

Hundreds pay to attend birthday bash for 90-year-old ex-governor

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BATON ROUGE - A more traditional person might call it crass, an ostentatious 90th birthday bash with a \$250-per-person price tag to attend. But then, no one would call Louisiana's four-term former governor, Edwin Edwards — the convicted felon with a wife five decades his junior, a 4-year-old son and a lifetime of making headlines — anything close to traditional.

The birthday festivities Saturday night at a posh Baton Rouge hotel sold out weeks in advance, with hundreds of elected officials, lobbyists and onlookers ponying up for tickets and a chance to watch what is expected to be pure spectacle, a throw-back celebration remembering when Edwards was the Democratic king of Louisiana politics. "A lot of people just feel personally close to him. No other governor has served four times. To me this is just a once-in-a-lifetime historic event," said Robert Gentry, the long-time Edwards friend organizing the celebration.

The ballroom will be packed with more than 500 people, including Louisiana's current governor, Democrat John Bel Edwards (no relation), Republican Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser and Republican Senate President John Alario. And everyone goes home with a gift bag: photos of Edwards with his wife Trina and preschooler son Eli, a souvenir magazine and a commemorative poster. "I just talked to a man who was practically begging for a ticket," Gentry said. "I bet you we could have filled up the place three times."

The attraction

Edwards was the dominant figure in Louisiana politics for the second half of the 20th Century, with charisma and power rivaled only by that other famous Louisiana legend from decades earlier, Huey Long. Edwards sums up his 90 years succinctly and without bitterness: "It's very wonderful to reach 90. I've had a great life, and while I've had my ups and downs over life, I have no complaints." He won his first office, a city council seat, in 1954, followed by elections to the state legislature and Congress before serving as governor for 16 years between 1972 and 1996. He was famous for deadpan one-liners delivered with a Cajun accent, deftly cutting one opponent by describing him as "so slow it takes him an hour and a half to watch '60 Minutes.'" That

wit is what Edwards' authorized biographer Leo Honeycutt believes is drawing so many to the birthday festivities: "People are tired of seriousness. They're tired of belligerency." As for the attendance price tag? "I look at this like Edwin is an entertainer," Honeycutt said. "And I haven't been to a concert yet where an entertainer just said, 'Come on in for free.' Everyone's willing to pay to see him perform."

The criticism

The lovable rogue nostalgia chafes Bob Mann, an LSU mass communication professor who worked for years as a Democratic political operative. Mann said the Edwards terms were marked by razzle-dazzle, but few long-term accomplishments — and he said elected officials should "stay 10 miles away" from the party for a man convicted of corruption.

"I don't know anybody who says the state is so much better off than we were in 1972 when he took office. After four terms, he didn't markedly improve the state's lot in terms of poverty and education," Mann said. "I don't think there are many people who would argue that he ran anything close to an ethical administration in any of his four terms."

During decades in office Edwards drew a reputation for shady, backroom dealing. The ex-governor seemed to foster the status, with quips about two dozen investigations and multiple trials. As he defeated white supremacist David Duke in the 1991 governor's race, bumper stickers promoting Edwards declared: "Vote for the Crook. It's Important."

Edwards' luck with federal investigations ran out in 2000, when he was convicted in a bribery and extortion scheme to rig riverboat casino licenses during and after his fourth term. He spent more than eight years in federal prison, always maintaining his innocence.

Prison did nothing to quell public interest — or Edwards' popularity in many pockets of Louisiana. Freed in 2011, Edwards was quickly back in the spotlight, getting married for a third time, having a son and starring in a short-lived reality show while traveling the state touting his biography.

Though he continued to captivate, Edwards was unable to regain political footing. He was handed his first-ever election defeat in 2014 when he ran for Congress in a heavily Republican district. He's a real estate broker now, living in the Baton Rouge suburbs and raising his fifth child. Edwards hasn't given up on politics entirely. Son Eli bears his same initials, EWE, a well-known monogram in Louisiana

politics. Edwards said his wife printed T-shirts bearing the slogan "EWE for Governor 2043."