

From the Mic Episode 8 - Chris Ricciotti

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

Chris Intro

Hello From the Mic listeners! We're back! I'm so thrilled to share this full interview with none other than the "Queen Mum" of gender-free contra dancing, Chris Ricciotti! Chris began his lifelong love affair with dancing in 1966 as a young boy enthralled with the old time squares he did in gym class growing up in Coventry, Rhode Island. Dancing has been central to his life ever since.

Chris's resume as a dancer, dance teacher, caller, and organizer is long and storied and you'll hear all about it in our interview, but as you can tell by his title, he has especially been recognized as one of the pillars of the gender-free dance community. In 1987, he started what would eventually become a network of contra, square, English and folk dances for the gay, lesbian, bi and trans-gendered community around New England and the US. In 1990 he brought gender-free contra dancing to NEFFA, the New England Folk Festival, as a way to share this style of teaching, calling and dancing with dancers and callers from the wider dance community.

Over the years at these events and within these networks Chris has helped develop the concept of changing calling and teaching terminology to be gender-free, beginning with "Armbands" and "Barearms" to designate dance roles. Approaches to gender-free calling continue to evolve today.

Chris still teaches contra and square dancing, English, Scottish country dancing, Scandinavian turning couple dances, International Folk dances and vintage couple and set dances from the 1860s through the 1920's. He plays melodeon for contra and English dances as well as morris dancing, and has composed a few of his own tunes.

Outside of dancing, Chris works full time as the Technical Manager of the Office of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion for Steward Health Care, an eight state, 44 hospital system. He is the curator of the Rockland Telephone Discovery Center, a hands-on museum of telephone & switchboard history, which he started himself. He also enjoys photography, gardening, raising animals, weaving, and cooking for others. Chris joined our interview from his new farm in Montville, Maine.

[*Clip of Chris calling at the 2008 San Francisco Bay Queer Contra Dance Camp with music by the band Bag 'o Tricks*]

Introduction and beginnings

Mary Wesley: Chris Ricciotti, welcome to From the Mic. I'm so happy to see you here.

Chris Ricciotti: Thank you. Good to see you, too.

Mary Wesley: From The Mic is a podcast about North American dance callers. So we are exploring contra, square dance and community dance traditions, as they're called in this part of the world. And I'm really excited to hear from you. And would you start by just introducing yourself and just sharing a little bit about how you got started dancing, calling anywhere you'd like to begin?

Chris Ricciotti: Sure. Well, my name is Chris Ricciotti. I currently, well, recently have moved to Montville, Maine, to fulfill my dream of living in a rural farmhouse and working the land and living in a rural community. And I'm a caller of mostly contra and square dancing, but also do English country dancing, Scottish country dancing, International folk dancing, Scandinavian turning couple dances, as well as vintage dancing from the Civil War era to about the 1920s. So I love it all. I dance at all. It's a lot of fun for me. How I got involved in dance, believe it or not, was elementary school phys ed square dance class. I absolutely loved it. I did everything in phys ed and totally sucked at it, including baseball, basketball, had no hand-eye coordination at all. However, as soon as I heard the first square dance album played, it was on these old 78s, and they were doing old Eastern and the old time squares, I just...there was something about the music and the movement that I immediately identified with and felt very confident in the way I moved and the way I felt.

So to me, I mean that was one of the few areas in my life at that point where I wanted, I just felt so confident that I didn't want anything or anyone to spoil that experience for me. So for me, I just really fell in love with square dancing and all of that. So from there

as I went through all of the years and in school, as time went on, I got to do more and more square dancing in school. Sometimes I would sneak out of study hall to get more of a fix, and I would sneak in through the boys locker room, jump into a square until the phys ed teacher found me. Then they would throw me out and I would go out through the boys locker room, sneak in through the girls locker room, jump into another square. And by the time they found me again the session was over and I got a chance to do some more dancing. Eventually, some kids saw how much I loved square dancing in high school and they said, "You know, you should really go to 4-H." I had no idea what 4-H was about, but what intrigued me was they said, "Well, they're dancing three nights a week and they are getting ready for competition for the Big E Fair," and I thought, "Works for me!" So I went up—again, lots of old 78s on these old phonographs and I was learning a lot of old singing squares and patter squares, and I just fell in love with the whole thing. It was absolutely wonderful. And eventually, after doing competition, they said, "So how would you feel about trying to call for competition?" And I thought, "I don't know. I'll give it a try." What I remember is they handed me the microphone and as I was speaking into it, I had to keep pushing it away. I said, "It's way too loud." He said, "No, that's the way it normally sounds." I said, "No, it doesn't. It's really loud." He says, "Trust me, just keep your microphone there. Keep calling, and over time you'll get used to it. And it won't sound very loud." And sure enough, that did happen. I did go out for a competition for calling for old time, singing squares and just loved it. Eventually got too old to be in the 4-H group so eventually a couple of years after that, when I was out of work, I decided to start my own square dance group, my first one. We did this at Summit Baptist Church Hall in Summit, a rural train town in western Coventry [Rhode Island] and we had four squares on a Friday night and four squares on a Saturday night. And I did that for a season and absolutely loved it. And eventually it was in 1985 that...well, even before that I had discovered Western Square dancing through Dick Leger. I joined Dick Leger's group that he had in East Providence.

Mary Wesley: Can you tell us a little bit more about Dick Leger? It's a familiar name to me but I'd love to know more.

Chris Ricciotti: Yeah, Dick Leger was an amazing Western club style caller. He did mostly mainstream calls, but what he was really good at and what he instilled in me, which totally changed my calling, because I was doing a lot of hash [calling], I didn't know anything about timing at all. I just kind of repeated what I remembered and you know, what I learned from records and things like that. But he taught me how to do timing. In fact, I took his caller's class in 1985 after dancing under his leadership for a couple of years. Dick Leger was nationally known around the country. He was probably one of the top notch Western Club style square dancers at the time. He wrote a lot of books about it, but his big thing was timing. He thought dancing would be really good if you did timing well and it worked well. So that's what he did, is he did timing. And he

taught timing as a part of it. And that eventually fueled and changed my way of calling the squares that I love, because then I started thinking about the timing and how all of that would work. And eventually, of course, that led really, really well into the 8-count figures of contra dancing and how the whole music is phrased and how you call before the musical phrase so that they'll be ready for it the same way that we did in Western Squares at that time.

So after doing his class, interestingly enough, that fall, November of '85, I finally came to terms with becoming a gay man and came out and it was the following year, sometime in the spring, I was singing in a men's chorus, mixture of straight men and gay men in Providence. And one of my friends behind me said, "You know, I just came back from Colorado and I went to the gay rodeo." And I'm thinking, "Oh my God, gay rodeo!" I could not even imagine those two things being together. And I said...you know, so I was just listening to the conversation. And then he said, "And after that we went to a square dance." And as soon as he said that, my eyes just popped open and I'm like, "You mean a gay square dance?" And he said, "Oh yeah, they've been doing it out there for years." And I thought, oh my God, as soon as I heard that, I knew I had found my calling. I said, "I have got to put together my two worlds of dance and being a gay man and see if there's a way that I can make this work." Because back then, socially, in the gay community, all there was was a lot of, just the bar scene. And I really wasn't a bar person. I really liked getting together in a community of friendship and being able to see people under a normal light without a screaming, you know, music and smoke and alcohol. And I just didn't want any part of that.

So you know, at that point I had started contra dancing in 1984, Isabel Barton, who was part of the band for Four on the Floor with her husband at the time, Dave Mussey, introduced me to contra dancing. And what I didn't realize is it was a lot more along the tradition of my old time squares than the Western style club dancing. While I was dancing Western squares, I had often asked, "Well, what about the old squares like, you know, that I used to do in 4-H and in school," and [people] said "Oh all that stuff died out years ago." I had no idea it actually had not. It's just that I hadn't discovered the country dance community yet, and they were under the impression it had long since died because they were looking at this from the perspective of, you know, a Western Square dancer. So after doing a couple of contras and of course, the first thing that happened was the room was spinning round for a while with all the swinging that we did. But once I got beyond that, I found that I really enjoyed it a lot and eventually asked, "Could I call some squares?" They said, "Oh, you call squares? Oh, that's great." And I told them all about the singing squares, but I had never worked with a band before. So Isabel and her husband got together with me and I told them the tunes that I did, and they, interestingly enough, they were familiar with the tunes. And so they started playing. And I had never played with live music before. I had always done squares to 78s. So this

was pretty fascinating for me and it was pretty exciting to learn this and to actually feel like I could do this with live music. I still loved my old stuff from the records, but this was really expanding what I knew and what was possible. Then in March of 1987, I finally started my first...and I'd been calling contras on again, off again within the regular dance community. And I go ahead.

Mary Wesley: Sorry. Just remind me, where did you start contra dancing? Where was the Four on the Floor dance?

Chris Ricciotti: Oh, that was spring of 1984, and that was at the Congregational Church in Kingston, Rhode Island. It was the place where many years ago I met Lisa Greenleaf and a few other callers that I got to know over time.

Mary Wesley: Great. And so you said you'd started calling kind of in Rhode Island in the New England area?

First gay and lesbian contra dance groups

Chris Ricciotti: Well, just in Rhode Island at that point, I didn't know anything else about anything else. I was pretty much a newbie, and I was still kind of getting my feet wet. I mostly called squares, but eventually found I really liked the contra dances because they were easy enough to learn. So in March of '87, I started my first gay and lesbian contra dance group. It was at the Congregational Church on the east side of Providence. I think it was First Congregational Church, and nobody would have shown up except that the AA meeting that was going on downstairs of the church had been canceled. And it was a it was a gay AA group. So all of these men and women came upstairs and decided, let's try this, this dancing thing. And we had 25 people that night. And so we just had a really good time with that. And I decided I really wanted to do more of this. So I was really pushing. I did a lot of marketing. I talked with a lot of my friends in the community at that time in order to try to get this idea off the ground. And it wasn't until 1988 when some friends of mine who had come down from Boston had said, "You know, you should be doing this in Jamaica Plain. You have a gay community there, and they would love this stuff." And I'm like, "What the hell is Jamaica Plain?" So they, you know, and I was pretty naive back then. I didn't travel very much. I mean, Rhode Island was pretty much my world at the time, and I hadn't even gone outside of New England. So I drove up there, found the church, 3 hours late, ran into the middle of a couple of islands because I had no idea how to negotiate all of that...and saw the church and thought, "All right, this'll do." It had a nice wood floor. It had nice oak paneling and stuff. And it was just what I pictured being an old time dancehall. Went back there in September. I had gone down in June to look at the hall, and in September we started with about 12 people. Two weeks later, those 12 people brought 12 more.

Two weeks after that, we had 30 people. Two weeks after that, we had over 40 people. And by January of 1989, we had over 90 people in the hall. And it was huge. And eventually what happened, something happened within the community, the gay/lesbian community at that time. This was one of the first things where men and women actually were dancing together in that community, because up to that point, the gay community not only was a big bar scene, a lot of smoking, a lot of drinking, but there was also a lot of political stuff going on. And men typically did not mix with women. Now, unbeknownst to me and thankfully, I had no idea and I really had no interest in being separate. In fact, when we first started forming lines at those first few dances, all the women formed a set of their own. All the men formed a set of their own. I thought, "Hmm, this isn't exactly what I had in mind." So I started doing mixers and I did a lot of mixers. And eventually somebody came up to me and said, "You mean, we can all dance together?" And I'm like, "Well, yeah, that's kind of what I had in mind."

So in January of 1989, there was a huge explosion of social groups that came to fruition in Boston. I'd like to think that a lot of it came from ideas that people shared while they were at the dances here. But there was also a change going on in the political climate, and people began to realize, you know, we can start socializing and we don't have to be in bars to do things like this. So there were lots of other different dance groups that suddenly started popping open. There was a large country Western dance group called "Gays for Patsy." There was a new swing dance group that started. There was ballroom dancing, and soon enough there was tango dancing going on. And there were a lot of social groups starting that played board games, that did potluck groups, movie nights and so on. So what was 90 eventually kind of whittled its way down to 40 or 50 with a good core group of people that were coming all the time and lots of new faces coming.

The Queen Mum of Gender Free Contra

And it was the year after that, in 1989 that I had started calling not only in Boston, but found out that there was a group that wanted dancing in Hartford, Connecticut. And I had gone to a gay contra dance not only there, the year before. I think it was Katherine Wedderburn who had called that one and Marsha Lazarus had been organizing a group up in Albany. And I said, "Would you like to get an ongoing series there as well?" So between Boston and Hartford and Albany, I was now starting a network of dances for the gay and lesbian community and wanted to create a community, a networking tool. So we started a group called S.E.G.A.L. to begin with: the Southeast Gay and Lesbian Contra Dancers. Then a year later, in August of '89, we met, we had a group of people from all of these groups get together at the Moosup Valley Grange Hall in Foster, Rhode Island. And we had a big meeting to figure out what did we want to do with all of this? You know, should we start a networking group and a group that would be able to help

organize? So we did. We decided to call it the N.E.G.A.L, the Northeast Gay and Lesbian Country Dancers. And they said, "Well, what role do you want to take? What title do you want?" And I'm like, "Well, I damn well don't want to be president. I hate that title. I don't want anything to do with that." And my friend Peter Rivard piped up from the back of the room and he said, "Well, what about Queen Mum?" And before I could say anything, they all said, "Yep, that's what it'll be." Interestingly enough, a number of years later, when the Queen Mum did die back in '97, I found out that she and I actually did have something in common. We were born on the same day, exactly 60 years apart, and I had no idea.

Mary Wesley: Oh, my gosh.

Chris Ricciotti: So, you know, people often in my community refer to me as the "Queen Mum" of gender free contra dancing. Now N.E.G.A.L. eventually became the Lavender Country and Folk Dancers, which is still going on today. We started our first dance camp in August of 1989. I did it from top to bottom, soup to nuts. Hired the band, was the caller, flushed the toilets, cleaned the rooms. I mean, you know, did the menu...everything from top to bottom. And over the years, that became pretty successful and people had a great time. And it also gave a chance for all of these groups to start organizing and talking with one another and visiting all the different dances. So it kind of grew out from there.

Now, during that time, it may seem strange now, but back then these were two different worlds for me. The general or the conventional contra dance and square dance community was completely separate from what I was doing with the gay community, and one should never meet the other because God forbid, if anyone ever found out, they probably wouldn't want me as a caller in the conventional community. So I did keep two very separate lives, and I did not talk about one with the other until Isabel Barton from the group in Kingston, Four on the Floor, saw one of my fliers hanging up. She recognized the number and she recognized my name and she sent me a letter and said, "You know, I don't know if this is your group or not or if you're, you know, if you're gay or what not. But I just wanted to let you know if you have any involvement with this group that I want to do whatever I can to help support what you're doing. And in fact, if you would like to have live music at one of your events, Dave and I would love to come down and play for you."

Well of course I was in tears and I had no idea what to do with this. So eventually I did call them on the phone and I talked with her and I said, "Yeah, that's me." And I said, "I just have not been saying anything about this because, you know, I don't know...I had a sense that people would probably not take kindly to it." And in some cases that was true. She told her husband, Dave and Dave wrote me an amazing letter and said, "Well,

I wanted to let you know my sister's a lesbian. She's an amazing woman. I want to do whatever I can to help support what you're doing. I think this is great, and I think it's about time that, you know, we open this up." So that started very slowly over time. I began to network these two communities together, but it was a slow process. Occasionally, I would put my fliers out at local dances. There were times where people would, and not many, but there were a few individuals who would see them, take them off the table, rip them up. And later comment that, you know, "This is a family dance.

Changing Terminology

There's no place room for this kind of activity in a place like this." And I'm like, "Really? Who do you think is dancing with you right now? Who do you think is calling with you right now?" So, you know, it was a hard time for me in regard to trying to merge, but also need knowing that I needed to, you know, do things separately. And at the same time, my language was changing because in January of '89 in Jamaica Plain, they said, you know, we love what you're doing with dancing, but we're tired of the man/woman, ladies and gents thing. I'm not a lady. I don't want to be called a lady. I'm not a gent. I don't want to be called a gent. Can you come up with something different? So I ended up going back to calling people that I knew in the Gay Square dance communities and asked, I said, "Well, how do you deal with gender?" And of course, they all use CALLERLAB, which is a fixed and a consistent language.

I'll give you a little bit of history. Carl Wittman started the idea of gender-free English and Scottish country dance in the Pacific Northwest in Oregon back in 1970. He had been from the RSCDS community. Him and his partner Alan were kicked out of a Scottish ball because they wanted to dance together. And so that kind of left a bad taste in his mouth and he decided to travel up the coast, in some rural communities that he was a part of, and started...he decided he wanted dance to be a part of that. He also was calling gents and ladies and eventually his community had challenged him. They said, "You know, we love this dancing, but this terminology really just is not appropriate for our needs and what we want. So he came up with eventually bandannas of "reds" and "blues," and then eventually he dropped that whole idea and he did "left file" and "right file" where you didn't need any color identification at all.

Well, fast forward many years later, I started this whole idea of gender-free, well, not gender-free, but contra dancing in 1986, about the time Carl had passed away. I had no knowledge of what he was doing and very similarly to his community in 1970, in 1989, I was challenged to change the language. To fit the needs of our community, to make it more appropriate, to make it feel like they really owned what it was all about. So I checked around. I called around to a lot of the gay Western Square dance clubs at the

time. I said, "Well, how do you deal with gender when you want to identify who's doing what role?" Because they use CALLERLAB, which is all standardized. But there were times where, if they were working with new people and they wanted to identify, they would use in some cases wigs, in some cases vests, in some cases different colored t-shirts, some some folks humorously said that that they used shirts and skins, which was not true...like they did in gym class. And, but some said, you know, we use ties as, you know, neckties. I thought, "Oh, a tie, a bandana or a ribbon. We could tie one around somebody's arm. And what do we call that? How do we identify the two?" And what came to mind was, I called them "armbands" and "bare arms." So I brought it to Jamaica Plain in January of 1989. I said, "All right, we've had some challenges from the floor about changing this, how we identify the roles. So this is what we'll try." I said, "We'll try it for one night and you... At the end of the night, you decide whether this is going to work or if we need to do something different." So we did it. I made some mistakes, but over time I kind of got my head around it and at the end of the evening they gave it a standing ovation. And from that point on until about 2018, that was our method of calling. Our terminology was "armbands" and "bare arms."

Bringing Gender Free dancing to NEFFA

So in 1990, the year after, I decided...I started becoming a little more courageous. I said, "What about the idea of doing this at NEFFA?" Which I had recently discovered and was really enjoying. So I put the word out there. I said, "This is what I'd like to do. I'd like to see if we could get everybody dancing together and, you know, use non-gender terminology." And, you know, they said, "You know, what would you like as a title?" So there were a number of titles. I had no idea what to call this, you know, "sex-free dancing," "role free dancing," "non-gender dancing," "dancing multiple roles," all kinds of different things. Unbeknownst to me, this stirred up quite a bit of controversy with NEFFA, and they were like, "Well, should we actually be doing this? Is this appropriate?"

So they finally went to one of the original organizers of NEFFA. Larry Jennings. And they said, "Larry, what do you think about this? Do you think it's appropriate that we should be doing this at NEFFA?" And he said, "You know what? I think it would be inappropriate not to consider having this sitting NEFFA." So after a lot of talk and discussion, they finally decided to have it. And they wrote back to me and said, "Your session has been approved. We are calling it 'Gender-Free Contra Dancing.'" And I'm like, "Ooh, what a neat idea. I never would have thought of that." So I didn't come up with the role. I did not come up with the role. That was something that NEFFA had come up with. So got to NEFFA, getting ready. Nervous as all hell, thinking, you know, maybe

ten people from our community might show up. We were on the auditorium stage over at the Natick High School at the time.

Mary Wesley: Was that the big dance room? Was that the biggest dance space?

Chris Ricciotti: No, no, that was smallest dance space. They probably weren't sure if anybody was even going to come out for this. And to my great surprise and delight, it was packed, including, you know, there were a few people from our community, but all the rest of them were people I've known for years through the conventional dance community. I was watching Ted Sannella dancing together with Tony Parkes, which totally blew my mind, and they were swapping roles and laughing and carrying on, having a good time. And I couldn't even get my head around all of this because I wasn't expecting any of this. And I guess it became kind of a hit and they decided, well, if...you know, I asked, "Could we do it again?" And they said, "Absolutely. And we're going to give you a bigger space because you need more room."

[*Clip of Chris calling the dance Dance All Night by Rick Mohr at the Concord Scout House in 2008 with music by the band Apple Crisp*]

Growing the community

Chris Ricciotti: At our dance camps I started, and at our local dances...it was mostly me and a band that I really liked. It was Nantucket Sound. It was Linda Henry, Bob Snope and umm...

Mary Wesley: Amy?

Chris Ricciotti: Yes. Amy Larkin. Yes, absolutely. I absolutely adored them. They were the first ongoing band that came to play for our group in Jamaica Plain because we had been using recorded music. I didn't think any of the bands in Boston would even want to play for us because of the nature of the community. Come to find out, Nantucket Sound wasn't getting a chance to play enough, and they didn't care who they played for. They just wanted a good old dance group to play for. And I thought they were awesome. I remember going up and seeing them. I went to their house for one of their practices and I listened to them. And all the evening long, when I was hearing them practice, I was thinking, "God, these folks are fabulous. I love them." So at the end of the night, Amy looks at me. She goes, "So what did you think?" I said, "God, I love this. This is amazing!" She goes, "Really, you really think we're good?" I'm like, "Holy cow, you're one of the best bands I've ever heard."

So they came and they became a regular. And they also came and they played for dance camp. So over time...they were kind of the beginning of, well, we should start thinking about maybe having callers come because it shouldn't be just me. I mean, you know the idea of networking what we're doing with other communities so that we can also learn from other callers, learn from their experiences and their guidance, because there were a lot of great callers. I was relatively new to calling. I wanted to call. There was no room for me in Boston to call. So most of my calling was in Providence at the time where they knew me and they needed callers. There was no room for me in Boston to call at the time. The market was kind of saturated. So this was my way of being able to call, but also being able to build a community of dancers around me. So over time, I thought, you know, this would really be great to get other callers in because there were people like Lisa Greenleaf who I loved, Sue Rosen. You know, Beth and Tony Parkes. I mean, there were a lot of different people that I really wanted over time. Plus, there were a lot of good bands, and over time, the word kind of spread that we have a fun community of people here. Why don't we go and call for them. So we started getting more callers from the conventional dance community, and they really enjoyed our presence. They really enjoyed what we were doing. The callers themselves were learning a whole different style of calling, using a different gender terminology, a language terminology, and they really enjoyed what we were doing.

The only thing that wasn't happening still in the early aughts through the mid-aughts was that there weren't many people crossing over into our community to dance from the conventional community. So occasionally we would go and we would crash conventional dancers with a whole group of people from our community. One of the biggest ones we did was, there was a woman in our community who was having a birthday named Doris Reisig. And she had been dancing for years before she came and danced in our community. She was having a birthday party and she said, "I want to go and dance at the English dance on Wednesday night in Cambridge. Why don't we go as a whole group and do that?" So I was like, "I'm fine with that." So we had about 15 people that came. We came in all kinds of skirts and wild costumes, and we just came in and we danced with them all night long. And at the end of the night, a number of them came over to us and they're like, "Wow, you people are incredible dancers. Where did you all come from?" And I said, "We're from the Jamaica Plain dance community." They were like, "Jamaica Plain? Oh, that's interesting." And, like, "You should come more often! You added a lot of life to the party here tonight!" And I said, "And you should come to our dances because we're a lot of fun."

Laura Johannes, a caller and dear friend of mine who recently passed away, started becoming very involved in our community in between 2005 and say, 2012. And one of the things she started doing as she became involved with the organizing was she started inviting people from the conventional dance community to come and dance with

us. One of the first ones she was able to convince was Maureen Carey. And she came and she had an absolute blast. And she goes, "I don't understand why more people aren't here doing this. You people have an incredibly fun dance and it's great. People are friendly. They're having a great time!" She eventually started talking with others. Laura started talking with others. And eventually I got more courage to talk with people I had known for years. And I said, "Come and dance with us." I mean, you know, you don't have to check in your your sexual identity at the door. I mean, this is open for everybody to come and to have a really good time. And it took a while. But over time, it did happen and everything really came to a head in 2009.

We had our 20th year celebration, it was in January of 2009. We spread the word throughout the entire Boston dance community contra dancers, square dancers, international folk dancers, musicians, callers. We had over 120 people come out for this daylong event. We had callers dancing with other callers. Men dancing with women. Women dancing with men. Men dancing with men. Women dancing with women. We had four different bands from the local community who came out and supported us and actually played for us for free because they wanted to be a part of the party. And we had...I still have videotape of this and it was absolutely amazing. Absolutely. The energy in the room was over the top. Absolutely incredible. And it was a real testimony to some of the work that we had started doing with networking. And people began to realize, "Oh, we can just come and have a good time. We don't have to worry about the holw gender, I mean, orientation thing or the gender thing. It's just a nice group of people who just want to dance and have a good time. And you can dance with whoever you want, wherever you want, whatever role you want. That's all it is.

So over time, we started getting more people from, not only the conventional community...and occasionally doggies [Goji the dog appears on camera], but we also had people, there was a whole community of people from the trans community who started coming to our dance regularly around 2011, 2012. And as they became more and more involved in our community, they said, "Well, you know, we need to come up with a different name for this group rather than the Boston Gay and Lesbian Contra Dancers." And so we eventually decided to change our name to the Boston Gender...instead of the Jamaica Plain Gay and Lesbian Contra Dancers we became the Boston Gender Free Contra Dancers so that everybody would be welcome to come and just join in no matter what.

Dancing, identity, and community

Mary Wesley: You know, listening to this progression, starting with like, "Oh, my gosh, gay square dancing, that's a thing? I need this in my life." And you started this group

and you're describing that as being...you were really in these two separate spheres. And then in terms of the gay and lesbian dance, you know, country dance scene...you're describing this progression towards making it a space that's inclusive to all and is that different from other gay and lesbian centered spaces? Because, I just don't know. There's something that strikes me as different about the progression that you've gone through. And to me, I'm like, Well, it's the dancing...because it's you both wanted a place to be comfortable with your sexuality and enjoy this activity. But they also didn't need to be like, separate for you. I'm just curious how that plays out and also how it compares to other spaces that were, you know, initiated as safe spaces. And maybe wouldn't have gone through that same progression of becoming spaces that are meant to be open to all.

Chris Ricciotti: I think the whole recreation and the art and the history of contra dancing is about people coming together and making community. Whether it be their local farm dance, barn dance, you know, group of people getting together to, you know, just talk and chat and, you know, do something they've been doing for, you know, over 100 years. All of this dancing stuff. Dancing has always been a big community builder. It's a group...well, at least country dancing, the traditional dances, whether it be folk dancing, contra dancing, square dancing, all of that. It's about a whole room coming together and enjoying. It's not about couples. Although, you know, there are couple dances and there's that. But unlike like two-stepping and, you know, ballroom dancing and other forms of dancing, this was a lot more about building a community. This style, this tradition of dancing is naturally something where it's a group activity. It's not just a single person's activity or a couple activity. It's about the whole room coming together to build that energy. And it may not be something that's intentional, but it just happens by the sheer nature of, you know, contra dancing and all that wonderful traditional dance work. It's about people coming together. And without that community aspect of it, the energy isn't sustainable and it doesn't happen. So I think in our world, well, at least within the gay world and now all the other groups sort of fall under a larger umbrella, this is one of the few places where you can touch people and it's socially acceptable. Isn't it interesting? Two or 300 years later, the only really socially acceptable way to touch people is through the art of dancing together.

Mary Wesley: Mhm.

Chris Ricciotti: You know what I mean? It's incredible, you know, it's that drawing of people together. Dancing is one of these kind of weird things that draws a lot of like-minded people together doing something that rarely you would do in any other social group, whether it be potluck or board game or whatever. The element of touch is not there. Dancing is kind of the last holdout of something that overall, thankfully, is still

okay to touch. But, the other side of that is you also have to be respectful. And that's something that I look out for a lot.

Mary Wesley: Well, you know, it sounds...so much of this for you is so personally intertwined. And, you know, I mean, I'm just hearing that, like, even from such a young age, dancing was like maybe the first place you experienced some belonging.

Chris Ricciotti: And it was something about the music and the movement that I could claim as being mine. And I was incredibly courageous in that moment. In ways that I could never be that courageous in any other activities I was doing. There was something about music and moving and dancing that totally was something I owned.

Mary Wesley: Ao one of the things I find so interesting about callers, and one of the reasons I wanted to sort of do this series is, it's such a unique job. It's such a unique role, the caller. And, you know, part of it is, yes, you're in front of the crowd, you direct the dancers, you teach, you prompt, you talk to the band. But there...one of my sort of theories or just areas of curiosity is the other kinds of leadership and really shaping of our dance traditions, that callers end up influencing or bringing into the dance space. And for you, that just feels so prominent because you were not only making dancing happen, but you were really pioneering some new spaces and new practices. And I imagine you were also like...I don't know, I imagine you were also navigating your own identity and sexuality and how you were moving through the world just in general. So how was that?

Chris Ricciotti: Well, when I... boy, that's an interesting question because, you know, when I came out, I had this crazy, crazy-ass idea that, you know, once I would go to a gay bar and, you know, meet people in a social climate, everybody would like one another and everybody was going to have a good time. It would be fun. Nuh-huh, after I came out of my first gay bar, you know, and was listening to the conversations and the drinking and people throwing up on me and, you know, oh, my God, it was a nightmare. And I walked out of there with some of my friends and I was like...I just felt like I came out of the high school locker room. It was just horrendous. And I was really taken aback. And over time, I said, you know, "If this is what it means coming out in the gay community, then I have no interest in this." I needed to create something that was going to work for me. And somehow the dancing and what I was doing as a part of that was the avenue for that.

Because I wasn't just, you know, the idea of creating community came from having discussions with people and what they were identifying. For me in really looking back on it, I was trying to create a family because, you know, a lot of...not all, but a lot of gay people don't end up getting, you know...going the traditional route of getting married and having kids and doing all of that. This is my family. You know, and today in many ways,

this is still my long term family of 35 or 40 years. This is where I've made my deepest connections. These are people that I have trusted that have been there with me through thick and thin, and we've all hung together, many of us. And this has become a group of people we've come to rely on and come to be able to talk to and trust and do all of that.

So that was a big piece for me because I wasn't feeling it in the general, in the social construct of the gay community when I first came out, when it was mostly just bar scene stuff and, you know, subscribing to a mainstream culture that I just have never felt comfortable in. I don't care whether it be in a straight community, in a gay community. Mainstream culture and me just have never really clicked. I have my own ideas about what I think the world can be, and I feel that the work I've done in the dance community is a great example of what's possible in breaking that mainstream mold and creating a whole different world that can be never you want it to be. So long as everybody's kind of on the same page with it. And thankfully it actually happened. I hadn't planned on it being that way. I was willing to push and give every ounce of my energy and organization and passion until this finally clicked. And there were many times over the first couple of years, I just wasn't sure this was really going to happen.

Mary Wesley: I mean, and was it hard to sort of discover dancing and really kind of find a key part of yourself, but then have to cordon it off as you come into your identity as a gay man.

Chris Ricciotti: Yeah, that was really hard. And in some ways it was easy because it meant I didn't have to identify. It meant I could live my two separate worlds because I knew what each world would and would mean. But bringing them together over time, that was the hard part. And there were other people in my community who were so much more comfortable at doing that. At pushing that envelope. I felt like I had a real responsibility within our community, and within the whole nature of dancing and with people I knew from both communities, not to be the person pushing that envelope. Because I was already calling in both communities regularly. It didn't mean that I could do what I wanted in both communities. I limited myself and there were people from my community who were taking liberties that I just didn't feel I had the right to take because I knew callers in the conventional community. And what would they say? I knew band people, I knew dancers. So I had to be very careful what I did, when I did. And sadly for me, what it meant was that it was a long time before I could accept and also and enjoy the liberties that everyone else had been doing for years. And the other thing that I've carried with me over time is, I like dancing with the whole room. So if I go to a conventional dance, say, in a more rural area or in a more traditional area, it's hard for me to just be dancing with women all night. And if there's one or two moves where I'm doing a left hand turn with a guy and they won't even look at me, I'm like, "You know what?"

And I'm no longer naive about all of this. I will tell you that there is an incredible joy and an incredible energy that can be built when everybody just lets all of that stuff go and just dances with everybody who comes to them with a big smile and open face, expectation of having a great time, sharing that love and that passion that you enjoy about moving to music with everybody who comes. You know, it can take one person in a set to completely break it down and make it feel like crap. And I can tell you from personal experience and passion, I can take the energy of a set and build it till it is absolutely off the charts as one person. And I don't even tell people that's what I'm doing. I just do it and watch it spread.

Mary Wesley: This I believe. I've been in a dance set with you, Chris, and it's a true joy.

Chris Ricciotti: I can't help myself. It's one of the few places in my life where I really feel comfortable just pouring myself out and not having to hide. Dancing at six, at 26, at 46, and now 62 is...

Mary Wesley: And onward.

Chris Ricciotti: Absolutely. Chris Ricciotti: It's one of the few places I still feel completely comfortable sharing that little child with the whole rest of the world. Even times in places where I'm not sure how comfortable I feel completely being myself, there's a part of me that once I get into it, I can open myself up and make it happen.

[*Clip of Chris calling the dance Butterfly Kiss by Bob Isaacs at the 2012 NEFFA festival with music by the band Jet Stream*]

Mary Wesley: Yeah. So now that...you were starting to describe, you know, sort of more currently that it's just becoming more common for callers to be using gender free language. To be adopting larks and ravens or larks and robins. This is becoming more of a convention. As that trend is moving along, it's certainly not universal now, but in my perspective, it is spreading. You know, is it still important to have dedicated, gender free contra, gender free country dance spaces?

Chris Ricciotti: We've been talking about this. We have this discussion all the time.

Mary Wesley: I bet.

Chris Ricciotti: And until very recently, we said eventually we'll probably just be swallowed up with whatever's going on. But you know something? There is something about providing intentional space that is different. It's subtle. But it's different because you come into that space already knowing you are welcome. Regardless of how you identify on any scale, you are welcome. And you know, along with that, you must also respect the space of other people that are there as well. It is a coming together of,

respect the space, respect the community. And just because a community is calling gender free, doesn't mean that they accept all of that. I find in the conventional community, community, there are still conventional ideas about the way things could be, should be, what they're willing to do, what they're not willing to do.

Chris Ricciotti: I find that I have to be a little more guarded. And this may be true with everybody. In my own space, in my own community, in JP, I'll flirt with everybody. First time, no problem. No questions asked. When I go to a more conventional community, particularly with men, I'm going to be a little more cautious at first. I'm finding myself being less cautious now, and I'm also finding that I don't take it quite as personally as I used to, that men won't look at me. I've come to find that there are men who just are not comfortable with that, and that's fine. And when I look up and down the line at how they're interacting with everyone else, including other women, I'm finding they're, oftentimes they're doing that to everybody except for the people who they know well. And I have to accept the fact that not everybody is going to be able to have it or be able to enjoy it the way I want to enjoy it. And I have to come to terms with, that's really okay. Because we're all coming at this from different perspectives and whatnot. I can really...I really appreciate the times where I can be totally playful and have a great deal of fun.

Caller craft and philosophy

Mary Wesley: Yeah, you know. I'd love to hear a little bit about your craft as a caller. And so when you are up at the mic, you know, because I mean, you're kind of...hearing you talk you're operating in like every sphere of this dance scene. You know, you're organizing, you're dancing, you're publicizing...

Chris Ricciotti: Sometimes I'm dancing and calling, which is my absolute favorite thing to do. Because I get a chance to dance and I get a chance to lead a group and I can have it all.

Mary Wesley: So good. That's great. So, yeah, I mean, when you step up to the mic and you're leading a group, what's what's going on for you? What are your goals? And how have you come into your own as a caller?

Chris Ricciotti: As a caller, I think back about something Ted Sannella said to me years ago, he said, "If the room isn't having fun, it's your fault." And you know, I really took that to heart for a while. And I thought, you know, and as I started calling more and more, I began to realize, you know what? There are some nights that are not my fault. I did my best. But I'm not willing to take all the credit for a night that didn't go as well as I think it should have gone. Every night is going to be different. It's a minefield. My goal is to do whatever I can to make sure you're all having a good time, that you're smiling, that

you're having fun, and that I'm providing material that is easy enough to follow, and at times challenging enough to make it worth giving it a try. But overall, the big thing is making sure that everybody's having a good time. As time has gone on the urban contra dancing, while enjoyable and almost predictable, has become less satisfying for me. And it's not that I won't call it. I love calling for them. Some of my best friends are there and I love them. But personally, as a caller, my vision, my passion, where I get the greatest joy is bringing new people into dance.

It's not that I can't do a high level dance. Maybe not on the level that people like Lisa Greenleaf or Will Mentor or Bob Isaacs or, you know, other, you know, callers who really take this whole thing...or Carol Ormond who's amazing with her geometry, how she sticks things together because that's how her brain works. For me, this is about a passion. This is about sharing love. And there's no greater love than bringing new people into a dance and having them smile and say, I love this, I want to come back. That gives me the biggest thrill and the biggest feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction and joy. It's hard for me calling in community where it's like, "I don't need no damn caller telling me what to do. And I'm like, "Well, then get on the stage and call it yourself then!"

Mary Wesley: What am I doing here?

Chris Ricciotti: "Yeah, what am I doing here? If you don't need me, call it yourself if you think you're so hot." They don't want to hear that because they don't want to call. They just want to pay their ten bucks, have their high, and then go at the expense of everyone else that's there in the center line. And folks, you know who I'm talking about. [Laughs]. There are nights you know, there are times where I as a dancer, also want to have that high. But I find over time, I get that high in a lot of different ways. And honestly, there are some times I get my biggest highs from watching the light bulb go off in the heads of people who are new. And I can tell they're getting it. I can see their smile getting bigger and bigger and they're relaxing and they're having comfortable. And in that process, it gives me permission to, say if I'm dancing with somebody who's newer and I get to the top of the set, I'll take a moment and say, "Let me show you something about the swing that will help you enjoy it more and use less energy." And the smile that comes from that, if they really get that, it's like, absolutely, there is no bigger joy and they spend the whole night getting bigger and bigger smiles as they're doing the swing. So yeah, I mean, family dancers are a great deal of fun. I have a lot of really easy stuff. And you know part of being a caller is I've had to write a lot of my own material over the years. When I started calling in the gay community back in the mid-80s the simplest dance that any caller would give me is "Lady of the Lake" or "Lady Walpole's Reel." I'm like, are you kidding me? I'm like, nobody's going to know how to do this walking in off the street. I thought that was crazy. So one of the things I needed to start doing, and

thanks to Dick Leger and all of what I learned in his workshop, the art of timing and how to put a dance together in Western squares, which also carried over beautifully into contra dancing, was using those eight count figures to create dances that are so simple that somebody walking off the street could do it knowing practically nothing. So I spent a huge amount of the first two years of my calling experience within my own community of dancers writing material, because there was nothing in the conventional dance community at that time. Even the simple stuff was beyond.

Working with Beginners

You really have to think about the mindset of people that are there. What is their physical ability? What is their mental ability? What is their geographic ability? You know, can they hear the music? Can they feel the rhythm? I mean, you see people that are plodding along that have no clue. Not too often, but you will see them and it's like the whole room is carrying this person. And they do it with joy. It's a little harder for them. But in a group of four, when you're all working together over time, you can make it happen. You can take them so far. So this is something that I'm very mindful of as a caller in any group that I'm working with. What are you used to? What can I comfortably do with you? What's going to bring you fun? How am I going to balance what I think the other people want, who've been dancing for a while, versus the brand new folks?

I had to do this even within our own dance community. We got to a point in the early nineties in JP where people were saying, "You know, we need to do nothing but advanced dances because we're losing all of the experienced people." I said, "If you do that, you're going to kill off your community." They said, "Well, we're losing too many people who have experience because the dances are not experienced enough." And I said, "So we need to do nothing but experienced level dances?" I said, "All right, if you do that, fine, but I will not be a part of this community. And you can get yourself another caller." So we had a lot of heated discussion about this. I said, "All right, why don't we come up with a compromise? The first half of the evening, we will do beginner dances to easy-intermediate dances. But in order for this to work, all of you who are experienced level dances need to be there to help making this part of the evening successful. We have a break and after the break, we will do more experienced level dancing. And I will tell everybody that this is what we're going to do. That I am not going to be, you know, holding up a dance because one or two people...if you can't do it, this may be a good dancing section to sit down at."

And so we did that and you know, it was a bit of a shift, but it is the foundation of what we're still doing, you know, many years later in Jamaica Plain, 20 years later. We start off the evening really simple. I mean, I do...like if it's an evening where we've got like ten

hands up and we've got 25 people, I start right from scratch. And people know I do this really well. I do what I call "the building block." I present really basic figures that even if you're dancing with somebody that's never done this before, there'll be enough people in the room and people in the room know, ask the new folks to dance so that you'll be comfortable with it and you'll be able to help them with the dancing. Because if all the new folks are all dancing with each other and you as experienced level folks are dancing with each other, you're not passing on the joy. You're not passing on the love. A part of you getting that good dance experience is being a part of sharing that passion and that joy and that love that you have. The only way to do that is to engage yourself, motivate, and to be passionate about bringing these people along with you so that we can all do it together. And they do.

So we'll start off pretty basic. I'll do circle dances. I'll do contra dances. Sometimes I'll even do a scatter dance. But each dance that I do is building the foundation of putting together the formation of the contra dance and then eventually introducing new figures into that contra dance that slowly build over the evening. So by the halfway point, you are at an easy to intermediate level. Everyone, including the people that have never danced before. Then we break. I come back, we'll do some more, you know, higher level dancing. But then I cast it back because, you know, people just want to have a good time. It doesn't have to be about constantly getting more and more intense. It's about putting figures together in a way where they can enjoy flow in different ways. But it doesn't have to be a dance that's so far up here that what few people will enjoy that is going to be lost on everybody else. To me, I think it's about celebrating what you have in the room in that moment.

Looking to the future

Mary Wesley: What is...I mean, it just sounds like you have always been moving towards this place that you've...you know, you've created so much in in the dance community that you've nurtured and also just helping to slowly, you know, carve these pathways between the original gay/lesbian dancing and then just sort of bringing everyone both into and out of that that community and into the world and sort of having this mixing. What are you looking forward to? What's on the horizon for you now?

Chris Ricciotti: There are...and I know and I've had to become very humble in this experience. Just because I love everything doesn't mean everybody's going to love everything. And when I started dancing, I thought everybody should love everything. You know what doesn't work that way. People do compartmentalize things in a lot of different ways, and that's the way they work and that's what really works for them. So what I found is that I really do have to honor where people are at, which is also shaped

my programming, it's shaped my calling, it's shaped being successful at what I do for an evening of dancing and so on. So where do I move forward from here? Well, all right. Now here's my backdrop here.

Mary Wesley: Nice. What are we seeing? I see a field. I see trees.

Chris Ricciotti: There's woods. There's a river way in the back. Looking out the window here. I mean, it's a rural community here. I love it here. My joy and my love is going to be starting a new dance community here over time.

Mary Wesley: Nice.

Chris Ricciotti: So I want people to just come together and have a good time. If I can do that with contra dancing, great. If I can do that with a mix of contras and squares, great. If I can bring people together who've never danced before and teach them how to have a good time and not say a single word about gender in perspective to a role, I want to even get beyond that. I just want to say you're...you know, inside people do this, outside people do that. Or people on the left do this, people on the right do that. We're not going to be getting to the point where we're having a dance camp...weekends here, you know, starting a dance. I want to create the foundation of a good community of people who like getting together and like dancing, even if it's once a season. But I want to create that beautiful friendship of movement and music and laughter, making mistakes and having a good time and just knowing that, you know, we're not going to call anybody out. And I always remind people, just like Marianne Taylor said years ago, "Making mistakes is part of the fun in what you do." And the other thing I like to say to people, when it's all over and I need to get to bed, "You don't have to go home, but you can't stay here." There are a lot of great things I got from her that I really enjoyed, but "making mistakes is part of the fun" has become something I remind people of that. And you know, "This isn't brain surgery, it's just dancing. Just have a good time." Or George Fogg saying something like, you know, "Smile and all is forgiven." I love stuff like that. So I, you know, I have my own things like over the years, somehow I got to saying, you know, "Take hands four from the top and be kind with your neighbors and pass it all the way down." I didn't get that from somebody. I somehow, that became a part of my greeting when I start a dance, especially at the beginning of the night.

Mary Wesley: Yeah.

Chris Ricciotti: And that's become kind of my thing and that's become kind of my vision. It's about coming together. It doesn't have to be about how high-level the dancing is. Although I do like high level dancing, and if there's a community of people that wants that, we can do that. But baseline for me is the community part, and when you start losing that, you start losing me. You know, it's not about a level. It's about the passion,

it's about the friendships. It's about being open to continually bringing new people in. Just like we brought you in at one point, you know.

Mary Wesley: That's right.

Chris Ricciotti: I've done some dancing in my barn up here. Absolutely fun. Oh, we did that over Labor Day weekend. I had a group of dancing friends come up. We traditionally put together a camping weekend, and this weekend they came up here. They loved it so much, they decided, we want to come back. And on Saturday and Sunday night, I held a barn dance. And not only were they there, but people from our local community came out and came and danced with us. People who had never done it before and they had a great time.

Mary Wesley: So the seeds are being planted.

Chris Ricciotti: Seeds are being planted. And that's, you know, in the future, just want to bring people together and dance. I don't want to have to talk about or even worry about gender. I don't want to have to worry about, you know, what style and what level and how many swings. I just want to just have fun now. There's so many ways to do that.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, well, I can't wait to come to that dance.

Chris Ricciotti: Please do. Please do.

Closing

Mary Wesley: So my closing questions first, I have a curiosity about callers as sort of archivists or cataloguers. And so I wonder, how do you keep your dance material organized and notated? And I can't even imagine because you do so many different kinds of dancing! But, dance cards? Computer files?

Chris Ricciotti: No, you know even though I'm very much a traditionalist at heart...I have a telephone museum, you know, that works with old style technology. I love living history. I like bringing people back into that and actually experiencing the way it was back in the day. I do that with phones. I do that with, you know, my love of dancing. I do that with what I do here on the farm. I still wash clothes on a wringer washer that's run by hand and has rollers. And, you know, I'm just kind of an oddball when it comes to something like that. However, when it comes to my dancing, you know, I would have a couch-sized thing I'd have to drag around with me. And I did. I dragged two bags filled

with legible cards, whatever. I couldn't do it anymore, it was just getting to be too much. I use Caller's Companion for all of my contras, squares, all of that good stuff.

Mary Wesley: Nice. Do you have any pre- or post- gig like rituals or ways that you kind of get into the caller space and then out?

Chris Ricciotti: Oh, that's a really good one. What goes through my head? Well, I will tell you, although since COVID, it seems to be less this way. I would get so nervous before calling a dance that it was almost. It was like my brain would freeze. It was horrible.

Mary Wesley: Ooh, yeah.

Chris Ricciotti: I would sit there stunned, looking at the program. What can I do tonight? How am I going to arrange it? Aahhhh! It would be like 4:30 and I'm like, "Oh, this is really not coming together." It's that whole urban contra dance things like you want to have the perfect dance, you want to be able to call for everybody, you want to be asked back as a caller... You know, since COVID, I call a dance now it's like, you know what? This is what I'm doing tonight. Get over it. And I don't do it in a mean way. I mean, I'm still, I still want to do what people want, but it's like, you know what? They're going to have a good time. You know, I don't have to sit there and sweat over it until I'm like, the perfect dance for the perfect time. I find that since I have started relaxing in my programming, my dances are a hell of a lot better.

Mary Wesley: Nice.

Chris Ricciotti: I am not like a crazy person walking in there with my stomach in knots, like, you know, like deer in the headlights. It's like I can go into a hall. It's like I can now relax. I can talk with people. It's like, you know, so what? I'm a caller. I'm the caller. So what? You know what? It's not a big deal anymore.

Mary Wesley: It's not brain surgery.

Chris Ricciotti: No, it's not. It's um...afterwards if I feel like we've had a really good dance, I sleep like a baby. I just feel so good. It used to be, and I will be quite frank with you, and I learned this from Ted Sannella, this can't be about your ego. And honestly, my dancing when I was younger was a lot more about my ego. And even later, there was bits and pieces of it that I just could not let that go. There is, I grew up with a mom who was a performer. There is something about that performance part of that that really drove me. And now it's more about just connecting with the community and just having a good time. It's since COVID, it's really shifted for me.

Laura's death has also been...really showed me something. I hadn't planned to do this, but for the first dance in Jamaica Plain that we did this year, I got her dance book of all the dance that, not only stuff that she had written, but dances that she really loved that she had collected. I started incorporating all of that material into my collection because I found in looking at that she had good taste in some of the dances that she picked. And they were not what every other caller picked. She was very specific about what she liked and she liked the technology of the dance. And I get that because there was certainly something about the thinking as well as the feeling part that goes into making a really good dance. I called that whole dance with nothing but dances that she had written, that she and I had collaboratively written, and dances that she had in her collection that I found I really liked. That I thought would work well. It was one of the best dance programs I have ever put together. That, and being a full moon, which I know from keeping my diary as a caller has always been the best energy. I can't tell you why. All I know is that if it's right near or right at the peak of a full moon, the energy is going to be bouncing off the walls.

Mary Wesley: Nice. Wow!

Chris Ricciotti: So I broke a lot of rules. As Ted would say, vary your stuff. Don't always use dances from the same caller, blah blah blah. You know, I did that and you know what? It showed me something very different. It showed me that it is the tone that you set of the evening that's really going to carry it. It is the material, but it's how you use it. The tone that you place in it, and how you piece that together to create that magic. That is the magic of what really makes the dance work. It doesn't have to be stressing over completely different dances. In fact, some of the dances I did had repeat figures. But you know what? We had a lot of new folks in there, and those repeat figures in some cases became the building blocks of introducing more advanced level material. It gave them something they knew as well as being able to enjoy something different. And even the experienced folks were really getting into everybody, moving together, having a good time. And we're all learning and it's not breaking down. So that was big. There was something about that that for me was like...covid has taught me a lot. I think, not only about myself as a caller, but even more so as a person. What's important for me now. You know, and I'm getting older. You know, I'm 62. I'm not...even though I think I'm a 25 year old, the reality is, you know, the very humbling reality is I'm not. I feel it in my hip, you know, my muscles from time to time. Thankfully, I still have really good health. I can move well. I can still dance pretty nicely, sometimes beautifully, when it hits me. But, you know, time humbles. Getting older humbles you. It's not about you anymore. I see the young folks coming up behind me, and it's like, I want to create a bed for them to be able to...a foundation, to be able to enjoy themselves and not have some of the things that we did that made it more complicated than it needed to be. And it's not...I'm not

saying that really good level dancing can be a joy, but it's not the only joy. And I think sometimes people forget that and they leave people behind.

Mary Wesley: Mm hmm.

Chris Ricciotti: So I think about that before the dance. I think about this whole sort of mindset that's coming to me. Wanting to be a part of experienced dances, but also not wanting to forget what brings me the joy. And as I get older, it's what's bringing me joy that's more important to me now as I prepare. When I leave I think about what have I done, what worked well, what could I have done better? But I don't beat myself up about it. It's just an acknowledgment, you know. Yeah, I could have done that. I shouldn't have done that at this point. But I don't hold it as something that is painful. You know, to burden me with afterwards. It's just now just the acknowledgment that I can make a better choice next time.

Mary Wesley: Nice. That seems like a good way to just go through life, what you just described.

Chris Ricciotti: It is the humble lessons of being

Mary Wesley: Okay, last question. Do you identify as an introvert or an extrovert, if you know?

Chris Ricciotti: Boy do I know that, right to a tee. I am a borderline introvert to extrovert. More on the side of introvert.

Mary Wesley: Ok.

Chris Ricciotti: So people that know me have often looked at me as an introvert because, yes, when the mood strikes me, when the energy is good, when I feel it, when everything comes together, I can light up a room like it's nobody's business and I can do it effortlessly. When that's done, I need to, like, wind down and crash like it's nobody's business. And I have come to find out recently if I keep putting myself out there over and over and over again and don't give that relaxed time in between, I become a mess and I'm not happy. So yeah, I do love being the extrovert and I enjoy that and I celebrate that and I love that. But after it's over, I also have really becoming in touch with the joys of being an introvert and refreshing from within. Refreshing from quiet time. Going out for a walk, hiking, playing in the snow, you know, growing plants, taking photography, doing weaving, you know, playing in my museum when it's quiet, even housework. Believe it or not, cooking. You know, just hanging out quietly with somebody is a wonderful thing.

Mary Wesley: Nice. Nice. And now you have a beautiful farm to explore both sides. You have a barn for dancing and then you can send everyone home. Chris, thank you so much for sharing your history...

Chris Ricciotti: Oh you're welcome!

Mary Wesley: ...and just yourself as a caller and as a person. Yeah. It's been really nice to get to know you a bit more. And I hope I'll see you on a dance floor sometime soon.

Chris Ricciotti: Thank you for the time. And it was fun interviewing with you. We'll do it again.

Mary Wesley: Yeah, likewise!

A big thanks to Chris for talking with me. Check out the show notes at podcasts.cdss.org to learn more about him.

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Happy dancing!

[*Clip of Chris calling the dance Joel's in the Kitchen by Sue Rosen at the 2011 Lavender Country Folk Dancers Dance Camp to the music of Lady Gaga*]

Ben Williams: The views expressed in this podcast are of the individuals and do not necessarily reflect those of CDSS.