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Moving On / By Jeffrey Zaslow

The Singles Lobby: Unmarried People Seek Economic Perks Enjoyed by Couples

WHEN THOMAS COLEMAN visits legislators in Washington, D.C., to lobby for the rights of unmarried Americans, he isn't always taken seriously. People learn the name of his organization—the American Association for Single People—“and they immediately snicker,” he says. “They’ll ask, ‘What’s a dating service doing here in the Capitol?’”

Actually, it's an advocacy group that fights for legal and financial benefits equal to those given to married people. But as executive director of the five-year-old, 3,500-member AASP, Mr. Coleman knows his group won't soon approach the size or clout of the 35 million-member AARP, or even the 500,000-member National Organization for Women.

Yes, there are 86 million unmarried adults in the U.S., all eligible for membership. But many of them are embarrassed to be unmarried, or they view themselves as “temporarily single,” Mr. Coleman says. “They think, ‘I’ll put up with it for a little while and then I’ll be married and get the benefits.’”

We live in a society of advocacy acronyms, where senior citizens, African-Americans, gays, women and others belong in large numbers to their own groups—AARP, NAACP, GLAAD, NOW. Most of these organizations easily target prospective members. A person's race never changes, and once you're old, you're old. After you join these groups, you can be a member for life.

But singles are a fluid constituency. They might go from never married to newly mar-

The Perks That Singles Don't Get

- **At work:** Married employees have enhanced health-care plans and unemployment benefits.
- **At home:** Landlords in many states can refuse to rent to singles.
- **On the road:** Many car insurers give discounts to married drivers.
- **In the marketplace:** Country clubs, cruise lines, and health clubs offer family discounts.
- **After death:** married people can leave unlimited wealth to spouses tax-free.



PictureQuest

ried to divorced to married again to widowed. About 90% of Americans are married at some point in their lives, a percentage that will increase if same-sex marriage is legalized nationally. Many singles recognize the inequities in their treatment, but rarely fight back. So don't expect the Unmarried Millions March on Washington any time soon.

That's frustrating to singles activists, who bristle when their complaints are dismissed as trivial. In the workplace, singles are expected to

put off summer vacations so married colleagues can visit Disney World while their kids are out of school. Married people get family leave and special dispensations to work at home, while singles often feel chained to their desks.

Married people enjoy economic benefits, too. If your spouse relocates, and you leave your job to join her, you can collect unemployment. If your spouse dies, you can receive half his Social Security benefits. Married couples often have lower car-insurance rates, and enhanced corporate health-care plans. They get family discounts at health clubs, exemptions on estate taxes, and richer housing allowances if they're in the military.

Of course, married people with kids argue that they need more room to live, and say they deserve “group rates” on cruises because they're bringing companies more business.

But Roger Brokaw, a 57-year-old, twice-divorced civil servant in Gulfport, Miss., doesn't buy it. Describing himself as “better at honeymoons than marriages,” he doubts he'll marry again. So he paid his \$10 dues to AASP, and has become one of its few foot soldiers. He has asked about 50 single friends to join the non-profit group, but just two have signed up.

The AASP—which also goes by “Unmarried America” to avoid the singles-club stigma—charges that unmarried people aren't only marginalized by society, they're ignored by politicians.

President George W. Bush has proposed spending \$1.5 billion to promote “healthy marriages.” “We should turn his ‘W’ upside down,” says Mr. Coleman, “because everything is the ‘M’ word—marriage, marriage, marriage.” The AASP finds John Kerry similarly focused. The Democratic contender keeps talking about “working families,” as if mom, dad and the kids are piling into minivans and heading to the office. Even Ralph Nader, who is single, has his own limited agenda that doesn't include rallying for the unmarried.

Candidates may fear that supporting singles'

rights won't play well in Peoria, but like many cities in the U.S., Peoria has a majority of households (58%) headed by unmarried adults.

There are thousands of social groups and dating services for singles in the U.S., but barely a handful of organizations take an activist approach. The 6,500-member Alternatives to Marriage Project advocates for equal rights for unmarried couples, focusing on such issues as cohabitation and estate planning. The Single Women's Alliance Network (SWAN), which has 2,000 members, lobbies to win unmarried women “a larger voice politically and a more positive identity.”

The AASP was founded by wealthy industrialist Lloyd E. Rigler, who built Adolph's Meat Tenderizer into a world-wide brand. Mr. Rigler, who was single his entire life and died last year, provided about \$2 million in seed money for AASP.

When singles discover the organization, they often send in passionate e-mails. One man recently wrote that his company considered layoffs, and a married co-worker argued that single employees should get the ax because they didn't need to support families.

In another e-mail, a woman wrote that her boss told her to cancel her dinner date and stay later at work; her social plans were deemed “less urgent” than a co-worker's need to pick up her children at daycare. The AASP will contact companies on behalf of singles with complaints.

The AASP's Mr. Coleman admires AARP founder Ethel Percy Andrus, who launched the giant senior-citizen organization from her kitchen table in 1958. But he doesn't expect that his singles movement will ever mushroom to AARP proportions.

A lot of singles are too busy, he says, “looking for their soulmates.”

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