Hey spinster! When are you getting married?

April 13, 2010  Trish Crawford

Melissa Goldstein has a regular Passover ritual and it isn't the Seder.

"I get interrogated and nagged the entire time," says Goldstein. "It's all, 'You should meet somebody,' 'You need a boyfriend,' 'You should be married.'"

The 36-year-old social activist and communications professional has learned to gird her loins for Passover and other family get-togethers where her marital status is an open topic for discussion.

"I do feel pressure from family," says Goldstein, of Toronto, adding, "I used to be a lot nicer. Now I'm like, 'Leave me alone.'"

She's not the only single lady getting the third degree.

A University of Missouri study of "never married" women in their mid-30s discovered they are still surrounded by expectations they should have a husband.

Researchers found that family weddings and gatherings can be particularly painful "when parents and siblings remark about their singlehood and make jokes or rude comments." They were also surprised that families called the women "old maids."

They were also subject to pointed remarks and heightened scrutiny by society in general, says the study titled, I'm a Loser, I'm Not Married, Let's All Just Look at Me — a quote from one of the women surveyed.
“You gotta joke about it, or you would cry,” says co-author Larry Ganong, a family studies professor at Missouri. “Behaviour in North America has changed but norms change more slowly. People hang onto their standards and beliefs, particularly parents and grandparents.”

Elizabeth Sharp, a single, 36-year-old associate professor of family studies at Texas Tech University who co-wrote the study, argues that 9/11 is partly to blame for

"A pendulum shift back to notions of tradition."

Sharp says people have a firm idea “of the standard, North American family” — a heterosexual married couple and two children.

But modern-day spinsters have a handbag full of tricks to deal with the probing, hurtful questions.

St. Louis mystery writer Susan McBride didn’t get married until four years ago, when she was 41. She used humour to deflect family barbs.

“My cousin asked me if I was a lesbian. He said, “If you’re a lesbian, that’s okay.” I said I’m not gay but thank you for being so accepting.” And then she burst out laughing.

As the years went on, her family began to worry “that I would become a cat lady.” But, after being named one of St. Louis’ top singles, she met a software engineer at the party honouring the finalists, and they began dating.

Lisa Santonato, 37, has been too busy building her Toronto communications company to think about marriage. She’s noticed her family’s questions have died down.

“They had higher hopes when I was younger,” she says, “They probably suspect I’ll become a spinster now.”

“I always said that I wouldn’t get married. Not because I didn’t believe in marriage — my parents and grandparents were all still together and had all set very positive examples — but more because I didn’t want to be in a role that was limiting,” Santonato says.

“But now that I’m much more settled in my career, I’m interested.”

tcrawford@thestar.ca
Missouri research park to be built in Blue Springs

The Associated Press • April 14, 2010

COLUMBIA, Mo. (AP) — The University of Missouri has found a temporary home in Blue Springs for its nascent research park in the Kansas City area, which joins similar parks in Rolla and other state cities.

The university will lease space in an office building near Interstate 70 as it continues to develop a 500-acre biological sciences complex called the Missouri Innovation Park.

The school has a preliminary agreement with Blue Springs officials to build the research park.

Similar research sites are in place at or near the university’s Columbia and St. Louis campuses. And construction has started on a Rolla Innovation Park at the Missouri University of Science and Technology.
Missouri State faculty group seeks domestic partner benefits

"It's not going to fly," says chairman of the Missouri State Board of Governors.

MU mention page 2

Didi Tang • News-Leader • April 14, 2010

More than three and half years after Missouri State University added sexual orientation to its nondiscrimination policy, a faculty group Thursday will ask the university to extend employee benefits -- such as health insurance -- to domestic partners of MSU employees.

"It's important to recruit and retain the best faculty," said Jeremy Chesman, who chairs an ad-hoc faculty task force studying the issue.

But the proposal is bound to face opposition.

"It's not going to fly," said Brian Hammons, chair of the MSU Board of Governors, which has the final say on university policies.

"State policies are not in favor of it." Hammons said.

Asked if not offering benefits to domestic partners would disagree with MSU's nondiscrimination policy, Hammons said: "They can be exclusive of each other."

MSU President Mike Nietzel declined to weigh in on the matter until the Faculty Senate proposes a change to the existing policy.

Chesman, however, is hopeful.

While there is a moral argument for it, Chesman, an associate professor of music, said there is an economic incentive for MSU to act.

Providing benefits to domestic partners would help MSU retain and recruit quality instructors, thus benefiting the region and the state, Chesman said.

"It's time the university does this," he said.
Drury University has been offering employee benefits to same-sex domestic partners since 2007.

"We think it is consistent with our strategic planning for diversity," said Charles Taylor, vice president of academic affairs at Drury. "It nurtures a culture of inclusion."

The financial impact, if any, has been negligible, Taylor said.

"What I can say with confidence is it's common for faculty applicants to ask about it," Taylor said.

Many applicants do not use same-sex partner benefits but see them as a reflection of Drury's values, Taylor said.

"It's a powerful message," Taylor said.

Evangel University, operated by the Assemblies of God, does not offer benefits to domestic partners. Nor does Ozarks Technical Community College.

Private employers are more likely to extend domestic partner benefits than public employers, according to a 2007 report by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

Nevertheless, over the years, more colleges and universities have begun offering such benefits, said Daniel Hurley, director of state relations and policy analysis at AASCU.

Altogether, 311 public and private colleges offer domestic partner benefits; 61 percent of the top 120 schools as ranked by U.S. News and World Report provide the benefits, according to AASCU.

"There's the combination of social acceptance and a compelling argument for competitiveness in terms of recruitment and retention," Hurley said.

The financial impact of such benefits has been minimal, but offering domestic partner benefits has been an effective way to attract faculty, particularly when salaries for college professors are rising at a slower pace, Hurley said.

For state colleges that do not offer domestic partner benefits, the reason usually is not financial but political, Hurley said.

"The (gubernatorially appointed) boards are supposed to be politically independent, but if there's a pressure, it's simply that state policy makers may have conservative views on this matter," Hurley said.

In Missouri, where voters amended the state constitution in 2004 to define marriage as the union of a man and a woman, no state college offers domestic partner benefits.
At the University of Missouri-Columbia, the Faculty Council recently recommended a benefits proposal for non-married household members, though it is yet to be officially adopted.

The Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce is not taking a position, President Jim Anderson said.

Past work

At Missouri State, the push to provide domestic partner benefits picked up last October when the Faculty Senate formed a task force to study the issue.

The report, to be delivered Thursday to the Faculty Senate, details past efforts on domestic partner benefits, noting a human resources planning task force recommended a committee be formed to study its feasibility as far back as January 2004.

No committee was formed.

But the President's Work/Life Committee recommended employee benefits, such as tuition waiver and health insurance, be provided to domestic partners.

In 2007 and 2009, the Student Government Association also stated it wanted MSU to offer domestic partner benefits.

In the report, the task force uses the term "household non-employee" to include both spouse and domestic partner.

A household nonemployee is defined as someone who has spent a certain period of time with a university employee, shares financial commitment, is not married to someone else, not related to the employee by blood and is at least 18 years old.

The report examines the policies at 11 similar universities and finds seven of them offer benefits to nonmarried household members.

The report also finds the financial impact would be minimal because the university only pays health insurance premiums for its employees. Their spouses and dependents are eligible for the university health plan, but they pay for the coverage.

MSU would pay itself for the tuition waiver program. It would incur actual costs for fees such as computer usage, the report says.

Given that a small number of employees typically take advantage of those benefits, Chesman said extending the benefits would not place a financial burden on the university.
News sites funded by think tanks take root

By JOHN MILLER Associated Press Writer © 2010 The Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — A growing number of conservative groups are bankrolling startup news organizations around the country, aggressively covering government and politics at a time when newspapers are cutting back their statehouse bureaus.

The phenomenon troubles some longtime journalists and media watchdogs, who worry about political biases and hidden agendas.

The news outlets have sprouted in larger numbers in recent months to fill a void created by the downsizing of traditional statehouse coverage and to win over readers, including those who don't trust the local paper or the TV news.

"Our state capitol used to be bustling with the media," said Matthew Brouillette, president of the Harrisburg, Pennsylvania-based Commonwealth Foundation, whose news outlet, the Pennsylvania Independent, went live in January. "Now, you can swing a dead cat and not hit anybody in the state capitol newsroom."

The news outlets usually receive their money from right-leaning, free-market organizations. Idahoreporter.com, for example, is funded by the Idaho Freedom Foundation, a think-tank that has barraged local governments with public records requests since last year in an effort to expose waste.

Similar news operations are now in place in Washington state, Michigan, South Carolina, Montana, Wyoming, Florida, West Virginia, Arizona, Missouri, Maryland, Nebraska, Illinois, Texas, Tennessee, Ohio and elsewhere.

The outlets publish almost exclusively on the Internet and usually look like traditional news sites. For example, the front page of Idahoreporter.com recently featured stories about proposed tax increases, higher park fees, a labour report, and the funding of a college scholarship program. The lead stories all had accompanying graphics and photos; some stories have video.
Journalism watchdogs say they have not noticed any obvious slant in the coverage. But some of these news organizations have been barred from capitol press corps because of rules that forbid lobbyists from membership.

And there are fears that these organizations are trying to advance a certain agenda by the stories they decide to cover -- even if the articles themselves are unbiased.

"They are still very new. But in any content, there are a couple of different kinds of bias to look for: the angles taken by a reporter, the tone of writing. But there is also a bias that can exist in terms of choices of stories to cover," said Amy Mitchell, deputy director for Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

Wayne Hoffman, executive director of the Idaho Freedom Foundation, challenges people to find bias in the stories and stresses that he doesn't dictate what his staff should cover. But he does emphasize that the stories should be presented from the viewpoint of taxpayers.

"I want them to ask the question 'Who is going to be impacted when government creates a new program?' It still needs to be funded. When there is a new regulation, who will it impact and how? We ask them to close that loop, to present all the details, not just the ones politicians want you to know about," Hoffman said.

The trend comes at a time when technological advances and the growth of citizen journalism have blurred the lines between traditional and nontraditional reporting and created all sorts of new ways to cover the news.

"If you have a laptop, a wireless card and a flip cam, you're as powerful as The New York Times," said Jason Stverak, a former North Dakota Republican Party director who runs the year-old Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity in Bismarck and advises news outlets like those in Harrisburg and Boise.

Stverak also said the movement has caught on because people are skeptical of the mainstream media. "You can draw a parallel between the explosion in the tea party and the rapid increase in the amount of new news organizations," he said.

It does not appear that left-leaning organizations are funding their own news outlets to the same degree.

Hoffman said Idahoreporter.com has been a success on many levels. A few of the site's stories were mentioned in mainstream media or referred to in newspaper blogs. He also said it became a place statehouse reporters and lawmakers turned to for developments. Page views have increased fivefold since the launch in January to about 1,000 per day.

Ethical questions persist, however.
Hoffman recently stood at a lectern at the Idaho Capitol and demanded that state lawmakers require greater transparency for education spending. A reporter from Idahoreporter.com took notes on his laptop for a story about the event.

To deal with the potential conflict of interest, Idahoreporter.com stories that quote Hoffman end with a disclaimer about his relationship to the news service.

Some of the jobs pay better than newspaper reporting gigs. The Alaska Policy Forum recently put up a help-wanted Internet ad offering to pay an investigative reporter up to $75,000 to cover government in Juneau.

Organizations that issue press credentials for statehouse reporters in such places as Ohio, Illinois and Idaho have denied membership to some of the new outlets, citing their links to advocacy groups. That means Idaho Freedom Foundation's reporters were excluded from the capitol press room.

"The vote of the membership was unanimous," said Betsy Russell, president of the Idaho Capitol Correspondents Association and a reporter with the Spokesman-Review newspaper. "They simply didn't meet the bylaws."

Critics have also raised concerns about the identities of the news organizations' financial backers. Stverak will not say where he is getting the money to pay his 12-person staff. Neither will Hoffman or Brouillette.

**Phill Brooks, director of the University of Missouri's State Government Reporting Program, said such reluctance is a "red flag." A similar startup news service in his state, the Sunshine News Foundation, refused recently to say who was paying the bills.**

"I can't recall in 40 years that there's been an organization that has come here and asked for recognition as a news organization that hid its financial background," he said.

Hoffman said his donors expect privacy when they pitch in to cover his $78,000 annual salary, paychecks for his journalists, or his foundation's work to organize a tea party rally and to bring libertarian-leaning Texas Rep. Ron Paul to Boise.

"Supporters to organizations such as mine have been harassed, they have been criticized, they've been vilified," he said. "We choose not to subject our donors to that, unless they choose to be subjected to that."
Beef prices shoot up after harsh winter

A harsh winter and cash-strapped ranchers — let's not forget commodity speculators — have reduced cattle herds and caused prices to shoot up nearly 25% since last year, the Financial Times reports. Expect that burger or steak to cost more in the months ahead, the meat experts say.

Prices have soared since December, as worldwide production is headed for its third year of decline. Cattle didn't get fat this winter, so leaner herds went to the slaughterhouse. On top of that, ranchers struggling with the recession thinned or sold off their herds.

"It may be the biggest rally in fed cattle prices from December till April in the last 30 years," said James Herring, president of Friona Industries, a Texas feedlot operator that supplies ag giant Cargill.

The situation isn't limited to beef, the FT writes separately. Pork and poultry production are also down or flat, and that means lower supplies and higher prices.

"There is a trend driving things: we downsized the meat industry," said Ronald Plain, a livestock expert at the University of Missouri.

Besides beef producers and speculators, there's another group of people happy about the meatless situation: vegetarians ...