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Spare Change

By Johnny Campos

National spotlight continues to shine on Illinois, which once again had a big presence among the award winners at this year's USBC Convention

LAS VEGAS — Illinois once again made a statement at this year's United States Bowling Congress Convention, with a sweeping presence among the nation's most prestigious award winners. Whether it was Hall of Fame recognition, top youth honors, outstanding proprietorship, or association excellence, the state's bowling community was front and center on the sport's biggest stage.

Keith Hamilton, Executive Director of the Illinois State Bowling Proprietors Association, was inducted into the USBC Hall of Fame for Meritorious Service. The spotlight continued with George Kontos of Joliet Town & Country Lanes, who was named Proprietor of the Year. His center also boasts Gianna Brandolino, the recipient of the Alberta E. Crowe Star of Tomorrow Award. And in a moment that surprised even its members, the Chicagoland USBC Association earned the Association Excellence Award — making it a clean sweep for Illinois across multiple categories.

"It was a heck of a time for Illinois," said Hamilton. "I think it shows a lot of promise, and we're being recognized for the things we contribute to the sport and industry. I'm actually more proud of this morning's surprise that Chicagoland was the Association of the Year.

"They're great to work with, and I know because we delivered a check to BVL (Bowlers to Veterans Link) for \$15,620 working together. I'm thrilled about that. And I'm thrilled about George Kontos and Gianna — the whole state. It was a great week and a great month for us."

Kontos took the stage to receive his award, but his son John had to give the acceptance speech. The older Kontos was too emotional to get in front of the mic. He had found out earlier that morning that Jeff Bailey, a longtime employee at Town & Country, had passed away at the age of 56.

"There is no way I could have gotten up there," George said. "We got to call about two o'clock this morning that they took him off life support. Jeff was with me for a long time. He worked for us right out of high school, got married and left us for a few years. He came back and was with us for over 30 years, so he was very instrumental in a lot of our youth programs. He got us involved with high school coaching and Junior Gold."

But in December, Bailey's health took a turn for the worse.

"He had pancreatitis," Kontos said. "He hadn't been working. He's been fighting, trying to get better. So, we knew it was coming. We were just waiting for the call."

Kontos said he was shocked when he got the call that he had been named the 2025 USBC Proprietor of the Year.

"There are so many good proprietors and so many people who care about the game," he said. "And there are people who think about the future of the game. That's when it hits me the hardest. When I started, I was the young guy."

"Now I've seen the roles reversed. Now I'm the old guy and my son and my daughter are the younger ones and the ones that have the ideas."

His children, John and DeAnna, are now the third generation of the Kontos family to work at the now 54-lane center that was built in 1957 and opened in 1958.

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"I tell my people all the time to just treat people the way you want to be treated," Kontos said. "I've got great staff. I've had people like Jeff and Rick Plunger, my other guy. He's been with me for almost 40 years. He does everything – maintenance, pin setting, mechanic and building supervisor.

"So, being Proprietor of the Year was an honor for our family, our employees and for the community. Our customers are the best and have stayed with us. We love them and they love us."

One of his customers is Brandolino of Channahon, Illinois, who just finished her senior year at Minooka High School. She maintained a 3.9 GPA while posting an impressive resume on the lanes.

Brandolino has won 20 Elite Youth Tour wins (run by Hall of Fame bowler Diandra Asbaty of Chicago), 13 Storm Youth Championships, nine USBC Youth Open Titles, six Illinois State Scholarship tournaments (run by Patti Mauerman of Tremont, one of last year's USBC award winners), and a slew of other titles in the Midwest.

"The ISS and EYTs had tough shots," Brandolino said. "They probably helped me get better. They have really helped boost my career and helped get me prepared for some of the bigger tournaments."

That would include her victories in the 2024 Professional Bowlers Association LBC National Championship Clash (beating PBA star Kris Prather, another Illinois bowler, in the title match), and the 2023 Junior Gold U18 Girls.

In college, Brandolino will join the strong Jacksonville State program, under head coach Shannon O'Keefe (a 2025 USBC Hall of Fame inductee) and her husband Brian.

She became the third bowler from Illinois in the past nine years to win the Alberta E. Crowe Award.

"I feel like Illinois, especially on the youth side of things, has always been very strong," Brandolino said. "I feel like we have some pretty good bowlers in the area, like Landin and Griffin Jordan, and myself.

"So, I feel like it's not just me winning the award. It's the community winning it, because I get to share it with them."

The surprise winners of the day were the delegates from the Chicagoland USBC Association, who had no idea they were going to claim an award.

"We're involved with BVL, Bowl for the Cure and with our youth, making sure that our members are totally satisfied," said Theron Mitchell, the Chicagoland USBC Association President. "But we were totally surprised when we heard our name.

"Before they announced it, I turned to my wife (Latasha) on my right, I turned to my work wife (Kristee Bylls) on my left and said, 'OK, let's get ready,' and took off my hat – totally joking! When they said our name, I just sat there for about five minutes."

The wins by Kontos and the Chicagoland Association were bonuses for Hamilton and the Illinois State Bowling Proprietors Association, who work with them on a regular basis.

Hamilton gave a moving speech during his induction into the USBC Hall of Fame the night prior to the rest of the national awards. But speaking without the benefit of any notes or script, he admitted that there was one person in particular that he failed to mention: Gianmarc Manzione, the editor of Bowlers Journal International.

Hamilton and Mike Panozzo sold the magazine to the USBC in 2020. Panozzo stayed on as the publisher and Manzione as the editor after the sale.

"Gianmarc Manzione is one of the purest and greatest writers that's ever been in the bowling business," he said. "He's also been very loyal to me after we sold the magazines. He really showed appreciation, not disdain, towards us, and I've always appreciated it and the character that he has. I didn't mention him last night, but he was clearly on my mind.

"I really appreciate the Bowlers Journal editor very much for what he did for me and what he's doing for the USBC."

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Also during his speech, Hamilton thanked the Illinois State BPA for hiring him during a time when he was feeling isolated from the industry.

"ISBPA hired me and took me out of the abyss that I was feeling at the time after selling the bowling magazines," he said. "I am grateful to them for that."

As for being included among some of the names in the Meritorious Service division of the Hall of Fame, Hamilton said it is awe inspiring.

"I believe there's like 129 of us throughout the history of bowling, going back to 1895," he said. "I don't want to say I feel inadequate, but I felt like I went in at the low end of the totem pole. I'm honored to be thought of enough to be with the greats that evening."

Hamilton is currently a board member and treasurer on the BVL board, where he is continuing his service to the industry.

He also was on the board for the International Bowling Museum and Hall of Fame, serving as Chairman and President from 2011 to 2014. Hamilton was on the International Bowling Pro Shop and Instructors Association (IBPSIA) Advisory Board, serving as Chairman from 2005 to 2009. And he had a successful run as the President of the International Bowling Media Association (IBMA) from 2014 to 2018.

Hamilton also was very involved in some considerable donations made to the BVL by the Illinois bowling contingent during a luncheon hosted by the BVL the day prior to the USBC Award ceremony.

Through the ISBPA's Beat the Champs Contest, whose proceeds are donated to a charity, Hamilton and Storm Bowling owner Barb Chrisman, the major sponsor of the event, presented a check to BVL for \$10,900.

Chrisman, well known for her charitable work, then stunned the more than 300 guests in attendance by announcing an additional donation of \$25,000 from the Bill and Barbara Chrisman Foundation to bowling's most recognizable charity.

Following the presentation, Hamilton, who was representing the Chicagoland BPA, called up Chicagoland USBC Association Manager Kristee Bylls to the stage, who made an additional donation of \$15,620 from her association to BVL.

For Hamilton, George Kontos, Gianna Brandolino and the Chicagoland USBC Association, the USBC Convention week was filled with honors. But for Illinois bowling as a whole, it was something more – a reminder that years of hard work, mentorship, and community commitment can lead all the way to the national stage.

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USBC Proprietor of the Year George Kontos.



Gianna Brandolino, a recent graduate from Minooka Community High School, accepts her Alberta E. Crowe Star of Tomorrow Award. Pictured are (left to right) USBC President Dennis Hacker, Brandolino, and USBC board members Christopher Floyd and Chrissie Kent.

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Members of the Chicagoland USBC were the surprise winners of the USBC Association Excellence Award at the USBC Convention. Pictured are (left to right) USBC President Dennis Hacker, Kristee Bylls, Theron Mitchell, Latasha Mitchell, Robert Amoruso and USBC board member Glenda Beckett.



One of the newest members of the USBC Hall of Fame, Keith Hamilton.