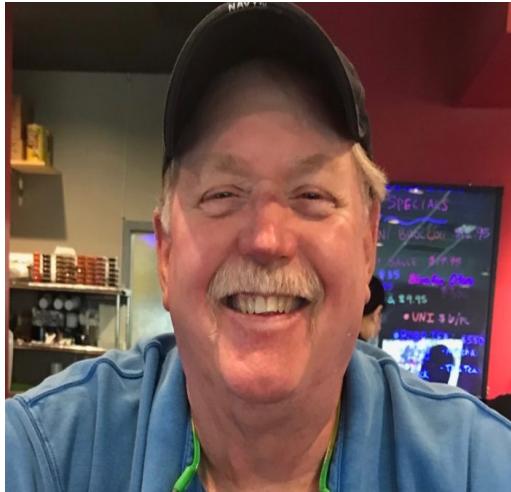


JOYFUL KEYS LIVING: NAVY VETERAN ENJOYS AN AFTERNOON STRUM ON THE UKULELE

By [Emily Steele](#)

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Mike Ehlers

Mike Ehlers can be found most Wednesday afternoons playing the ukulele at the JOY Center. He first learned to play the ukulele as a child when his aunt, a Dominican nun, gave him one.

After learning to play a few songs he lost interest, but regained it 52 years later on his 60th birthday, when his brother gave him a ukulele as a present.

Over the next few years he taught himself to play by watching YouTube videos and spending many hours practicing alone. He played with the Key Largo Library Group, attended seminars at Penny Lane Music Emporium in Fort Lauderdale, and then brought his knowledge and experience to share with participants in the ukulele programs at JOY.

Ehlers' tenacity and sense of adventure have been a hallmark of his life. He was born with salt water in his veins, fishing in his heart, and music in his soul on the South Shore of Long Island, New York. As a youth he spent time fishing in the canal near his house. His father helped him get his first job on a fishing boat, telling the captain, "Bust his chops so he'll never want to be on a fishing boat again." Ehlers is still fishing and over the years he has conducted hundreds of charters and built a broad customer base in the Keys – with the help of his wife, JoAnn, whom he courted with rolls of quarters stuffed into the old phone booth at Bud N' Mary's Marina.

Before coming to the Keys, Ehlers served in the U.S. Navy as a navigator on the USS Dupont during the Vietnam War. “I had it easy,” he was quick to say. “Not like those fighting in the jungles. My job was to direct fire from the Dupont, provide range and bearing.”

During his time in the Navy he was able to fulfill a childhood dream of traveling the world. “You know, join the Navy and see the world. I read a lot of travel books as a kid and the Navy gave me the opportunity to see New Zealand, Australia, Guam, Hawaii, Panama Canal and more,” he said.

Over the years the call of the sea and the whispers of fish have kept Ehlers busy. They continue to pull at him hard enough to prevent retirement. But he takes time out to spend with his wife, children and grandchildren. He also spends his Wednesday afternoons playing and teaching ukulele at the JOY Center.

“You can’t be angry, disappointed or lonely when you play the ukulele,” he said. “It is a joyful, fun instrument. When we meet at the JOY Center we become a group of people having fun, continually improving our playing; even though we are on different levels, we’re making it happen. I encourage everyone to sing; I’m no singer, but I lead the group so I have to sing. I tell them to sing loud enough to cover up for me.”