joy, to invite movement, to stand in that special place between the band and a room full of dancers (or people who don't yet know that they're dancers), and from the mic say "find a partner, let's dance"

Gaye Intro

As I'm getting ready to introduce my guest today I'm recalling a conversation I had with my friend and fellow caller Will Mentor when I was brainstorming plans for this podcast. We were making a list of potential people to interview and Will was thinking about the different specialties that some callers represent: callers as choreographers, like Bob Isaacs or Carol Ormand, callers as historians like David Millstone or Tony Parkes, callers as musicians, callers as community organizers... And then Will said, "Of course let's not forget...callers as saints." He was talking about Gaye Fifer of Pittsburgh, PA and that's who we're lucky enough to hear from today.

An active dancer herself, Gaye understands the subtleties of making dances particularly satisfying for dancers. Her instructions are clear and concise, as she is a teacher by profession. An easy smile and delightful sense of humor are part of Gaye's relaxed, pleasant style at the microphone. Gaye calls contra and English dances throughout the

U.S. and Canada. She is also an enthusiastic advocate and instructor of contra-style waltz. Gaye is currently President of the Board of CDSS.

If you imagine a love of dancing personified, that's Gaye. In our conversation I learned about her beginnings as a dancer in St. Louis and later, Charlottesville, VA where she first began calling. We talk about how she maintains her perpetual infatuation with bringing people together through dance and the many leadership roles she occupies. It was a delightful conversation! Let's dive in.

[*Clip of Gaye calling with The Syncopaths at the 2018 Atlanta Dance Weekend*]

Mary Wesley: Gaye Fifer, hello and welcome to From the Mic.

Gaye Fifer: Thank you. Thank you. Lovely to be here.

Mary Wesley: It's really, really great to see you. It's been too long. I hope I get to see you in person or on the dance floor sometime soon. But for now, this is just lovely to sit down with you. And, you know, we've talked about many different things as we've met over the years, but I'm excited to have a chance to really kind of do a deep dive on calling with you, because you are a consummate caller, someone who I've encountered on many, many stages across the country. And, you know, I also think of you in a lot of other leadership roles. So I'm just so excited to talk with you and on this podcast. We're just really exploring the particular role of the caller. It's an unusual thing to do, an unusual place in the sort of, ecosystem of a contra dance or social dance. So, yeah, I'm excited to talk to you.

Gaye Fifer: I will do my best to answer every question as well as I can.

Origins of dancing and calling

Mary Wesley: That is all we ask. Well, I usually just like to get started by getting a sense of how you came to the world of social dance and also kind of defining your sphere of dance for us. On this podcast, I focus mainly on North American dance traditions. Contra dance, square dance, community dance. But as we know, we all kind of have our own bouquet of practices and things that we enjoy within the realm of traditional dance and song. So can you start by just telling me how you kind of found your way into that world and how that unfolded?

Gaye Fifer: Sure. I can tell you that I grew up with a father who told me I was genetically clumsy. So I got this message all through my childhood that dancing was not something that was going to come easily to me. And it really wasn't anything that anybody in my family did. We played games together and we spent time outdoors, but

we didn't dance socially. My parents didn't dance. So we did square dancing in elementary school. What I remember most is that the boys didn't want to dance with the girls. And so we had to line up on opposite sides of the gym. Girls on one side, boys on the other. And then you got whatever partner came towards you. And the boys were pretty much oblivious, and the girls were all moving around so they could get the boy they wanted to dance with. I don't remember being particularly excited about dancing, per se. I think it was more of a social connection that was fun. And then I took a ballroom dance class for my PE credit in college. That was pretty much my only exposure to dance until a relationship at the moment when I was just out of college, so 1978, and this guy said to me, "I just found this thing that I think you would really like," and took me to my first contra dance. I don't know that I was very proficient after that first time. But I loved it. It seemed like home, like I'd found this thing that I'd been looking for that was social and physical and challenged me to be able to move in the right ways and at the right time. It was something that I never quit. I mean, I just started doing it at that time and never stopped.

Mary Wesley: So where was that? That first contra dance?

Gaye Fifer: That was in Saint Louis, Missouri. The Childgrove Country dancers who are still dancing. I danced there for several years before I left St Louis and moved to Virginia. And one of the first things I did in Virginia was to look up the local contra dance group.

Mary Wesley: Did you grow up in Missouri?

Gaye Fifer: No, I grew up in the Midwest. I grew up in small town Illinois. So St. Louis wasn't that far to go for school. I went there for school and then stayed to work for a few years.

Mary Wesley: Nice. Can you say anything more about those early days of discovery when you kind of first found your way onto that dance floor? And did your dad's words haunt you at all or were you like, "Ha, take that!" Because "clumsy" is a word I would never attach to Gaye Fifer.

Gaye Fifer: Oh my goodness.

Mary Wesley: I'm sorry. No.

Gaye Fifer: Well, I have to say, I don't think my dad intended me to carry that weight for the rest of my life. I think it was probably just something he said, but for some reason it hit home and I felt criticized and judged. And so it did have an impact on how much I took risks physically. I think one of the things that made contra dancing more accessible to me was that I didn't have to be creative. I didn't have to think about what to do. I could just do what the caller said and that was perfect. So I wasn't having to worry about whether I was doing the right thing or whether I looked silly or whatever. You know, it was just...do what the caller says. I do remember that it was the dancing that was most

important to me rather than the people. I feel like at that point in my life I had good friends and good connections in my work and in my play with people. So I wasn't really looking for new friends, and I think that I probably danced for at least five years without making any friends in the dance community. I would go, I would dance every dance. I knew the names of the people I was dancing with, but I didn't have social relationships with them. I'd dance every dance and I'd go home. And so there were kind of two separate parts of my life. I think it was when I moved to Virginia that I didn't have a lot of friends at that point. So it was more a chance to connect socially. I could tell you a story about that.

Mary Wesley: Oh, please.

Gaye Fifer: I'm jumping ahead a little but when I met my partner Wayne, I had really not done anything except danced in my local community. I went to my local dance weekends, but I was still at home so I wasn't as much a part of the whole scene. And Wayne took me to my first "away" dance weekend and because you are...in this case we were at a camp together. So there was lots of time to hang out and to have meals together and go for walks and get to know each other. And I can remember thinking that weekend, "Huh, these are really nice people." It's so silly to say now but then I thought, "Oh, I wonder if the people at home are nice too." So that was really an eye opening experience for me to say "Oh, it's more than just dancing. It's the connection and the relationships."

Mary Wesley: So in that first, I think you said five years where you were mostly dancing and not socializing as much, but was your move to Virginia within that five years? Because I noticed that...I always find it interesting when people move to a new place and are able to tap into a dance scene there that can be such a nice way to sort of establish connections in a new place.

Gaye Fifer: Yes, well I think I danced...I probably danced just two or three years in St. Louis before I moved. So I had had the experience of dancing and knowing that that was a fun thing to do. But then when I moved I looked for more of a community sense. I will say that I did have a contra dance at my wedding. So I felt happy enough about the activity that I wanted to do that. We weren't going to have a rock and roll band or not free form dancing. So contra dancing worked really for us to include everybody because everyone could do it.

Mary Wesley: I love that. And so how long were you in Virginia and what was the next step in your journey?

Gaye Fifer: So I actually ended up living in Charlottesville, in or near Charlottesville for 30 years and danced regularly there. It took me quite a while to realize that somebody had to do work to make those regular dances happen. So for the first several years in St. Louis and in Virginia, I was pretty much just a dance consumer. I didn't really think about the fact that someone had to work and that there were people who were holding things together and contributing to make things happen. And I think that awareness kind

of coincided with a sense that maybe I wanted a little more challenge in my dance life. And it happened that Jim Morrison, whom you also know, lived in Charlottesville, was going to do a callers class. And so I thought, "ell, that's something I could try. It's a way to give back to the community. And I'm ready for a little more challenge." Kind of the next step in being involved in the community. And so I did,...took a caller's class with probably ten other people. And mostly I remember Jim saying, we only met twice, and I mostly remember Jim saying, "Really, the only way to get good at this is to do it." And so we all stepped up and called a local dance together where we just did one or two dances. And then gradually the group changed, morphed into people who were more serious about wanting to really pursue this, and people who were happy to have just the experience of calling once or twice and not really doing anything more with it. So a few of us started sharing evenings, half and half. And then eventually calling whole evenings by ourselves. I can't even imagine now how scary that must have been.

Calling as a beginner

Gaye Fifer: Do you remember the first time you called?

Mary Wesley: I do. I remember the first time I called because it went quite dramatically wrong. [Laughter] but thankfully, the Montpelier, Vermont dance community was very supportive. But, yeah, it just falls on that line of you have to learn by doing it. You're going to have to get through that phase of doing it while not being good at it yet.

Gaye Fifer: Right. And totally nervous. Like I remember that I could not pay attention to anything except the calls on the card and I absolutely needed the card for security. I was counting and really there are so many things to pay attention to. And in the beginning, I think it can be totally overwhelming.

Mary Wesley: Totally, and so hard to integrate. It's so hard to be present and you're thinking of all those different things. So much is happening, there's so much input because you're on stage, people are moving, the music is happening...and you're trying to figure out how to say words in a particular order to a particular beat with particular timing. And it's just, you know, flailing, I just remember it feeling like I'm flailing. I cannot bring all these things together and I just simply could not.

Gaye Fifer: And there's a certain amount of feeling very responsible, right? Like everybody's depending on you. If you're not doing your job then they can't dance.

Mary Wesley: An entire room full of people will come to a standstill, which is what happened to me.

Gaye Fifer: Oh, that's happened to me many times Mary. I don't remember it happening in the beginning. I wonder if it would have been harder to keep going if it had been really

dramatic. But here's the thing, I think this is a good reason to have people start in their own local community. Because people knew and loved me as an individual, knew me as a dancer and as part of the community, and they were totally supportive. Even if it was not the perfect dance experience for them they really let me know that they were excited about me making this effort.

Mary Wesley: Absolutely. I think it just makes it a little bit easier for people to just kind of hold you up if you've been on the dance floor with them.

Gaye Fifer: Yeah.

Mary Wesley: Do you have any memory, or can you think about what helped you keep going? Because it sounds like you were one of those people who kind of got the bug and wanted to do this more seriously.

Gaye Fifer: I did really enjoy it. Once I got past the nervousness and the feeling of being overwhelmed by all the things I had to think about, it did get easier. I don't know anymore how long it took for me to feel comfortable calling. But I can remember noticing, oh yeah, I have time to actually look at the dancers or I have time to look at the band. You know, it's not just total being frozen and counting and trying to say the right things at the right time. So that took some time and it did take dedication to calling as often as I had the opportunity to call. I think that can be helpful too if you're in a community where there is some understanding that you have to be training new callers. So there's space in the schedule to have those new callers get a chance to really do it on a somewhat regular basis. I think....I know of communities around the country where a caller, for example, I don't want to say "owns" the dance, but a caller is kind of in charge of the dance and calls every time. It's a little bit harder as a new caller to make space to get in the rotation, if there is no rotation. So I felt lucky that way.

Mary Wesley: Would traveling bands and callers come through Charlottesville? Was that the larger dance in the area?

Gaye Fifer: It was and I don't remember bands coming through too regularly except when we did our fall dance weekend. We were one of the earliest communities to do a fall dance weekend and so there was always a big name band and caller that came in for that weekend and dancers that came in from other places. So I feel like it kind of upped the ante for everybody in the community to be dancing with new and different people and to have that quality of music. I've been listening to the podcast that Julie is doing. I don't think bands were traveling as much back then and I feel like now in the olden days, but there were bands that would come through on an annual tour and stop in Charlottesville. I think it was because of Jim Morrison being there it was kind of a place that people would think of coming.

Mary Wesley: Yes, this is...I feel like I'm getting to sort of travel both geographically and also time travel a little bit to a region that I'm less familiar with. Back in the times when we would go out and tour a little bit more, I definitely have been through Charlottesville

and called Charlottesville and Greenwood. I remember Greenwood, they have a platform that the caller stand on because there's no stage and everybody...All the callers have signed it. That really stands out to me...of getting to sign that platform. It made me really happy to get to look and see names of so many different people who'd been through. I'm curious if you can take me into the time that you were there when it sounds like maybe it was a bit more localized. What was it like? And then how did your consciousness of a wider dance scene sort of start to emerge?

Beyond Charlottesville

Gaye Fifer: Well, I would say two things really made a difference, or two occurrences. One of them was getting to know Kappy Laning, and Kappy came to Charlottesville about the same time I did. So we built a friendship and became part of the dance community about the same time. She was connected with CDSS and with family weeks at camp and she encouraged me to come to my first CDSS camp. And it was where she was the camp director. I took Rachel, we went to a family week when Rachel was five. So Rachel's 32 now, that was a long time ago. But that was an incredible exposure to another whole part of the world of dance and music, right? That there were people who chose to spend a week with their families doing those fun things together. I don't think without Kappy encouraging me, I would have jumped in quite so quickly or quite so completely. And I know that we ask this at camp every year, but I also got a scholarship to go, and that made all the difference that I could afford to go and be there. And then I was the bookstore manager for several years, which also helped with the cost of camp.

Mary Wesley: And were you going to Pinewoods camp or was that Buffalo Gap?

Gaye Fifer: Yeah, we were at Buffalo Gap when Rachel was really little...well, I could tell you lots of stories. I know this isn't about Rachel, but that whole camp experience for her as a child really carried through her whole life. You know, making the connection she did with kids her age and having that continue through the present and I don't see any reason why that would change. And Kappy was just a general...she encouraged me in every way to be active and involved and to step up and take leadership. So I appreciate her having confidence in me or seeing something in me or just deciding that she wanted me to come along with her. The other thing that happened that helped me kind of spread my wings was that at the time at the Charlottesville Fall Weekend they would have a local band and a local caller do the Friday night dance, and then the featured band and caller would be on Saturday. And it was the community's way of saying, we want our local people to get some exposure, so other people can see what our local folks can do. And I did, after I called that Friday night dance someone asked me to come and call in DC. So someone from Glen Echo had been at that dance and invited me to come and call, and that's really how it started. I never did any self-promotion or looking for gigs. It was just really that people heard me call somewhere and in the beginning, heard me call locally and then said, hey, we have a

dance, would you like to come and call at our dance? And so it really mushroomed from the more exposure in different places, the more widely I was invited to come and call. It was kind of organic, you might say.

Mary Wesley: That's such a good feeling when you get invited into something that you care about.

Gaye Fifer: I will say it was also intimidating, I mean, Glen Echo was a big place and a big dance and that was a big city. There were people that I had seen other places who were going to be dancing. So it was intimidating.

Mary Wesley: Had you danced there before?

Gaye Fifer: I think I had gone up to dance there because of the waltz thing. So at the same time that contra was becoming a big part of my life so was waltz. And so they had an afternoon waltz up there that was just before the contra dance. Probably went to the Sunday night ones before I did the Friday night.

Mary Wesley: So you got invited to call at Glen Echo and then did you start traveling more for calling, kind of what happened from there?

Gaye Fifer: I believe that I did. You know, it was still regional for sure. So I might go to Richmond or I might go to Charleston, West Virginia or somewhere in North Carolina. But it seems to me like it came from people dancing to my calling at one location and then saying, well, we have a dance here, would you consider coming to that dance? I also did a lot of, I guess you call them one night stands, where somebody would say, "We're going to have a wedding or we're going to have a party in our intentional community or, you know, whatever, like some family reunion," you know, "would you come and call?" And so you develop different kinds of skills in calling at a place where nobody really knows what's going on. Yeah, you have to be a little more clear, maybe a little more explicit in what you're asking. And you have to learn to call the right dances. Like fit your program to the people that you're calling for.

Mary Wesley: Did you like doing those kinds of dances?

Gaye Fifer: I did, but in some ways, it was harder, right? Because you're starting really from not a common understanding. I do think, Mary, that part of why calling is fun for me is because I really am a teacher at heart. And so having spent really my whole career in public school and mostly with five year olds, I had learned how to be very clear and precise in my use of language and words and to break things down so that we could do one step at a time and people could all be successful. I think that is part of what made calling fun for me. It spoke to that pleasure that I get from seeing that people can understand and respond to my teaching. At the same time I will tell you that this is one of my weaknesses as a caller. "Weakness" may be a strong word, but because I was a teacher for so long, I tend to notice the people who are having a hard time with something. And so on the dance floor, I think I'm learning how not to do this quite so

much now or quite so vocally but I would tend to focus on the people who were not getting it and thinking that if I just called to them or if I used different words, or if I said it more clearly, that that would help them. And I think it was important for me to learn to trust the dance floor and to let go of needing to try to help everybody. I'm

Mary Wesley: Right, they're flailing just like when you're first learning to call. Any new learning process there is a point of saturation, it's hard to watch and it's hard not to feel responsible for what they're going through.

Gaye Fifer: And sometimes I think, if I could just say the right words at the right time that it would make everything better. I've also had to just accept that there are times when you just have to let it go and people on the dance floor will take care of them and everybody will have a better time if I'm not fixated on trying to continue calling to that one person or that one couple.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, I think those, those one night stand or events or situations where people are coming in without knowledge of what it is to do that kind of social dancing or maybe coming in expecting to do some kind of group activity that's taking people from sort of ground zero...it's a lot of work. But I also feel like it's where I really learned to be a caller. There is a certain part of...I don't know...I found going through that process helpful to just know that I could take someone from ground zero...it's a totally different skill set than to be working with a group of contra dancers versus...but it feels like an important link in the larger overall chain of these traditions, that value of like, yeah, this is for everyone, you can try it even if you never have.

Gaye Fifer: It reminds me of teaching in that, a lot of times the new teacher gets the hardest class. It will either make you or break you, right? It can teach you a lot of things about yourself and about how to approach a group of people. But it's also much more stressful. Although I think I've also learned over the years to be more relaxed about perfection, too, that it doesn't really matter if everybody does the do-si-do the same way or at the same time. Especially when it's a party and you're just having a good time. So I have come to relax a lot more about how perfect it has to be too.

[*Clip of Gaye calling at the Trillium Twirl in 2019 to Turnip the Beet - Kelsey Wells & Jeremy Lekich*]

Mary Wesley: So how did your caller career continue to unfold as you started traveling more?

Gaye Fifer: Well, I will say that about this time I was seeing Wayne who's my current partner, and lived in Pittsburgh. I lived in Charlottesville, so we started going to dance weekends, and that was a way for us to have time together. So we both had jobs and lives in separate places, and then we'd meet on weekends, at dance weekends. So I started going to a lot of dance weekends and here's where I can give Wayne some credit. Wayne was really interested in waltzing and would often at contra dance weekends take waltz workshops. And so it was clear to me that that was a passion in

his life. He actually at one point took an eight week class with the waltz teacher in North Carolina. He drove every week from Pittsburgh to North Carolina for that class. So it was really quite a passion for him. He and I went together to Denmark with a group of dancers, and we waltzed in every train station, every airport, every opportunity that we had on that trip. And as a result two of the dance organizers for the Richmond, Virginia dance weekend were on that trip, and they saw us waltzing all the time. They knew I was a teacher and they knew Wayne was a great waltzer. So they invited us to come and teach waltz at their contra dance weekend. So a whole new world opened up for available dance weekends because we became known in the same way that I got gigs for calling from people seeing me call, we got gigs for teaching waltz from people coming to the workshops, and it was a way for us to get to many, many, many more dance weekends. I will say that I think I did have some people who saw me only as a waltz teacher and so they couldn't make that leap to me calling as well. But I did get lots and lots of exposure to different dance events. and it was really because of Wayne also that I...he was on his local dance community board and I realized that I needed to do something more to contribute. I think that's part of my deeper connection to CDSS started happening around that time too. I had done local things. I'd been on my local community board and helped plan the dance weekends, but then it seemed like it would be a good thing to contribute to the bigger picture. So I'm jumping years ahead but...

Growing as a caller

Mary Wesley: Yeah, I guess there's always a point in these interviews I've found where I have to, of course, acknowledge that we're in a funny point when it comes to time, being more than two years into a pandemic and the time when there's been a great, great pause in dancing and we're starting up again and in different ways everybody's figuring out how that's going to work as a community and also for each of us individually kind of navigating those waters. But, factoring that in, where do you feel like you ended up landing? You have the local dance experience, you have sort of living and dancing in the same place for a long time. You have starting to travel, you grow as a caller, you find waltzing... How did this all kind of come together for you and how would you kind of self-identify at this point in your life now as all those threads continue to unfurl?

Gaye Fifer: I would say, if I think about who I am, I would say a community builder. And that I do that in different ways. I've taken on lots of different leadership roles in the dance community. Calling is one of them, and I love that. Teaching waltz is one of them and I love that. But I think, and I haven't really articulated this, Mary, but I think it's really in the service of building and maintaining communities. So, for example, during the pandemic I did call Zoom dances for several communities. And I will tell you that it wasn't my very favorite thing to do, partly because I don't get the interaction and the sense of being with people that I get when I'm in person. I always did it because it seemed like an important way to help hold the community together. Not that it was ideal,

but that it was a way that I could contribute to that sense of belonging that we all needed when we were isolated.

I will also add that a step along the way, and another name, Joseph Pimentel. I admired him so much as a caller and as a person and he started as a contra dance caller. I think that's how I knew him first but he became quite an excellent and well-loved English dance caller. He told me that he was going to be teaching a class at Pinewoods for contra dance callers who wanted to learn how to do English. So he kept saying it's going to be like a graduate level course because he wasn't going to spend time on the basics of calling. He wanted people who were already experienced but he could talk about how English was different. And so I took that class. I think that he told me that if I took that class, if I called English and contra, there would be more of a chance of us being at weekends together. I don't think that really happened but he got me there to the class and it was wonderful. It really opened up another whole way of interacting with the dance community. I do remember saying to him that I was worried because I didn't have the right personality to be an English caller. And he said, "You have the right personality to be Gaye Fifer: and no matter what you do, you will be Gaye Fifer." And it was really liberating to think that I didn't have to be somebody else or do things in a different way in order to call English. I don't think that...I know I don't have the same knowledge about history or even the skill of thinking about the nuances of how to move and style points as some of the really good English callers that are around now but I really enjoy it. I think maybe my niche is to help make English dancing more accessible to contra dancers, because I think that it's a positive thing for us to share and collaborate with each other and not be two separate communities. And so that actually added quite a bit to my life when I added English calling.

Calling philosophy

Mary Wesley: Yeah, what a totally great piece of advice or sort of reflection that he gave you there. Well, I would love to dive into the callers role, the callers job, kind of unpacking what that is. So I wonder if you can tell us who Gaye Fifer as a caller is. What I mean is, what are you thinking about? What are you trying to do when you step up on stage in front of a roomful of dancers?

Gaye Fifer: Well, I think above all, I want to help people have a good time and I want to help people feel like this is something that they can be part of that doesn't make them feel awkward or criticized or not good enough. So I think part of who I am is to be that welcoming and easygoing, non-threatening person at the microphone. So I'm pretty comfortable making mistakes. I hope that that helps other people feel like it's not a big deal if they make mistakes. I think my whole demeanor is: just relax and have a good time. And that gets communicated to the dancers. I think teaching clearly makes all the difference in the world. Maybe partly because I worked with young children, it feels like that came pretty easily and not giving too much information all at once and not using too

many words and being accepting of where people are, noticing where people are, being observant about that. And I think I don't ever see myself as the entertainment. So I'm a fairly quiet, I think, caller personality wise. I don't need to be the center of attention, I really am facilitating the experience, but I don't need be the focus of it.

I will tell you something else. The first dance weekend I called, I was paired with a caller who was very, very out there personality wise. The weekend went very well and I asked the organizers if they wanted to give me any feedback since I was just starting out as a weekend caller and it would be useful for me to know if there were things I could do differently. The organizers sent me an email after the fact saying, you know, 99% of the evaluations were glowing about what you did and so you could stop reading here but if you really want the whole story, there was somebody who said: "Gaye Fifer doesn't have enough personality to be a weekend caller." And of course that's the only thing I remember from that weekend. I think it made me really stop and think, you know, what is it about my personality? Is that what I really want to be promoting is Gaye Fifer's personality or can I be something different than that? So that was kind of a wakeup call. I do feel like I have enough personality but I have grown into it. I think part of it is the more relaxed I am in an environment or doing something that I've done that I'm very comfortable doing, the more I can let my personality show. Whereas at that weekend, it is probably true that I was so anxious about it being a weekend gig that I was just tense and anxious and not relaxed about being myself. So that was a good lesson and good feedback, even though it was a little bit traumatic at that time.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, I mean, it's a strong statement. And I'm glad that the person who wrote that message sort of laid it out in that in that way of just like, look, since like you are great and since you asked, here's this one person...and isn't it always true that it's the one that...

Gaye Fifer: That really is memorable.

Mary Wesley: ...yeah, or feedback. I think that really gets at something that I just find so, so curious about calling and callers. Like, I just can't really think of many other, I never know what to call it, jobs or occupations or hobbies like calling dances like this because there are so many trappings of being a caller that make you think of like an entertainment venue. You know, there's a stage, you're amplified, I often say, the caller is the loudest voice in the room. You are an emcee, a host of sorts, so there's all of these things that make you think, "Oh, that person is a star." And, there's just really a lot more going on than somebody entertaining from a microphone. And some callers are wildly entertaining and some callers are quiet. I think both those types can be very successful callers.

Gaye Fifer: I think if it matches who you are, that's the key, right? I don't think it would work to pretend to be something that you're not. I'll tell you, this is how quiet of a caller I am. I was at a dance and for the last dance of the evening I got down off the stage to ask somebody on the floor to dance with me and he said, "wow, where have you been all evening?" Well, and that's a good thing, too because I think sometimes as callers, we

think that everybody's paying attention to us. And the truth is, there are probably a lot of people on the floor who have no idea who the caller is or aren't paying attention to anything about the caller. So you can't get too much of a big sense of how important you are either.

Mary Wesley: I hear musicians tell that same story, too. You know, they're down for a drink at the break and someone says, "Hey, do you want to do the next dance?" Like, "Oh, well, sorry I have somewhere to be." What do you like about being in that little spot between the dancers and the band?

Gaye Fifer: ...and the music, yeah. Well, you know this Mary, there are so many incredible moments where everybody is connected. The dancers are connected to the music and the musicians are connected to the dancers and you're part of that mix. Everybody's responding, it's pretty incredible when that happens. It might not happen every night, every dance. But there are times when you can just feel how much everybody is in the moment. I think that's what attracted me to dancing. It's also what attracts me to calling. That we're part of creating something that's unique and unusual where nobody's worrying about tomorrow or feeling bad about what happened yesterday. We're just in this experience totally together. I love that feeling.

Challenges of calling

Mary Wesley: Yup, it's really good. I really missed it. What's challenging about it? Or are there challenging moments? Because, like you said, those are the sweetest moments when everything just kind of clicks and takes off and they can't all be like that. And some are just, you know, the next dance, especially if you call a lot, there can be an element of, it never feels like a grind, daily grind to me, but it's like, okay, yes, this is what we do, this is how this goes, that's always part of it. But are there parts, are there moments that are sticky or challenging?

Gaye Fifer: Well, this makes me feel old to say this, but I think I've been noticing as I get older that I have more little pet peeves. Like if my goal is to have the whole community participating and in the moment, one of my pet peeves is one dancer who insists on doing something to disrupt that flow. So it could be, well, actually, the times it bothers me or when it's intentional, this person thinks I'm doing something that's giving a dancer a better experience. But I can see from the stage that every time that dancer is late or not in the place they need to be. So I'm more aware of the constant disruption. It's not so bad on the floor, right? Because each dancer only deals with at one time through the dance but as a caller, I can see that cascading disruption and that is kind of a bother for me probably because I attach so much importance to the sense of everybody being together. I get annoyed with myself sometimes when I can't find the right words to make it really clear and obvious, or to make it succinct. I don't have that trouble too much yet, more in English, because I think there are more words that need

to be said. Honestly I think the hardest parts were in the beginning and now that I feel pretty confident and competent it's not too challenging, and partly because I can laugh at myself pretty well, pretty easily, so I don't get anxious or defensive. I might be a little anxious before the dance, just kind of anticipating, you know, have I picked the right dances for this crowd? Especially if I don't know the crowd, you know, how's everything going to go? But once I've started calling it's usually pretty straightforward.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, yeah, I also would love to get into some of the craft of calling and maybe thinking about the actual dances, the mix. You know, part of the caller's job is choosing dances, thinking about choreography and then bringing that together with music. Where does that fit in with your kind of sensibilities and what's your approach?

Gaye Fifer: Well, I think, I wonder if this is true for every caller, I do base it on my experience of what I like as a dancer and so I am for variety. I might build a little bit on skills but I don't make that the way I plan a program. I think about starting with simpler dances and seeing how that goes. But I do try to have variety. So variety in the feel of the dance, like one that's very driving and energetic and then one that's a little more laid back. I try to have variety in formations. So I do...I generally do a square every night and I generally do a four-face-four. I try to include moves that are traditional moves and also some of the newer moves that have come into dancing from English for example.

I want to say something about an epiphany I had recently and I think that the confidence a caller has in their own ability to teach, but also in their belief that what they have to share is really worthwhile and fun, makes so much difference. Like if I try to call a dance that I am not sure I like or, I feel obligated to call that dance or, I think this is one that might be challenging for people, and I don't quite trust myself to do it, it doesn't ever go as well. And so actually...I don't feel like I'm all that skilled, Mary, but one of the things that I do is that I really pick dances that I know are fun to dance. I don't write dances, I don't look on the internet to find dances. But when I dance at a dance weekend that I really like I make sure that I get it so that I can use it. So every time I'm sharing a dance, I'm sharing one out of this sense that people are going to love this. And I think that comes across in the calling, right? That I'm this is something I'm so excited to share. So if I were going to give a caller advice about putting together a program, I would say, "Pick dances that you love and those are the ones that you will be able to communicate that joy with."

Mary Wesley: I feel like that connects right back to, "you can be Gaye Fifer." You're channeling not only your personality but your own experience of a dance in your body on the dance floor. I feel like so much of calling is this channeling thing that happens. Do you experience that when you're teaching, too? Do you feel like you are having some connection to the dancers kind of in your body as you're teaching?

Gaye Fifer: I think so. I think I'm feeling what I'm teaching. And a lot of times I'll even say, "Oh, this is my favorite part of the dance." You know, when I get to do this, when I get to move right into that next move. Transitions, smooth transitions are a big deal for me. I think it's important to remember too Mary that not everybody experiences dance

the way I do. So it might be that it's not satisfying for some people to go to a Gaye Fifer dance and just dance things that Gaye Fifer loves. I can't imagine.

Mary Wesley: I'm just imagining a room full of Gaye Fifers just having a jolly time. No, I know, it's a balance. I think that's another place where callers have to put in time and thought, is how do you balance your own vision, your own preferences and that can cross into, oh, you want to call a square, you want to make sure to have some variety in your dances, dance choices. And then you have to also kind of filter that through where you are who's on the dance floor, what's the event... So there's some complicated considerations to make.

Gaye Fifer: But attitude is part of that, too, right? Like, if I say I'm going to call a square because it's good for us to do a square, already, that's not the best attitude. But if people see me as somebody who does fun dances, then they're willing to take a chance on something different. Because I haven't steered them wrong yet. So, building up your credibility, being pretty consistent with doing a good job and picking good dances and teaching them well. I feel like I have a little bit of, I don't know what you would call it, caché, because people know that I'm going to do a good job and that I'm friendly. A lot of people think I'm really nice Mary.

Mary Wesley: Oh, my gosh. Well, well, news to me.

Gaye Fifer: But sometimes I can even get away with saying something that's a little bit sarcastic, because people give me the benefit of the doubt and assume the best.

Mary Wesley: Yes.

Gaye Fifer: So now you know all my trade secrets.

Mary Wesley: It sounds like your biggest trade secret is to be Gaye Fifer: and you're nailing it.

[*Clip of Gaye at the Atlanta Dance Weekend - calling a whole grid square with The Syncopaths*]

Working with musicians

Mary Wesley: What about working with a band? How do you approach that?

Gaye Fifer: I'm sure that lots of callers can tell you stories about when that didn't go so well. I try to talk with the band ahead of time, kind of get a sense of what kind of music they like to play, how they want to be told, how the dance feels. Do they want to see the card? Do they want to just know when the balances are? Do they want to know the feel

of the dance? How do they want to be told when it's time to stop? And so I try to have that kind of open communication beforehand so that we're not trying to figure that all out once the dance has started. With very experienced bands I don't feel a need to be in control of the music at all. So if I've told the band this one feels really energetic like the train is going and you can't get off then I pretty much trust that they'll figure out the perfect tune and mostly 100% of the time that works. I think the times I've had challenges, it's been with inexperienced bands who don't really know yet how dances feel or don't even understand maybe even the structure of the dance. So if they get off on a part of the dance, they don't know how to fix it. Or if I tell them two more times through, they think they have to stop at that point in two times. So there have been misunderstandings that way but mostly just comes out of a lack of experience not anything else. I have had bands who want to see my whole program for the whole evening at the beginning of the evening. And I can show them with the caveat that I might have to change some things. I've had bands ask if I could please call a dance with a balance in the B one at a certain point in the evening and I try to accommodate. I mean, I think it's very important to have the band and the caller working well together. I have not had a situation where I felt like we were at odds in any way. So I try to accommodate what they're asking or the way they would like to share their music, as well. I think when I'm doing a local dance, I tend to call longer and so if a pretty snazzy band is playing this local dance, I might warn them that I'm going to have to do more calling because it's a new crowd, or I'm going to have to do more calling because it's an advanced dance and I'm going to be doing challenging dances. So I try to be upfront with the band about what to expect from me.

Caller leadership

Mary Wesley: You may not have an answer to this, but I guess going back to the caller being up there and being at the mic, being, in many ways a focal point, even if not everybody is watching and celebrating you, you're the director in a lot of ways. And so are there things, as a caller that you think about or that you feel like you do or are responsible for that people might not know that you're attending to or thinking about? I think choosing dances, communicating with the band, teaching dances, those are pretty visible and out there. But are there any less visible parts of that job?

Gaye Fifer: I think something that has become more important over the past several years is being more aware of etiquette and the feeling of safety and belonging on the dance floor. So being able to notice that people are sitting out numerous times and reminding people to look on the side and see if you can ask somebody that you don't know or somebody who's been sitting out and even announcements about safety and what to do if something happens that you don't like. So those things, they're not necessarily the caller responsibility, but often the caller is in a position to make those and to help people be more aware of those things. I guess I've even found that in terms of using non-gender calling that I'm kind of an ambassador for saying, "This is how we're going to do this tonight and this is what it means and why." I don't ever feel like it's

necessary or appropriate to lecture the dancers but I think giving them information about why I'm doing what I'm doing or why this community has chosen to do things in a certain way falls on the caller, can fall on the caller.

Mary Wesley: Yeah. Does that ever intersect with your other roles in the dance community? Because I hear you talking about being a community builder. I know sometimes you're an organizer. You certainly have a role with CDSS. Are you the current board president?

Gaye Fifer: I am.

Mary Wesley: I've seen you as the program director at camps. So how much do those other parts of who you are and what you do in the dance community come into play when you're just at the caller's mic?

Gaye Fifer: Well, I think I probably tend to feel responsible all the time for everything. But when I'm calling, like when I'm calling at a local dance I will check out with the local organizers about how they're handling things and what they would like me to do or not do and so I try to be responsive there. And it's an interesting thing when you're in leadership I think even when you say, "I'm not doing this as the board president. I'm not doing this as the organizer, I'm just the caller," people do see you as a leader so it's a little challenging to be totally divorced from those roles. I think it still comes back to being myself. So I am myself when I'm the board president. I am myself when I'm calling and I try to be that as fully as I can.

Mary Wesley: I don't know if this is the right way to phrase this, I was going to say, how do you keep yourself interested in doing these roles or is that even an issue for you? Because you just seem so fulfilled by it, by a lot of this work is what I hear from you.

Gaye Fifer: I would say that's true. I don't think I've ever been bored or uninterested. When I do start to feel like I am getting in a rut, then I might add something that's a little bit different. So when I added calling to my dancing, or when I added English calling to my calling, or when I added being an organizer of a weekend and then an organizer of a bigger group and then working on the board I think I have stepped up my level of involvement and challenge when I need that. Here's another thing, though, Mary, I never have lost..... you make me talk like this. I have never lost the joy I get from going to a local dance with a group of beginners. It's so cool to see people feeling the music or feeling the phrasing or seeing the potential, even if they're not great dancers. That first time you can see that excitement when they say, "Oh my goodness where has this been all my life?" And so I think it's hard for some people to keep that sense of joy in the local, day to day dance community and the excitement and newness of big dance events all around the country. I mean, it's very exciting to dance with 400 people all moving together. I love and will always love those local dances. I'm in a lovely position now where I don't need to make an income calling so it's really totally up to me how much I do and where I do it and how much I travel. I enjoy going to weekends and calling weekends, but if somebody calls me and says, will you come and call our Friday

night dance in whatever place, if I'm available, sure, that gives me a really lovely sense of gratification as well. So it's not like I'm climbing up this ladder trying to get to the top, and then I'll only do those really special fancy gigs. It's all really a wonderful experience for me sharing in both of those extremes, and everything in between.

Mary Wesley: It sounds like you're trying to experience everything in between, adding all these different facets. So, did you say that you first started dancing, late seventies, you said?

Gaye Fifer: Yep.

Changes over time

Mary Wesley: So, I mean, in that span of time, what have you seen change?

Gaye Fifer: A lot, huh? Let's see...Well, it's funny, I guess I've been dancing over 40 years. That's pretty hard to imagine. I still feel like a new dancer. In fact, I'm going to tell you another story and then I'm going to answer your question. I came to a dance in Pittsburgh when I was still living in Charlottesville and I danced with somebody, asked him where he's from, and he said he lives here in Pittsburgh. And I said, well, "I'm really happy to be here." And he said, "I haven't seen you before because I only come to the special dances." And I said, "Oh, I guess I'm still at that infatuation stage where every dance is special." He looked at me in kind of a patronizing tone of voice, said, "Well, how long have you been dancing?" And I said, "Only 30 years."

Mary Wesley: I love that!

Gaye Fifer: I like that story a lot. But it really also expresses my personality. Like each experience is new and different. So I have seen change over this 40 years, but I've also seen a lot of the same things happening, a lot of people coming and connecting and loving the movement. I will say one thing that's changed, a specific thing around gender identity is that I remember a time when men would not dance together. And so if you went to a dance where there were extra men, they would be sitting out on the sidelines waiting to swoop down on any unsuspecting or available woman to ask them to dance. And what that meant is that most of the time in those situations, I would never get to ask anyone to dance because there were always three or four people waiting to ask me to dance. And I'm not sure how that changed. I mean, I think society was changing as well. We quit doing gender balancing at weekends. I always loved weekends where there were extra women because then I could dance with women and not feel like these men were going to be deprived of their ability to have a good time. So I think that whole attitude has changed a lot. But society has changed too so men are more able to be physical with each other and not have it be threatening or intimidating or scary in any way. So I have seen just a lot more freedom about dancing with whomever you want to dance with and dancing whatever role you want to dance and having that be something

that is certainly more inclusive and allows people to experiment and play in ways that they might not have been able to do before or that they didn't have community approval to do. Now it feels like it's just a normal thing.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, and it's interesting how larger societal change or context, you know, is in conversation with our little subculture, but it has a lot to do with sort of inclusivity and accessibility because if those larger conversations about breaking down gender norms are happening, then that's a big consideration for what it is for someone to come walk into a dance for the first time and what what did they expect? I feel, especially if I'm going into onto a college campus, for example, or just any situation with younger people where I think I can expect a high consciousness of some of these larger changes and here I am presenting a new thing and it's really a chance that you could kind of make or break it with the way that you present things. And it's interesting to see that be playing out in the ways that it has bearing on calling.

Gaye Fifer: I think, too, that there are many pendulums that swing back and. So there's one way of looking at things where you're supposed to do it the traditional way. And then there are people who want to add flourishes and play with it. In some cases, it seemed like that almost went to an extreme. Now I hear more about consent. Like, it's okay to do those things, but make sure that the person you're dancing with wants to do those things. I have seen those kinds of changes where we've swung back and forth in some ways.

Mary Wesley: I know, I find it so interesting. I find all those conversations and variations just endlessly fascinating. I think it's that thing where each generation needs to make it their own in some way and so it makes me curious for what's going to come, especially coming out of this moment. Do you see anything on your horizon in terms of little things to add to your...new perspectives that you're seeking out, new facets to explore or do you feel like your plate is full and balanced right now when it comes to dance.

Gaye Fifer: It does feel pretty full and balanced in a way that I really am only doing things I love to do. I'm not in a position anymore where I'm doing things that I feel that I have to do, no sense of obligation. I am anticipating because I'm going to go off the board in two years. Then I will have a big chunk of attention and energy and time that's not automatically spoken for. So I think I will probably be looking for what the next step is.

Mary Wesley: That's quite a bit of intrigue to leave. What will happen next?

Gaye Fifer: Well, I think we can say for sure that I will still be Gaye Fifer.

Mary Wesley: Yes, most certainly. Oh, I love it. I have some closing questions that I always do, and I feel like we've kind of gone a lot of different places. But is there anything that you think I haven't touched or anything that you're like, oh, what about this?

Gaye Fifer: I think not. Mary, you are so easy to talk to.

Mary Wesley: Good. I'm so glad. I'm so glad. Just because it's a topic that I'm interested in and it's another way of surveying our community. We talked about Charlottesville people, Jim Morrison and Tom Hinds and Shawn Brenneman. Are there other either mentors or just influences, people that you have looked up to or drawn inspiration from over the years whether or not it was in that formative time or I think inspiration and mentorship can happen any time as we're all in our lifelong learning processes. Anything else that kind of jumps out?

Gaye Fifer: I do always watch other callers to kind of see what I can learn from them and what they do that I really like and what things I wouldn't do because it doesn't fit who I am. I have to say that there's a special place in my heart for Kathy Anderson. I did take a square dance caller's course with her. Actually, I might have taken it twice and I feel that she's also been somebody who's encouraged me to step outside my comfort zone and try doing something that feels more challenging. And people like Lisa Greenleaf and Cis Hinkle are callers that I look up to and that I admire because of their teaching and their stage presence and their ability to help everybody in the hall feel comfortable really.

I will also mention David Millstone because he's somebody who's always encouraging me to take another step to challenge myself. He's big on having me do singing squares, which I have resisted to this point. But yeah, it's good to know that there are people out there who can say, oh, well, this might be a good challenge for you. And I also want to say, Mary, that I am aware that I am getting older and that at some point it will be important for me to step back and make space for younger callers. I know how important it was for me to have those opportunities and so I want to make sure that I don't, and I want to say this sounds a little bit morbid but to say I don't want to stick around too long. But I am aware that this is a tradition that relies on new young energy and different ways of seeing things and different ways of saying things and so I'm aware of trying not to take up too much space.

Mary Wesley: Well, that sounds like just another part of this world, of this scene that you can try out. You can try out being someone who paves the way, which I think you're already doing in a lot of ways and it sounds like you have lots of other facets that will still keep you busy, even if you are stepping back or ushering in new callers as well. I always hope that we keep having that infusion, it's so important.

Gaye Fifer: Yep.

Closing

Mary Wesley: All right. I will turn to my closing questions, which I've been trying to ask everyone that I talk to, just things that I'm curious about learning from other callers. And

so the first one is actually about your dance collection and in particular how you notate and hold your dance collection. Are you using dance cards or a database or a binder or what do you pull out when you're getting ready to plan your dance?

Gaye Fifer: I still have three by five cards in a card box. I actually have two boxes now and then a third for English. So it's getting a little bit unwieldy. Wayne was actually worried that I was going to lose my cards and that would be really bad. So I have put them all in the computer as a backup. When I'm getting ready to call a dance, I like to spread my cards all out and look at all of them. I haven't figured out how to do that on a database. It feels constricting or constraining to only be able to see one card or two cards at a time, so I'm resisting that partly because of the way I like to organize planning a program. But it is kind of old school.

Mary Wesley: You are definitely not alone. Many people are still using cards. Are you still adding to the collection, would you say?

Gaye Fifer: Oh, definitely, definitely. I think that's part of what makes it interesting for me too Mary, that I'm not just calling the same dances that I called 30 years ago. Every time I go to a weekend, I find another dance or two that is new and interesting or makes me think in a different way, or makes me move in a different way so yeah, I'm still collecting for sure.

Mary Wesley: Do you have any pre or post dance rituals like when you're calling, is there anything you do when you arrive or when you get off stage to kind of step in and out of that role?

Gaye Fifer: I always brush my teeth before I call. I cannot call if I haven't brushed my teeth and no, I don't think I have any other rituals. That's my good luck charm. I do like just a few minutes of calm before I call, just to kind of focus and center myself and make sure that I'm ready. I enjoy the socializing afterwards, but I don't have any particular rituals other than just hanging out with people. Eating. I eat too much when I am at dance weekends. But that's not really related to calling, I don't think.

Mary Wesley: There's always there's always a snack crew that's good. Those dancers have to keep their energy up. My last question, which you may or may not think in these terms, but I'm curious if you identify as an introvert or an extrovert?

Gaye Fifer: I very much identify as an extrovert. But let me say that when I first heard those words, like 40-50 years ago, I thought that an extrovert was somebody who needed to be the center of attention. I don't feel like I'm an extrovert in that way. But I do get energy from being around people, and I have very little need to have alone time. I just get energy from being social, being around people. So with that definition, I definitely consider myself...

Mary Wesley: Yeah. And I think that's that's very true what you've pointed to, kind of people who recharge with people or in solitude is more what those terms mean. And so

does being at a dance and being on stage at a dance just feel great to you then, being the center of all that energy?

Gaye Fifer: It does and I think it helps me not to feel that everybody's focusing on me, because I'm sure they're not, actually. But to feel that I'm part of this thing that we're creating.

Mary Wesley: You're in the midst of it, not necessarily the center.

Gaye Fifer: And I will It's been interesting for me during the pandemic to kind of think about this extrovert, introvert thing, because my life changed pretty dramatically without dance and travel and I had to figure out a different balance of being by myself or reaching out to other people. And so I think it'll be interesting to see how that gets carried through as we go back to dancing. I may make some different choices.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, I know, we are all renegotiating what life is like now. Yeah, well, Gaye this has been just such a pleasure, thank you so much.

Gaye Fifer: Oh, it's lovely talking with you Mary. I appreciate your questions and your good ear for listening.

Mary Wesley: Well, thanks. I hope that we cross paths on a dance floor somewhere sometime soon.

Gaye Fifer: Looking forward to it.

[*Clip of Gaye calling with the Asheville Cats in 2015*]

Many thanks to Gaye for speaking with me and thank *you* for listening to From the Mic. This project is supported by CDSS, The Country Dance and Song Society and is produced by Ben Williams and me, Mary Wesley:.

Thanks to Great Meadow Music for the use of tunes from the album Old New England by Bob McQuillen, Jane Orzechowski & Deanna Stiles.

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Happy dancing!

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