



# ONLY IN N'AWLINS

Earl and Michelle Weber embody the very essence of New Orleans — even when they're thousands of miles away in the middle of the ocean aboard their 107-foot Denison, *Caribbean Sparkle*.

Text by Lisa Knapp

Photos courtesy of The Weber Family Album

“I wanna party with you!” Earl Weber’s bubbly voice enunciates the slogan on the carefully pressed t-shirt his wife, Michelle, is holding on a hangar. It’s the rallying call for the “Krewe of Conch” — and Earl Weber is the king. Riding on a float in the Krewe of Babylon in hometown New Orleans every Mardi Gras isn’t enough. Earl and Michelle launched their own parade, Krewe of Conch. This band of merry mariners cruises Guana each May.

Ultimate destination: Nippers. Rendezvous point: The iconic bar’s palm tree. It’s the palm that shimmied so much, it’s lost its fronds on top.

“The population of Guana is like 96,” says Michelle. “When we go down with 47, Guana’s population almost doubles. We have kids in sleeping bags all over the salon, adults in the four staterooms.”

*Caribbean Sparkle* leads the Krewe, all revelers from New Orleans. Weber’s 107-foot Denison is Michelle’s namesake. “Her nickname is Sparkle,” Earl says with a smile.

The Weber’s are the type of couple you gravitate toward. Their natural charm, a combination of good humor, good looks and southern hospitality, is a magnet surrounding them by family and friends — and on this day, a journalist.

Earl shows me his photo albums in his rooftop penthouse in Jax Brewery, in the heart of the French Quarter, on the bustling Mississippi River. The album has about 400 photos and every single person in every picture is smiling. I notice one shot that’s out of place. One

woman looks sad and wet, like someone rained on her parade.

“That was hysterical,” Earl explains. “This lady was seasick and on Dramamine. She never had one drink of alcohol that day. But she did fall off the boat, into the water, upon disembarking. She wasn’t hurt, but she got soaked,” he hoots, pointing to another photo. “Here she is again, a little drier, a few hours later.”

## Welcome to Earl’s World

The view from the Webers’ rooftop is tremendous. Television networks staked out the couple’s rooftop to film the New Year’s Eve millennium ball drop from Jax, and to film the best shots of St. Louis Cathedral, Jackson Square and the mighty Mississippi. The Webers are the literal epicenter of Party Central USA. “We don’t have the biggest boat or the best boat,” Earl says. “But we have more fun on our boat than anybody. Period. We’re from New Orleans and we’re New Orleans people. That means we party. If we’re not having fun, we’re not doing it,” Earl says as the *Natchez Steamboat*’s calliope whistles consent. “One day, you end up in a pine box. The guy who has the most fun wins. That’s how we live.”

Earl Weber walks his talk. His parents died in their early fifties, about the age he and his “Sparkle” are now. He was young to lose both parents within three years of each other and his dad passed when Earl was just 17. Instead of living with a chip on his shoulder, Earl embraces life with both hands — and feet. He’s a self-made man who’s not selfish.

The Webers cherish their time aboard their 107-foot Denison, *Caribbean Sparkle*, named after wife Michelle’s nickname. Frequently, the couple travels with a group of friends they call the “Krewe of Conch.”





Earl and Michelle Weber and their two sons, Jonathan and Michael, don't have to be on a megayacht to enjoy their time at sea. As long as they're together and the weather's fair, it's time for some family fun.

He puts his photos from the Krewe's last rendezvous aside to discuss his love of boating, which started as a child on Bayou Bienvenue. Earl waterskied daily back then and built his first boat at age 12. "It was just a little wooden flatboat with a four-horsepower Mercury motor," he says. "It was eight feet — the biggest sheet of plywood we had at the time — and I made it with my own hands. I've had in the neighborhood of 40 boats, including that first wooden one."

Michelle and Earl moved with their sons, Jonathan and Michael, into the French Quarter at Jax after Hurricane Katrina. The French Quarter was set high atop cotton bales by settlers nearly 500 years ago. The Quarter remains unscathed from Katrina's flooding as the high and dry hub of a city that's still percolating. Earl and Michelle frequently stroll to their favorite restaurants — Port of Call and Galatoire's — to enjoy what they consider the world's best cuisine. "I like getting eggs benedict at lunchtime from Galatoire's," Earl says. "That's my favorite." To shake things up a little, Earl occasionally orders fried soft-shell crabs or a veal chop. When he feels inventive and decadent, he asks the chef to put the eggs benedict on top of the soft-shell crab, sans the muffins.

While the Webers have the money to live anywhere, they choose to live in New Orleans, and it's not just for their passion of the city's flavorful food. The couple's home atop Jax Brewery was developed by Earl into residential condos after he bought it in 1999. "You couldn't get us out of here with dynamite," he says.

## Naturally N'awlins

Today Earl stands his ground as a local New Orleanian determined to keep his city alive during Katrina's second anniversary. His sons attend local schools during the city's metamorphosis in a post-Katrina world. The Webers are part of the city's backbone, helping other survivors put their lives, businesses and community back together, one day at a time.

Earl could teach lessons in growing one day at a time. He cut hair before he amassed his real estate fortune. He bought and sold property along Lake Pontchartrain before graduating to office buildings and shopping centers. Now he's focused on development, primarily resort marinas in the southeastern U.S., with projects like Jourdan River Yacht Club, in Kiln, Mississippi, and Pier 17, in Fort Lauderdale. "Water is always a great attraction," says Weber.

While they pack 20-some people on *Caribbean Sparkle* with plastic go-cups to transport drinks, it's evident that the Webers' secret to happiness after 26 years of marriage is "playing together." "Neither one of us comes from money," Michelle says. "Our families were middle-class. I think we could have trillions of dollars and we still wouldn't change because our family and friends are our life and we enjoy being together."

With so much togetherness and a guest manifest of more than 20 on a 107-foot yacht, the Webers keep most of their cruises to 10 to 14 days. "If we leave for longer on the boat, we'd miss too much here," Michelle says. 🍷