

Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus

Sugar Land's square dancing group celebrates over 40 years with a little Do-Si-Do every Tuesday night

Written by Sarah Tucker | Photography by Stephanie Albers

The group lines up on the dance floor, waiting for the music to start. Men in jeans and long sleeve shirts partner up with women wearing prairie skirts that dust the ground. One woman wears a shorter ruffled skirt that flares out as she turns to dance. Michael Jackson's "Thriller" plays, and a man speaks into the mic, "Face out, pass through, now bend the line."

These aren't new lyrics but square dance calls, and the dancers are members of the Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus, a modern square dance group that meets weekly at Faith Lutheran Church in Sugar Land.

The Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus started in 1972 when a group wanting to put on a square dance at the Fort Bend County Fair took lessons. Now the group is one of 25 clubs in the Houston area. "They had so much fun that they started a club," says Paul Hillis, who serves as co-treasurer with his wife, Carolyn.

Fun, Friends, and Fitness

Paul and Carolyn first started dancing with the group in the '80s. After a 25-year hiatus, they rejoined in 2006. "It's kind of a misnomer. It's not that squares do it, but that you dance in a square," Paul says. "It's a wonderful way to socialize." Another local family has raised their children in the club.

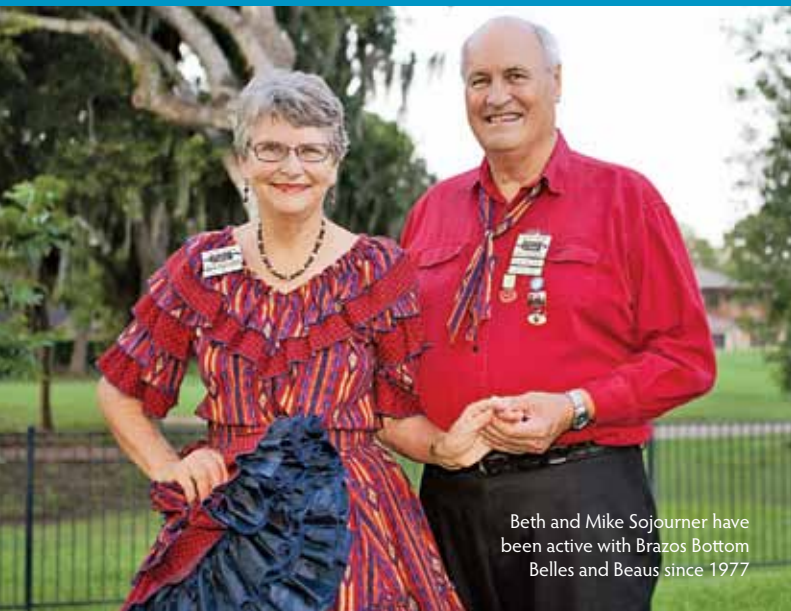
Mike and Mary Camara's daughter wanted to take ballroom dance lessons before going to college, but three weeks into lessons, the company folded. They tried square dancing, and Mike and Mary began going regularly to the Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus. It wasn't long before their sons joined, too.

"Our kids watched while we danced. At the end of lessons, they wanted to learn, too," Mike says. "Our kids still square dance on and off."

When their children went to college, each received a scholarship from the club. Others, like Lydia Steadham, join for fun and stay for the health benefits. Steadham began dancing five years ago. A few years in, she had knee surgery and kept showing up to dance in a walker. "It's physical therapy to music," Steadham says. "There are more twists and turns than a nest of snakes with bellyaches."

Anyone Can Square Dance

Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus members say that square dancing isn't difficult to do, but it does take practice to learn. Dancers memorize the steps to 65 mainstream calls and 35 plus calls. During the square dance, callers sing or say the calls, and the dancers follow, turning and forming lines, circles, and squares on the dance floor. "It's harder to learn than I like it to be," says Garland Smith, the club's caller.



Beth and Mike Sojourner have been active with Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus since 1977



Square dancers like Sire and Larry Jones find fun and fellowship at the group's weekly gathering

Members Beth and Mike Sojourner, Jim and Sandy Hallmark, Larry Jones, Donna Meijers, Sue Jones, Mike and Mary Camara, and Carolyn and Paul Hillis



“Square dance works for people who don’t think they can dance. It’s mechanical.”

- Mike Sojourner



Sandy and Jim Hallmark enjoy their friends and the exercise while dancing



Carolyn and Paul Hillis first joined the group in the 1980s

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Smith started square dancing in the '70s and went to caller school in Arkansas. He teaches lessons with the Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus and uses the lessons as an opportunity to introduce new people to the calls and social fabric of the club.

"Square dancing is friendship set to music," Smith says. While it does take patience to learn to square dance, Paul disagrees with those who say they can't dance. "Square dancing is almost like marching to music. If you can march, you can dance," he says. "If you dance every dance, it's like a quick four-mile hike. It gets your heart going."

Mike and Beth Sojourner agree with Paul. Active with the Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus since 1977, they enjoy the weekly dances because it's good exercise that keeps them moving and having fun. Mike says square dancing isn't like ballroom dancing. "Square dance works for people who don't think they can dance. It's mechanical." **SLM**

SARAH TUCKER grew up in Sugar Land and graduated from Kempner High School in 2005. She completed her Masters in Journalism from the University of Missouri earlier this year.



Mike and Mary Camara began square dancing with the group and soon after, their children also joined

Square Dance with Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus

Brazos Bottom Belles and Beaus meets every Tuesday from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. at Faith Lutheran Church (800 Brooks St.).

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