

mark stivers

This local cartoonist
offers readers something
to think about.

Mark Stivers whips out his latest cartoon, eager for assessment by a fresh pair of eyes. It's a drawing of a fish crawling out of the water onto dry land—the classic symbol of evolution. In the thought bubble above the fish's head are the words, "I am so going to get laid now."

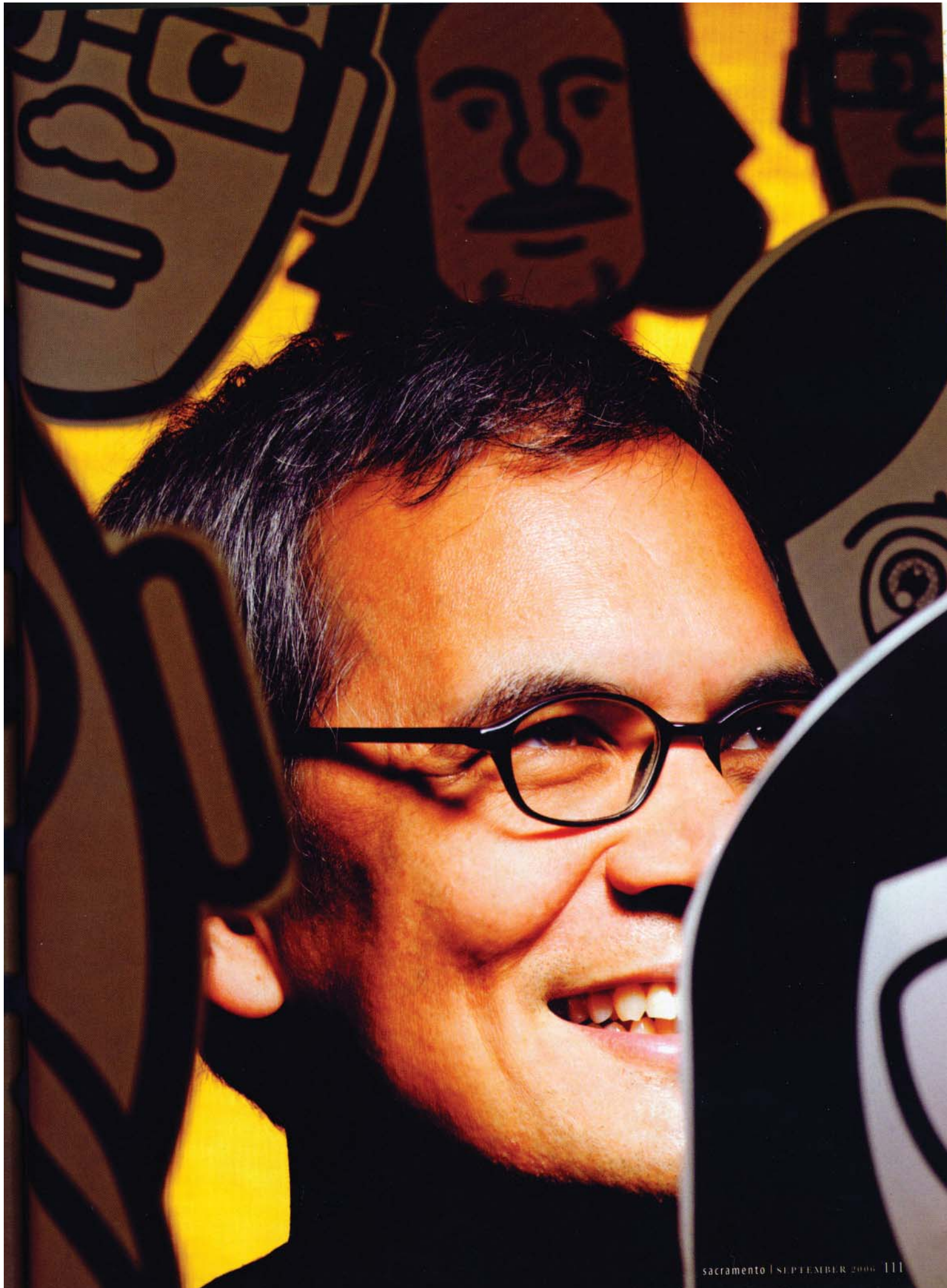
Wait a minute. Here's a creature about to radically and irrevocably alter the course of life on Earth—*What courage! What notoriety!*—and all he's thinking about is impressing some girl fish?

Think about it, Stivers seems to be urging the reader. Doesn't this say something about ourselves?

"When I did that cartoon, I was reading a lot about evolutionary biology and what's really our basic motivation for doing everything: passing on our genetic material," says Stivers, 48, whose "Far Side"-ish cartoons have appeared in the *Sacramento News & Review*, *Alive & Kicking*, *Harper's Magazine*, *The Utne Reader*, *The San Francisco Bay Guardian* and the *Philadelphia City Paper*, to name a few.

BY DAYNA DUNTEMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF ROSS



Stivers has published more than 1,000 cartoons since 1981, but because his favorite one is always his last good one, he is fixated at the moment on the god-fish of evolution and the true genesis of human behavior.

"We have all these reasons why we think we're doing things," Stivers says, pointing at his sketch, "but maybe that's not the real reason. Like in the movie *Art School Confidential*: The protagonist wants to be the greatest artist of the 21st century, but what he really wants to do is impress a girl. Becoming a great artist is just a means for it."

If evolutionary biology was what drove Stivers himself to cartooning, then, hey, it worked: Stivers' wife of almost 22 years, Jennifer, says she fell in love after reading one of his cartoons. Forget that Stivers was at the time contributing to the betterment of hu-

manity by serving in the Peace Corps on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, where Jennifer was involved in an Earthwatch Institute archaeological dig. Here was a guy who was funny, and not in an annoying-to-most-women Three Stooges kind of way.

"If I didn't know him, I'd say his cartoons were done by a woman," says Jennifer, a retired attorney.

The couple decided to get married three days after meeting for the first time, around Christmas in 1983. They were married on Veterans Day 1984 and moved to Sacramento that same year to be close to Jennifer's family. Mark has been tickling her funny bone ever since.

"He certainly has

a unique view of the world. His humor can be profound," Jennifer says. "It's amazing how he understands people."

That's what Melinda Welsh, founding editor of the *Sacramento News & Review*, thought, too, when she first published one of Stivers' cartoons in 1989.

"He's one of those people who looks at the world and sees a parallel universe—and then turns it on its head," Welsh says. "His cartoons make you

"I'm aiming at people who think," Mark Stivers says. "I don't like my cartoons to be dumb."





Brayden Durant

CHILDREN'S FOUNDATION

Becker Mortgage Proudly Presents
2nd Annual Brayden Durant Children's Foundation
Art Auction Gala

A "Full Course Strolling Dinner" with cuisine provided by: Bella Bru, Lucca, Mikuni, Hangar 17, Ma Jong - Mason's and more...

Many "Best of Sacramento" Local Artists
Live Music & Dancing to the sounds of "Late for Dinner"
Live & Silent Auction

September 16, 2006
Masonic Temple
J Street, Sacramento

For more information,
tickets or VIP tickets
call Becker Mortgage at
916-448-3174

Presented by:

BECKER MORTGAGE

Sponsored by:

sacramento MAGAZINE

AMERICAN PACIFIC MORTGAGE

B | V | M
BIG VALLEY MORTGAGE

LYON
Natomas Office

James Walker
of Cook Realty

Proceeds will benefit the Brayden Durant Children's Foundation which is dedicated to the betterment of the lives of children affected by disease, illness, or injury.

laugh, or they make you say, 'Wow, I never thought of it that way.' That's a creative person who can pull that off."

Stivers, whose day job—tuning pianos—takes him all around Sacramento and beyond, also is a talented musical arranger and keyboardist who's played with Music Circus, Best of Broadway, the Sacramento Opera, the now-defunct Sacramento Symphony, the Sacramento Theatre Company, John Skinner's Fabulous Band, Bobby Rydell,

and Danny and The Juniors. In 2005, he spent 11 weeks traveling with Cathy Rigby's national farewell tour of *Peter Pan* and has tuned pianos for top performers, including Chick Corea, Barry Manilow, Tori Amos and Patti LaBelle.

Yet it's art, more than anything, that gets his blood pulsing.

"I think I'm a better cartoonist than a musician," says Stivers, who studied at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, where he grew up. "But as it happens, I can make much more money as a musician. Being a cartoonist is really tough; it's very tough to make any money at it."

But Stivers, who makes anywhere from \$25 to a couple of hundred dollars per cartoon, isn't in it for the money. A modern-

day Socrates (who else would get his jollies listening to college lectures on philosophy, existentialism, quantum

mechanics and psychology on an MP3 player?), he is enamored with the workings of the human mind

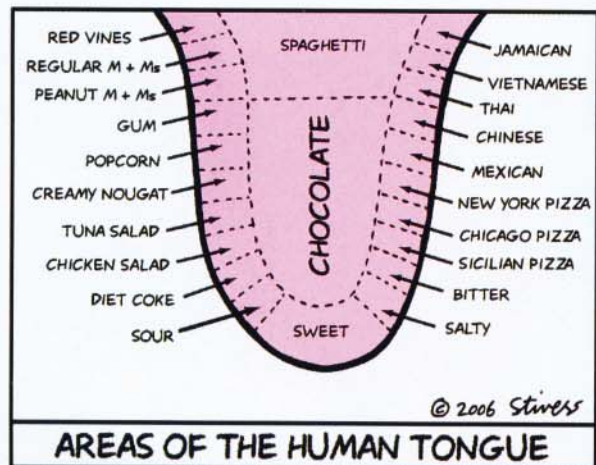
and feels compelled to present to the world his model of reality in hopes of making some kind of connection with the people who read it.

"I'm aiming at people who think," he says. "I don't like my cartoons to be dumb; as a matter of fact, my wife has forbidden me to do any puns. That's too easy. The best joke would have a lot of layers to it, and unfortunately, that doesn't happen very often."

To truly appreciate Stivers' work, you must stretch your mind beyond the limits of science to fully comprehend what it means to be human.

"According to science," he says, "everything is just physical systems, and what we perceive as conscious-

"I think my constant ambition is just to be in the moment," Stivers says.



thedoctor
for you.com



ness is really just chemical reactions in our brain. Nobody really thinks that, though. We always act as though we have consciousness and other people have consciousness, and it's sort of like we're projecting things on a screen in our minds. But you can't even grasp it as science; it's like trying to look inside your own eye. These are the things that fascinate me. And somehow, if you can encapsulate that in a joke, that's really wonderful because it's funny, but yet it taps into something really deep and rather troubling, really, because there are so many things we take for granted that are ephemeral. Like perception—we think we're seeing the real world, but what we perceive is such a tiny, tiny slit of what there is."

If Stivers can open that slit just a little wider, then he feels he's done his job. Take, for instance, a cartoon in his book, *There is Only Unibrow*, a compilation of his best work from the past three years (available on Amazon.com). In that book is a picture of a mural proclaiming, "If the world gives you lemons, make lemonade." A classic feel-good, self-help mantra, right? Well, not to the father lemon and the son lemon standing on the sidewalk reading it. "Daddy, why do they hate us?" implores Lemon Junior. Which just goes to show, Stivers says, that not everyone perceives messages in the same way. It depends on where you're coming from.

Because Stivers also is a musician, many of the cartoons in *Unibrow* give a nod to the artist's way of life. "I know that I'm not great," thinks a bespectacled guitar player strumming behind a microphone, "but I think that I suck at a fairly high level."

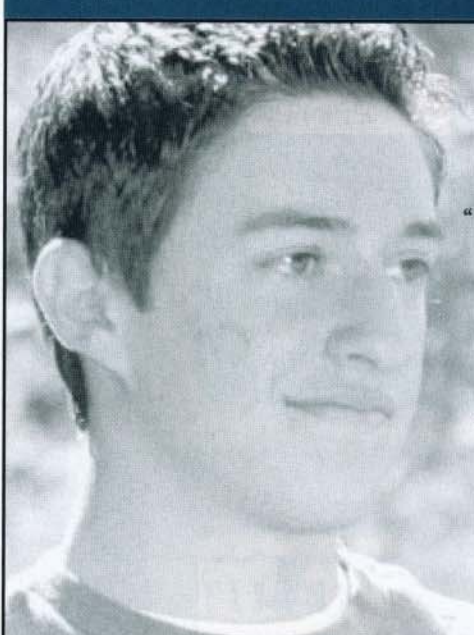
In order for a Stivers cartoon to see the light of day, it first has to pass muster with his wife and 20-year-old daughter, Rachel, a student of costume design at the University of California, Irvine.

"If both of them hate the joke, I almost certainly will not use it, no matter how funny I think it is," Stivers says. "Both of them are highly astute when it comes to comedy. My wife, she's so jaded, if she laughs spontaneously at it—she has this really spontaneous laugh; she'll go, 'Ha-ha!'—if she does that, I know I've hit the jackpot."

Providing a portal to Stivers' well of inspiration is the Internet. Stivers, a prolific blogger, is never without his digital camera, and nothing is too insignificant to escape his notice. Mark stivers.com is loaded with musings and photos from his daily comings and goings, from morning jaunts to Espresso Metro near Sacramento City College to his latest musical gigs. Contemplating photos like the "sea of shopping carts" at Ikea or the 30-year-old un-

used bar of *Star Wars* Darth Vader soap (which Stivers shot while servicing a piano at a client's house), you can't help but think, "How's this going to surface in a cartoon?" Because you just know it will. If anyone can find profound meaning in the mundane or the kooky, it's Stivers.

Stivers relies heavily on artists and cartoonists such as Roy Lichtenstein, Keith Haring, Charles Burns and Chris Ware to light the way for him. His



**"YOU REALIZE
attitude
AND FAMILY
ARE YOUR
greatest GIFTS."**

CASEY STITELER, AGE 16
BRAIN CANCER SURVIVOR

**AT RADIATION ONCOLOGY CENTERS,
WE DEVELOP SPECIAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH OUR
CANCER PATIENTS, LIKE CASEY STITELER.**


When Casey was 12 he was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. He underwent radiation therapy at the ROC.

For almost 90 years, Radiological Associates of Sacramento has been breaking ground in the delivery of radiation therapy to cancer patients, like Casey Stiteler. Our Radiation Oncology Centers (ROC) provide a full range of radiation treatment services for adults and children with Brain Tumors including, Intensity Modulated Radiation Therapy (IMRT), Gliasite, and Gamma Knife Radiosurgery.

With seven locations in Northern California, you'll have access to an extensive network of highly trained, board certified radiation oncologists who provide new advances in radiation treatment and participate in national clinical trials.

Today Casey is a thriving high school student and founder of "Casey's Project" a non-profit organization that donates toys to children in the hospital. No matter which center you choose, you'll receive the same advanced, compassionate care that Casey did.

AUBURN
CAMERON PARK
CARMICHAEL
DOWNTOWN SACRAMENTO
MIDTOWN SACRAMENTO
ROSEVILLE
VACAVILLE



A Division of Radiological Associates of Sacramento Medical Group, Inc.
www.radiological.com

▲ Accredited by Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Health Care, Inc.

favorite cartoon of all time? "Pogo."

"He drew beautifully, he had a wonderful way of mangling the language, and he was a great caricaturist," Stivers says of "Pogo's" creator, Walt Kelly.

Studying the elites of the field is essential to creating quality work, Stivers believes.

"To be a great cartoonist, you have to first of all be conscious of your tradition. As you look through art history, you're going to find certain things that appeal to you, so you have to find your tradition, and you have to know it inside and out. Then you have to develop what your concept of beauty is—you have to develop your style. This alone is very difficult; very few artists develop a strong voice. I put myself in that category. I'm sort of halfway there. And then, if you're really going to be great, you have to tackle the big subjects. You have to tackle sex and death."

Many cartoonists today are missing the mark, Stivers believes, mainly because they don't care about drawing.

"In general, the level of drawing really has gone downhill," he says. "More typical now is somebody like Scott Adams, who does 'Dilbert,' which is



a wonderful strip, but the drawing is pretty rudimentary. And he would be the first to admit that, I'm sure. But the writing obviously is great, and it struck a chord. It's become a generic word—when you talk about 'Dilbert,' everyone knows what you mean."

If Stivers never becomes that famous, well, so be it. He's not one to

cry into his brush pen over what might have been.

"I've never been an ambitious person," he says. "I think my constant ambition is just to be in the moment—because every day is a struggle between being distracted and being able to be in the moment. That may sound so New Age, but I just want to be mindful of the moment I'm in. I think if you are, then you are much more efficient, also. Part of the reason people procrastinate or are blocked is because they're focused on something that's not here. They're focused either on past failures or future failures.

When you do your best work is when you've internalized everything you've learned, and you're just doing it spontaneously and it looks so effortless. But you'll never achieve that if you're focused on the past or the future. You have to be in the moment."

Sounds like a cartoon waiting to happen.

5

The Elk Grove Community Foundation presents...

**SPOTLIGHT
ON
ELK GROVE**

*Making the dream
of a higher education
a reality for students.*

Sample local foods and wines!
Live entertainment!
Costumes are welcome!

Support local businesses!
Proceeds go to the EGCF
scholarship fund!

Tickets \$30 in advance
\$40 at the door

Thursday, September 14, 2006
SES Hall, Elk Grove
10427 E. Stockton Blvd

www.egcommunityfoundation.org

More information: (916) 685-7118



is sponsored
in part by:

