

well-written proxies, directives, and wills (how much tuition could be paid for with the legal fees for all that?), but not all of them. The Defense of Marriage Act prevents federal spousal benefits from going to same-sex couples. More than a thousand federal statutes rely on marriage to define one's status. If you are a widow of any age caring for a child, and your income falls below a certain level, you may qualify for Social Security benefits based on your late spouse's earnings (beyond what the child might receive). An unmarried parent would not. You don't need to be married to be a good parent, but marriage equality protects children by giving parents more tools with which to protect them.

Say that the practical issues could all be worked out, and domestic partnerships could be made more or less equitable. Would that do the trick? This was one of the central questions of *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*: whether being almost married, but not quite, is good enough.

Sandra Stier, one of the plaintiffs, testified about her frustration filling out forms that asked if she was "single, married or divorced": she found herself "scratching something out . . . making sure I explain to folks what that is." On an ordinary day, you can explain the complexities of a relationship, or simply elide them. But if someone goes to the hospital, or a child gets in trouble at school, then who everyone is, with respect to one another and in the eyes of the law, matters a great deal. Even a stepmother calling a

school has less explaining to do than a child's mother's girlfriend.

More than that, Stier's domestic partner, Kristin Perry—they have four children—testified that there was nothing in their legal agreements that conveyed "the love and commitment that are inherent in marriage." Judge Walker used the word "honor." A wedding has a transformative power. Perry had standing to sue less because of any single benefit she was denied than because Prop. 8 prevented her from becoming a wife.

It's hard to see how heterosexual wives would be injured if Perry and Stier joined them. Marriage is not a scarce resource that has to be rationed. (Nor is love.) When Walker pressed a lawyer for Prop. 8, who had been talking about marriage existing for procreation, to say in what way, exactly, marriage equality would harm the institution, the answer was "I don't know." Ross Douthat, a columnist for the *Times*, wrote that a "marital ideal" would be lost—but he admitted that this ideal was disconnected from reality. The shattering of an illusion, or the grip of a prejudice, is not enough to give someone standing in court.

What might undermine marriage is pushing fully loaded domestic partnerships—marriage-lite, lacking the constricting, exalting, maddening qualities of the real thing—as an alternative, another box to check. This might become an attractive option for everyone. If such contractual arrangements are really just as

good as marriage, then what is a wedding good for, other than cake?

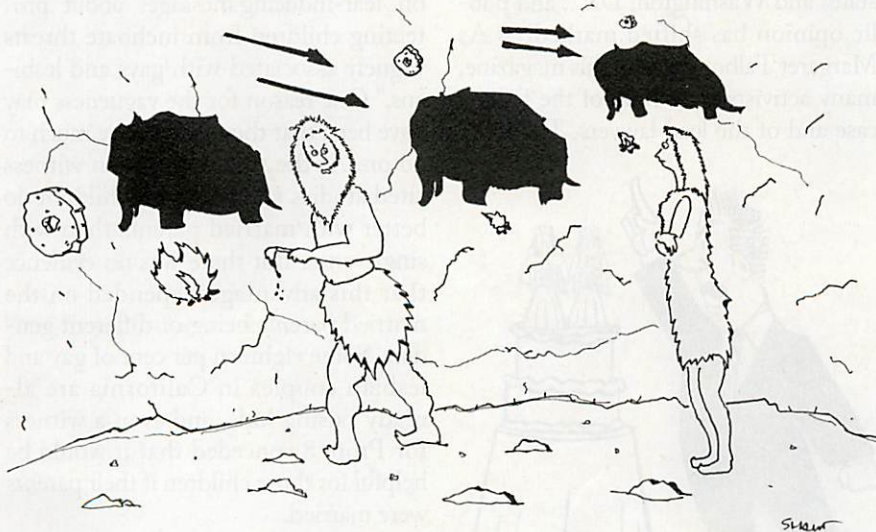
As for other potential victims, Judge Walker found that the State of California, far from suffering, would benefit from having more citizens in stable households. The Circuit Court could still let someone appeal—Prop. 8's advocates, who have come this far, or some government official. (Imperial County, where Prop. 8 got seventy per cent of the vote, as opposed to fifty-two per cent in the entire state, has asked for standing.) But the view from where those potential appellants stand, and from where couples like Perry and Stier are living their lives, is very different. Judge Walker found that, rather than seeking a novel right, the plaintiffs are asking California "to recognize their relationships for what they are: marriages." Almost, but not yet.

—Amy Davidson

SAFETY FIRST DEPT. EXIT STRATEGY



This month's news of Steven Slater, the JetBlue flight attendant who grabbed two beers and fled down his plane's evacuation slide, underscored the importance of having access to effective egress. Another creative thinker on the subject of timely escape is Kevin R. Stone, a California orthopedic surgeon and inventor. (He holds more than fifty patents, most of them related to the repair or replacement of injured joints and tendons.) On 9/11, Stone was deeply shaken by the impossibility of rescuing people trapped on the upper floors of the World Trade Center. "It just seemed like a mechanical problem that I ought to be able to solve," he said recently. "I remember thinking right then, If I can reel in a four-hundred-pound fish, why can't I reel out a four-hundred-pound person?" Existing escape equipment—parachutes, cables attached to building-mounted cranes, inflatable airplane slides—struck him as inadequate, too complicated, or prone to failure. He consulted with various engineers and industrial designers, invested more than three hundred thousand



"I may not have invented the wheel or discovered fire, but I am the first to comment visually on their impact on our lives."

dollars of his savings over six years, and invented the Rescue Reel, a basketball-size personal-descent machine. "I tested an early version off the back of my office with sandbags and a mannequin we got from the store," he said. Later, he tried it himself.

Not long ago, Luis Galvez, who works for Stone, brought a prototype to the city. The device—which is fire-engine red and looks a little like a leaf blower, and which Galvez carried in a salesman's sample case—was inspired by fishing tackle. It contains a spool of five-millimetre, five-thousand-pound test line made of Kevlar and polyester. The free end of the line is secured to a bracket-like hook, which can be attached to an office door, water pipe, floor vent, vending machine, or other sturdy anchor. A self-braking mechanism inside the casing automatically limits the rate of descent to about six feet per second, making the device suitable for people who are disabled or unconscious. "Ideally, you would store your Rescue Reel in a file cabinet in your office until you needed it," Galvez said. He removed a colorful, Snuggli-like harness from his case and handed it to a semi-acrophobic volunteer, who pulled it on like a pair of shorts, attached the Rescue Reel with a locking carabiner, and pretended to lean back toward Forty-third Street, a couple of hundred feet below. "There's a slow pullout initially," Galvez said. "That gives you a little time to get situated, so that you don't immediately go flying out of the building." The device also has a hand brake, for maneuvering around obstacles. The volunteer asked about the possibility of keeping the harness on at all times, just in case. Galvez looked down toward the street, and said, "I've been wondering about potential recreational uses of this thing. You know, people, just for fun, jumping off bridges and stuff." Then he put the harness back in the case.

The Rescue Reel inevitably raises certain questions, some of them economic, some ethical. The devices begin at fifteen hundred dollars apiece. Providing a Rescue Reel for every office worker and apartment dweller above the reach of a Fire Department ladder would cost billions, yet no more than a tiny number of the devices, presumably, would ever be used; in terms of the greatest likely benefit to the largest number of people, mightn't a sounder investment be colo-

noscopies? And, if an employer decided, as a cost-saving measure, to provide devices only for himself and his compensation committee, couldn't lower-level employees retaliate by purchasing heavy-duty garden shears and displaying them in their cubicles?

Nevertheless, other costly safety devices—lifeboats, seat belts, swimming-pool fences, air bags—provoked skepticism before being adopted almost universally. "As building codes evolve," Stone said, "they might require that each floor have a bank of these for the predicted number of people on that floor"—just as codes now require smoke alarms, exit stairs, fire extinguishers, and sprinkler systems. In the meantime, Stone has received inquiries from many potential cus-



tomers, among them a nervous woman who had bought a condominium on a high floor of San Francisco's Millennium Tower. And he has heard from people whose needs he hadn't anticipated, including a company that operates giant Ferris wheels (it occasionally needs to retrieve stranded customers) and the U.S. military (which is interested in finding a better way to lower soldiers from hovering helicopters). "We also thought about giving one to Mayor Bloomberg last summer, as a gift to the city," Stone said—although at that point the Mayor seemed concerned less with escaping from City Hall than with finding a way to climb back in.

—David Owen

FIELD TRIP SECOND GENERATION



Steven Deng, a lanky sixteen-year-old Shigh-school student from Shanghai, was full of questions during a recent visit to New York: Why are there so many Spanish people in America? What can you tell me about the iPhone4? What do the American people think about the diplomatic policy of Obama? Is American football more popular than baseball? What is the maximum number of children allowed each family by the government? How many children will *you* have? One boy and one girl, or both boys? "You know, in China, we totally don't care about these things," he explained over dinner at Planet Hollywood, in Times Square. "Or, if you care, you actually don't know. You can't obtain this kind of information. I'm in America now. So I can ask about this."

Steven is a member of the *fu er dai*, or "second-generation rich"—the children of China's political elite and of its first real entrepreneurial class. His parents make chocolate and, with the proceeds, invest in Australian real estate. He sometimes worries that they are more consumed with their business interests than with him, their only child. Much of the Chinese middle class, meanwhile, worries that Steven and his peers are spoiled and unserious, and are unprepared to take over their families' companies. What they need, everyone seems to agree, is some worldliness, and this has given rise to a flourishing supplementary-education industry. Steven and eight classmates were here on a two-week "college and culture tour," as one of their chaperons put it, organized by a Shanghai-based company called Educational Consulting International. They'd been travelling down the East Coast in a white bus with rainbow detailing. It was Day 10, and they had already visited Harvard, M.I.T., Yale, N.Y.U., and Columbia, with Princeton and a private White House tour still to follow. Steven, who had been quiet at the beginning of the trip, seemed energized by