

# SQUARE DANCING:



By: Luis Magana

It was just another night in San Luis Obispo but I was more excited than I had ever been on this particular Monday night. This was going to be my first opportunity to dance with the San Luis Obispo Square Dancing Club: Cuesta Squares. I was preparing to go to this huge hall filled with tons of people where a new friend of mine, who had started teaching me square dancing, would be calling. From my understanding, this was his club and I couldn't wait to meet the huge dancing community. As I was imagining where we were heading, we stopped in the middle of a residential area and my driver told me we had arrived. I was confused and I assumed that my driver had gone to the wrong address but that could not have been the case because my driver had been a veteran square dancer for over 2 years now. Were we going to dance in a house? We walked around to the back of the house where there was no back yard but instead a large garage which was separate from the house. The front door of the garage was open welcoming its guests into what seemed like any other garage. I was very much confused but the second I walked through that door, my college experience changed forever.

loved and cared for one another. I was introduced to the Cuesta Squares family and from that moment forward I would fall in love with the club, its members, and the community. However, as time has progressed, I have learned much about the club. Cuesta Squares, an LGBTQ+<sup>1</sup> Square Dancing club in San Luis Obispo, is 1 of 3 square dancing clubs in San Luis Obispo composed of gay, lesbian, and straight dancers of all ages. Although the influence square dancing once had on the entire US is now fading, the members of Cuesta Squares remain youthful, energy filled, and passionate allowing for the club to still have a strong presence in the smaller community of San Luis Obispo.

## HISTORY

Square dancing, a once larger, more popular style of dancing, has been a part of American culture for decades. Square dancing is believed to have originated in America as the Kentucky Running Set with tribute to a popular European dance called the New England Quadrille. This style of dance evolved with new patterns and later was titled "Modern square dancing" (Bennett, John P., 3 - 5). "Following World War II, Modern Western Square Dancing became popular across the country, competing with and displacing many of the older community-based rural dances." (Jamison, Philip A., 202) Its continuous popularity ramped up drastically and on June 1, 1982, Modern Western Square Dancing became the official American Folk Dance of the United State. Currently, as many as 22 states across the US call square dancing their official state dance and although square dancing has had a dip in popularity with the baby boomers, square dancing continues to stand the test of time in most part of the United States.



Wilson, Kiley. "Full House" 2020. PNG file.

The second I walked into that garage I was introduced to not just a group of people, but a packed garage full of dancers in which everyone

1. LGBTQ+: Acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Community

Cuesta Squares was first founded by caller Darren Gallina in 1997 as a “social outlet for LGBT people in the San Luis Obispo Area.” (Darren).



*“Cuesta Squares is San Luis Obispo’s only Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Ally square dance club. We dance to all types of music, wear casual attire, and do not require a partner. We’re here to dance, have fun, laugh, and make friends.” ~ Cuesta Squares*

The club has been a “social outlet” for many providing the “opportunity for people to get together,... socialize, and engage in a dance activity in a safe environment and have a good time.” (Darren). The club has had about 60 members in total and currently has 28 members composed of approximately 40% LGBTQ + members and 60% allies<sup>2</sup>. (Thom)

## INFLUENCE ON THE COMMUNITY

One of the most unique part of Cuesta Squares and the characteristic that sets it apart from other square dancing clubs is that it is a LGBTQ+ club associated with the IAGSDC<sup>3</sup>. The IAGSDC is an association of gay square dancing clubs that work towards providing a platform in which the gay community feels welcomed to the square dancing world. Darren Gallina believes that Cuesta Squares, in particular, is important to the LGBTQ+ community in San Luis Obispo for a multitude of reasons. He states that, “[Cuesta Squares] gives the LGBTQ community an opportunity to get together in a setting where it’s safe for people to be out without being uncomfortable and having to worry.” Thom Dang, a long-time member of the club also agrees that Cuesta Squares is a valuable part of the older LGBTQ + community in San Luis Obispo. He claims that the club’s allies allow the club to build bridges with the non-LGBT community and that the club helps normalize being gay. The club is also

useful in helping the non-LGBTQ+ community become comfortable with LGBTQ dancers.

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*“We are not something you have to be scared of because we are different.” ~ Thom Dang*

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Thom Dang, like many of the other members of the club is part of the LGBTQ + community and was first introduced to the club back in 2002. When interviewed, he explained that he was able to find Cuesta Squares in the Gay Lesbian Association’s newsletter. After that, he joined the club and has been a big part of the club since.

## YOUTH OF CUESTA SQUARES

Although a large part of the square dancing community is composed of a middle-aged population, Cuesta Squares is unique in that the club has a consistent flow of youth entering the club thanks to its connections with Cal Poly. This has helped Cuesta Squares thrive and grow into the club it is today. A variety of the members at Cuesta Squares consistently thank me and fellow Cal Poly students for attending their dances. With smiles on their faces, the older community always tells us we make them feel youthful and energetic again.



Wilson, Kiley. “Hoedowners” 2020. PNG file.

Caller Darren Gallina, as well as all the members of the club, truly value our presence and assure us that they are thankful that we can join

- 2. Allies: members of the club who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community and or are straight
- 3. IAGSDC: International Association of Gay Square Dance Clubs, an organization dedicated to providing a safe square dancing environment for the LGBTQ + community

them when we do. Darren says that, “Not only does it encourage me as a caller to be better but [it] encourages dancers to attend and interact and dance with the students because they bring a whole ‘nother level of energy.” Thom Dang also says that, Cal Poly students “have brought the energy up and for a lot of people; they are excited when [Cal Poly students] ... come because you(the youth) are excited. It’s really great to have the Cal Poly students dance with us.”

When I first started dancing with the club, I wasn’t sure if I was comfortable dancing with so many older ladies and gentlemen. I felt most of them were old enough to be my grandparents and every member of the club was definitely old enough to be my parent. I was a little concerned that they would make square dancing boring and slow. When I had danced with other Cal Poly student’s we were extremely high energy and the dances were fast pace. Were these older folks going to keep up with us? The second the first song started I realized how wrong I was. The entire club is so full of energy and even some of the oldest members of the club are so much fun to dance with. They are all amazing dancers and always manage to keep up with the more youthful dancers from Cal Poly. Best of all, they know all the calls very well and whenever I mess up, they drag me around and push me in the right direction.

Not only are the older members of the club grateful to have us, but we are thrilled to join the club in their events and dance with the amazing community. Roya Stoops, a 4<sup>th</sup> year animal science major at Cal Poly who has been dancing with Cuesta Squares for a few years now says, “It’s a lot of fun. We love the interactions.” She claims that square dancing is now a part of her everyday life and loves that square dancing is one of the only social dances that is not competitive. Cameron Causey, a 1<sup>st</sup> year mechanical engineer at Cal Poly

also has much to say about square dancing and has become super passionate and invested in the activity. She said the following:

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*Square dancing “gives me something to look forward to every week because it’s something that makes me happy. It has [also] improved my mental health.” ~ Cameron Causey*

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When asked why square dancing was such an attractive activity, she said “I like the people a lot. That’s a huge motivation: the people..., the fun and the trusting environment.”

Holly Dufek, a first-year architect student at Cal Poly and new member of the square-dancing community said during her interview “[Square dancing] is a great way for the youth to connect with the elder because elder usually don’t tend to participate in activities the youth would prefer to take part in.” Truly that is what makes the square dancing at Cuesta Squares so valuable. Cuesta Squares brings together the youth and the older generations in a way that other activities couldn’t. This benefit both parties because it brings more life to the older members of the club and it brings joy to the student.

## RELEVANCE

When it comes to the relevance of square dancing, there are many mixed opinions, and everyone gives different answers regarding when they think square dancing will loss relevance. When interviewed, Roya and Cameron both said that they felt that square dancing was not going to loss traction or relevance any time soon. However, when asking Darren how the community felt towards the disappearance in popularity of square dancing, he responded with, “I think some people feel that [fear]... we’re afraid that square dancing might disappear but we don’t want it to happen.”

One negative fact that can't be argued is that there is a lack of youth flowing into the square dancing community. This is causing minor anxiety for square dancers because they are not sure on how the community will continue to grow and develop. The solution to this problem is to try and advertise in manners that make square dancing more appealing to the youth. However, Thom, the one in charge of advertiser for Cuesta Squares, has explained that it is hard to advertise to the youth and appeal to a younger audience because sometimes, square dancing is associated with "old fashion imagery." Holly Dufek, when asked about her feelings towards the gradual decline in the square dancing community, said the following:

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*"I really hope that square dancing as a culture phenomenon will come back because it is such a strong community builder. It bridges a bunch of gaps between age, gender, social status, and sexual orientation in a unique way that other activities can't." ~ Holly Dufek*

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Cuesta Squares has had the amazing privilege of staying relevant and strong in the community, but some clubs have not been so fortunate. In fact, Darren and Thom both agreed that the club currently has the most members it has ever had with 28 total members and three squares worth of dancers. Not only does the club have 28 official members but as many as 30 + Cal Poly students also come and go to club gatherings which can drastically increase numbers for the club. Due to this high membership and participation in the club, Darren was confident in saying that "Cuesta Squares is strong [and the club is] going to be around for a while."



Wilson, Kiley. "Cuesta Squares' Kids" 2020. PNG file.

The main focus in the entire community however is to figure out and experiment ways to reliably attract the youth and increase numbers of members in the square dancing community so that square dancing doesn't disappear from American culture any time soon. Cal Poly students are making sure they do their part by promoting the activity via social media but, attracting the younger generations has proven difficult for the larger square dancing community.

## FUTURE OF CUESTA SQUARES

When asked what the future of square dancing and Cuesta Squares was, the two answers were provided as follows:

"Cuesta Squares is strong. We are going to be around for a while. Square dancing overall, we are still going to see the numbers drop. Will it make a comeback? Who knows?" (Darren)

"Hopefully we will be able to grow it back up; make it more easy to learn for new people. Also, the other clubs in the area have to support that new frame of mind with more levels of dancing. We need to be able to support dancing at a lower level to attract new people and keep them invested in square dancing." (Thom).

The community is making sure it can do everything it can to stay relevant and currently. Cuesta Squares is doing fantastic but, no one is truly certain how long square dancing will continue to stick around. Darren claims that the biggest reason

for the lack of participants in the community is not just due to the lack of youth but also due to people's lack of interest and the social shift in which people socialize. "Square dancing is on the decline but... bowling leagues [are also] on the decline; membership in the elks lodge and rotary club and other social activities are on the decline as well because people today have busy lives and there's a lot of other activities that people get involved in. The whole way we socialize has changed over time."

Regardless of what the future holds for square dancing, Cuesta Squares will continue to hold its weekly dances on Monday and Tuesday nights as long as the club has members. The club isn't disappearing from the community any time soon and it will continue to help support the LGBTQ + community, be a social outlet for all, be a safe and fun dance environment, and welcome everyone who walks through that club door. The community is strong and will, without a doubt,

remain relevant thanks to their connections with Cal Poly and the Cal Poly Country Line Dancing Club.

Every day that I join Cuesta Squares and square up with the members, all my worries melt away and I'm sure I can speak for everyone in saying that the family made in the club is one we all care for and love. The club has made a lifelong impact on my life that has helped me make bonds and relationships that will last a lifetime. As long as I stay in San Luis Obispo, I will continue to dance with the club and enjoy every square I can take part in. The club is not only a place to dance, it is a place to enjoy the presence of people from multiple age groups, ethnicities, sexualities, identifications, and social classes. It is a place where the LGBTQ + community can be open, a place where the elder enjoy the youth and the youth enjoy the elder. It is a place where all can come together and bond over a common hobby that has stood the test of time: Square Dancing.

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