

## ARROWHEAD SQUARES COMMUNITY DANCES

Aaron Goodman & Niall O'Reilly, January 2016

I first heard of the Community Dance programme at Callerlab, and thought, *who needs that?* It turns out, I do. While publicity channels such as Meetup have been successful at getting prospective dancers to open houses, it has become increasingly difficult to get them to commit to on-going classes. Cost, frequency, and the length of the commitment for a 4- or 8-month Basic program was too much of an obstacle, particularly for younger dancers facing career commitments. But they wanted to dance, and the Community Dance program was just the ticket.

Some community dances often feature round, circle and line dances. I wanted to focus exclusively on square dancing, with the aim of getting them to commit to Basic/Mainstream at a later date. They were held once a month, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Wednesday of the month, in the same hall as the regular club events (but a special night). Snacks are served. The dances begin as lessons, where a subset of the Basic programme is called, based on a list of 20 moves. Most are simple, the most complex being Grand Square. The classes are non-progressive. The caller's challenge is to be creative with the limited repertoire, and keep the music and sequences varied. I looked back when I started dancing with 10 squares on the floor and the key to keeping dancers is laughter, As Donald O'Conner sang many years ago "keep em laughing Be an entertainer and keep the program light and you will get them back." Remember the dancer is more important than the caller. The cost for 2015 was \$5.00 per dance. This will likely be increased to \$7.00 to cover more of the cost of the hall. There have been between 2 to 4 squares. The real test was in January, when it was seen whether any of the dancers expressed an interest in attending the regular Basic class. we had 5 couples join us. In February we will have 20 new people join us from other activities to see what square dancing is about.

A similar community dance was staged by Triangle Squares at The 519 Community Centre in August 2015, which was well attended by more 35 dancers, half non-members. A mixed set of dances were taught/led, including a tie-in with a well-known line dance caller. While the dancers were enthusiastic, none came back to join the September classes. Despite this initial experience, the model will be tried again in the summer of 2016, with a more concerted effort to convince dancers to come to the Sept Open House.

These, and similar models seem to be coming more prevalent in the United States, where clubs there are being forced to look beyond the standard Basic/Mainstream curriculum, or face gradual extinction. Both authors suggest these models be researched more thoroughly by the Toronto & District Executive, and communicated to member clubs, who are also facing similar membership declines.

This idea of once a month dancing appeals to people who would like to try square dancing but do not want to make a complete commitment of every week. After they get comfortable they can decide to join the next full lesson program and feel smarter than those just starting, and we can retain them.