

Sail Away

BY PAMELA LABBE

Countless lawyers, after experiencing a particularly difficult case or after an especially trying week of practicing law, fantasize about giving it all up and sailing away. But solo practitioner Joseph “Buddy” Stockwell III and his wife, Melissa, are making this fantasy a reality.

“People always seem to envision sailing away from all their troubles, but ‘sailing away’ is not a good plan to run away from hardship. If that’s your intent, then I don’t recommend it,” said Stockwell. “It is extremely hard work and takes a lot more skill, effort and industry than you would ever imagine.”

The decision to sell their home, his law office and many of their worldly possessions came only after several years of planning and much soul-searching. At age 48, Stockwell and his wife, 39, are much too young to actually retire, but hope to enjoy the benefits of retirement for the next couple of years while they are still capable of doing so.

“Even with all the preparation and thought about this, it’s still scarier and harder than I thought it would be,” Stockwell said. He and his wife had just moved out of their house the day before the scheduled interview for this article, and Stockwell admits that moving is hard to do at his age. “I think that most of us become so beat down and tired just in our daily jobs, by the time we get home and sit down and turn on the evening news, we just don’t have the energy to even think about something like sailing away. It really takes a commitment that you’re willing to do what is necessary. Everything is doable.”

He and his wife will set sail on *Indigo Moon*, their 2001 Lagoon 380 Catamaran, by the end of hurricane season, and will begin a two-year journey that will



Buddy & Melissa



Waves crashing over the *Indigo Moon's* bow — The *Indigo Moon* is a 2001 Lagoon 380 Catamaran.

include sailing both the Caribbean and the Mediterranean. The boat is comparable to two 38-foot sailboats put together.

“We’re convinced that, for us, it’s going to be worth the effort no matter how it turns out because we’re adventurous people. And we know we’re going to love it, but there is still that lurking feeling of, ‘Wow, this sure is a big thing to undertake.’ I think that’s a part of what stops everybody from doing it. It takes more guts than I thought it would take, let’s put it that way,” shared Stockwell. “I’m very lucky to be in a position to go sailing — we have no children and my wife is into this endeavor as much as I am.”

In preparation for their journey, the couple attended Sea School together and earned their U.S. Coast Guard Captain’s licenses. They became certified to scuba dive in the Cayman Islands two years ago, and they enjoy diving together as well as sailing.

“Melissa doesn’t have as much long-term sailing experience as I have, but she loves it just the same. And

photographs provided by
Buddy and Melissa
Stockwell



Boat washing time — Melissa Stockwell washes the boat while docked.

she certainly has enough experience now to handle a boat by herself,” explained Stockwell. “It is important to me that she is qualified and skilled such that if something happens to me, she can sail home and take care of the boat herself.”

World travel is nothing new to Stockwell, however. By age 6 he had experienced two Atlantic crossings with his family. In 1960, Stockwell’s parents sold their home in Wichita Falls, Texas, and traveled when he was 5 and his sister was 7.

“We drove to New York City in an old Plymouth. We sold it on the docks for \$50 and boarded the *Liberte*, the Italian cruise ship that was in the final scene of the movie ‘Sabrina,’ which starred Humphrey Bogart. We crossed the Atlantic Ocean, ordered a Volkswagen camping bus and stayed in a small village named Eagles located in the mountains, outside of Innsbruck, Austria, for three months while waiting for it to be delivered,” Stockwell said.

“We rented an upstairs room in a large villa and spent lots of time in the woods, exploring that area while waiting for the camper to be delivered. We traveled throughout the campgrounds of Europe for a year, and then brought the Volkswagen camper back on the ‘Lykes Line’ freighter *Sue Lykes* and docked in New Orleans,” Stockwell said.

“I learned to read while I was in Europe, and started first grade when we returned to New Roads, having traveled all over Europe. It was quite an education,” he said.

Having grown up on False River, he’s always been comfortable around water and boats. However, Stockwell did not become interested in sailing until the late 1970s, when he worked as a heavy equipment salesman in New Orleans.



Brady Island on Tchefuncte River

“There’s a large sailing community in New Orleans, and I got involved with people who were sailing small boats,” said Stockwell.

He eventually worked for a sailboat dealer, where he rigged and demonstrated boats,

and gave lessons in sailing and windsurfing.

Stockwell entered law school in his mid-30s, and he graduated from LSU and was admitted to the bar in 1993. He met his wife, Melissa, at Roy, Kiesel & Tucker (now Roy, Kiesel, Keegan & Denicola), where she was David Kiesel’s secretary at the time in the intellectual property section of the firm. Melissa, who already had a marketing degree from LSU, later pursued a second degree in information technology from LSU. Stockwell was a new associate and worked for Vic Roy in the firm’s banking section. After leaving that firm, Stockwell worked as an associate for James R. Clary Jr. until he opened his own general practice at 619 Jefferson Highway in March 1998.

Buddy and Melissa married on April 22, 1997, on the island of St. John in the Virgin Islands, thus continuing their love affair with the sea.

“We’ve always loved the Caribbean. That’s where we got married and it’s always been a fantasy of ours to be down there full-time,”

said Stockwell. The Caribbean, according to Stockwell, is an excellent place for them to begin their journey because of the predictable trade winds and ideal sailing conditions. The Mediterranean, on the other hand, is often rough and, at times, presents much more dangerous seas.

“So, if we spend a year and hone our skills in the Caribbean, we should then be ready for the challenges of sailing in the Mediterranean,” said Stockwell.

Stockwell said that he and his wife have received mixed responses from family and friends when they find out about their plans, but most people are extremely excited for them.

Some friends have asked, "Aren't you afraid of pirates?" To that, Stockwell retorts that sailing a large cruising sailboat is statistically much safer than being out and about in Baton Rouge after dark. "You just keep your eyes open and try to be safe. There are several 'tried and true' measures cruisers use to protect themselves. Firearms are illegal in many countries, so we will rely mainly on other methods of self-defense when abroad, in the rare event it becomes necessary," he said.

There are criminal elements no matter where you go, Stockwell reminds us, but his intention is not to sail around the world, as there are dangerous places he does not care to visit. After cruising the Caribbean and Mediterranean, if up to it after that, he may sail to various Pacific islands and, eventually, to New Zealand and Australia. He hopes to spend this Christmas in the Florida Keys, cross the gulf stream to the Bahamas, and then work his way south to the Virgin Islands and beyond.

"I think everybody assumes that I won the Powerball, which isn't true," said Stockwell. "Most people can do this but aren't willing to turn to the equity in their home and sell their vehicles and everything else to purchase a yacht and go sailing. But when I explain to people how affordable sailing is, they realize that it is very doable. For example, some people sailing spend only \$1,000 a month. They don't have car or house notes, they're not paying Cox Cable, Entergy or the dry cleaners. Picture yourself sitting in an anchorage on a boat that has a fuel tank that costs \$25 to fill up and lasts a month. All you need is food and that's about it. What are you going to spend all that extra money on? You don't need it now," he explained. Boat insurance and health insurance are the biggest expenses aside from purchasing the boat.

"Conventional wisdom says you can make it on as little as \$1,000 a month. For \$2,000 a month, you can live pretty comfortably, and go eat out now and then. And at \$3,000 a month, you can live like a



Buddy & Melissa with *Indigo Moon*

king," he said. "Now, if you want to do it forever, you might need a bit of a nest egg."

Stockwell considers their U.S. Coast Guard Captain's licenses to be his and Melissa's secret weapon: "I'm going to have a sign made that says, 'Snorkel Trips: \$75 per person.' If we find ourselves in a cash flow crisis, I'll just hang out the sign and run a few snorkel trips."

Sailboats require continuous maintenance, according to Stockwell, but in light of his extensive work history in the areas of carpentry, automobile mechanics and other blue-collar trades, he estimates he can do 90 percent of the work on the

boat himself, saving maintenance costs.

When asked if he'll miss practicing law, he said that he loves being a lawyer and feels extremely fortunate to have practiced in Baton Rouge, which he considers to be one of the most professional bars around. Although he is a proud member of the Baton Rouge Bar, he believes that there are other challenges he wants to face.

"I've been very fortunate to be able to make significant differences in people's lives, and to help so

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“People are already writing me from around the world about our web site. We now have friends in Australia, New Zealand, and many countries in Europe cheering us on.”

many clients. This has been a wonderful endeavor, but I know if we don't go sailing now, and if I'm this tired at 48 trying to get it done, then I'm not going to have more energy at 50. It's gonna be diminishing returns from here on out. So if I'm going to do it, I better do it now," rationalized Stockwell.

"I've always been the kind of guy that if there are 100 boats in an anchorage and somebody can't get his to start, I'm up to my elbows in grease trying to help him. I like helping people and I guess that's just the way I was raised. What I will miss most about practicing law is helping people on the level I can as an attorney," he said.

Over the years, Stockwell has helped many people in many different ways, including helping attorneys with chemical dependency problems. He has served for years on the Louisiana State Bar Association's Committee for Alcohol and Drug Abuse, and expresses that it has been a very rewarding endeavor for him.

"Those who know me know that I have been in a program of recovery for about 22 years now," said Stockwell. "I've worked with various entities and agencies to try and get the message out to lawyers who need help. We experience very high stress in our profession, we have high rates of chemical dependency, and in 1991, lawyers were found to suffer more incidences of major depression than any other profession. It is very difficult for lawyers to come forth and ask for help," he continued, "but we now have the Lawyer's Assistance Program, headed by Bill Leary in Houma. Calls to the Lawyer's Assistance Program are confidential by statutory mandate, and the Lawyer's Assistance Program does not report inquiries to the Office of Disciplinary Counsel."

Although he does not rule out the possibility that he may one day return to Baton Rouge to practice law, Stockwell intends to keep his options open and even

plans to keep his 'Buddy Stockwell, Attorney at Law' sign in storage, just in case.

"When you take a fork in the road that is this significant, you just don't know what the future will hold," explained Stockwell. Others who have made similar sailing journeys have shared with Stockwell that they regret having waited so long to make the trip, and that the people they met along the way was the most rewarding part of the experience.

"The richest thing others have taken away from cruising was all of the relationships they made with people from virtually around the world. With meeting people come opportunities, so you don't know what you might end up doing. To be honest, that's one of the most exciting parts of this whole endeavor. You just don't know what's going to happen."

For those who would like to virtually venture along with the Stockwells, Melissa has designed a web site, www.indigomoon.us, and they will be posting updated travel logs with digital photographs for friends and family who wish to track where they are during the course of their journey. They can also be reached by e-mail at

boatbum@indigomoon.us. By utilizing a global satellite phone, they will be able to make direct phone calls and also send and receive e-mail at sea.

"People are already writing me from around the world about the web site. We now have friends in Australia, New Zealand, and many countries in Europe cheering us on. They love our web site and have read our stories so far," said Stockwell. "The main purpose of keeping up a web site is to let everybody know what we're doing and what we experience. I would feel selfish to go out there and experience all this adventure and not tell anybody about it. That's the point — to share the happiness and share the adventure."



Indigo Moon — anchored at Cat Island, south of Gulfport