

## Donita Whitney-Bammerlin – Swingin Spurs

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

The man from Beijing, China deftly steps forward. He swings and turns and throws his partner up into the air. Is this judo? Karate? Olympic gymnastics? None of the above. This is a performance of a country swing dance troupe which is honoring the heritage of rural Kansas. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Dr. Donita Whitney-Bammerlin is an instructor in the Department of Management in the K-State College of Business. Growing up on a farm near Manhattan, Donita enjoyed music and dance. She learned to country swing dance with her brother and became a twirler at K-State. She even performed with a western dance troupe at Six Flags over Mid-America.

Donita went on to a career in education and academia, ultimately returning to a faculty position at K-State. Then she met a group of students who especially enjoyed country swing dancing.

In 2011, a young woman from Lyndon, Kansas organized a student K-State Country Swing and Two-Step Club. Soon after, the person they asked to be their faculty adviser was Donita Whitney-Bammerlin.

"They had a lot of fun and they had some great dancers," Donita said. "When I watched them dancing, I said, 'Wow, there is a lot of great student talent here. We should form a performance dance troupe.'"

The idea went over so well that auditions were held at the recreation center in September 2013. "I got three judges from the (K-State) dance program," Donita said. Seven couples were selected.

The group got organized, selected a captain, and worked on plans for the future. After lots of discussion, they settled on a name which would reflect the country dancing nature of the group: Swingin Spurs.

"Just two weeks after we were formed, the College of Agriculture had its Barn Party in Weber Hall and our students were asked to perform," Donita said. It was a trial by fire, but the group worked hard to prepare a routine. It went so well that the Swingin Spurs started to get lots more requests.

"The group probably averaged a performance once a month in 2013, but that doubled in 2014," Donita said. Under Donita's tutelage, these couples prepare and perform remarkable precision dances. They practice after the weekly dance club meetings. As director, Donita works closely with a choreographer who happens to be one of the former members of the original dance troupe.

The girls wear matching tops and the boys wear black shirts, blue jeans and cowboy boots. They perform unison floor routines as well as aerial moves, which means the boys fling those girls around in remarkable ways. (Kids, don't try this at home without adult supervision...) Besides demonstrations, the Swingin Spurs will also provide informal lessons for groups.

As students have graduated, additional tryouts have been held. Most of the members of the group are K-State students, but it has also included one Fort Riley soldier. The members have included an African-American and even an international

student from China. “He’s a great dancer, and he’s arranged for us to perform for the Chinese student group,” Donita said.

The Swingin Spurs reflects the agricultural roots and relationships of rural Kansas. The group’s website states, “As part of a Land Grant institution, we believe that a portion of the heritage passed down through the agricultural generations and disseminated to a wide range of citizens was evident in the social aspect of dancing. Swingin Spurs sustains and advances country two-step and swing dance by providing performances at local, state, and national events.”

Many of the group members come from rural places such as Holcomb, Berryton, Weskan, Beloit, Cherryvale, and Eureka. The group’s choreographer comes from the rural community of Plevna, Kansas, population 98 people. Now, that’s rural.

For more information, go to [www.swinginspurs.com](http://www.swinginspurs.com).

The man from Beijing, China deftly steps forward. He swings and turns and throws his partner up into the air. No, it’s not judo or gymnastics. It’s not a martial art, but it is a performance art. This is a performance of the Swingin Spurs, a precision country swing dance troupe which is making a difference by sustaining and advancing this element of rural culture. Let’s dance.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.