

This could be your state

The scary things happening to women's rights in South Dakota **are heading your way.** Jennifer Baumgardner reports. Photography by Katherine Wolkoff

What the hell is the matter with South Dakota?" I can't tell you how often I've heard that in the last few months, mostly because I was raised in Fargo, N.D., and people think Fargo is either (a) in South Dakota or (b) close enough. Until recently, I would have agreed that North and South Dakota are pretty similar: Both feature that funny accent you heard in *Fargo*, both are close to 90 percent white and both like their Target stores massive. But the near total ban on abortion that South Dakota's legislature passed in February means our fraternal twin has distinguished itself.

Although the governor signed the bill into law, it is actually on hold until the fall elections and will probably never officially go into effect—unless it makes it to the Supreme Court and *Roe v. Wade* is overturned. Yet that's almost beside the point. South Dakota has long been hostile toward women who find themselves unexpectedly pregnant, and the new ban just makes a bad situation worse: S.D. is the only state

that won't let Medicaid pay for abortions that result from rape or incest, it's the first state to boast pharmacists who refused to fill emergency-contraception prescriptions, and it recently ranked last out of the 50 states in sexual-rights legislation. As one of that study's advisors said, "South Dakota's abortion law has more in common with Afghanistan than with Oregon."

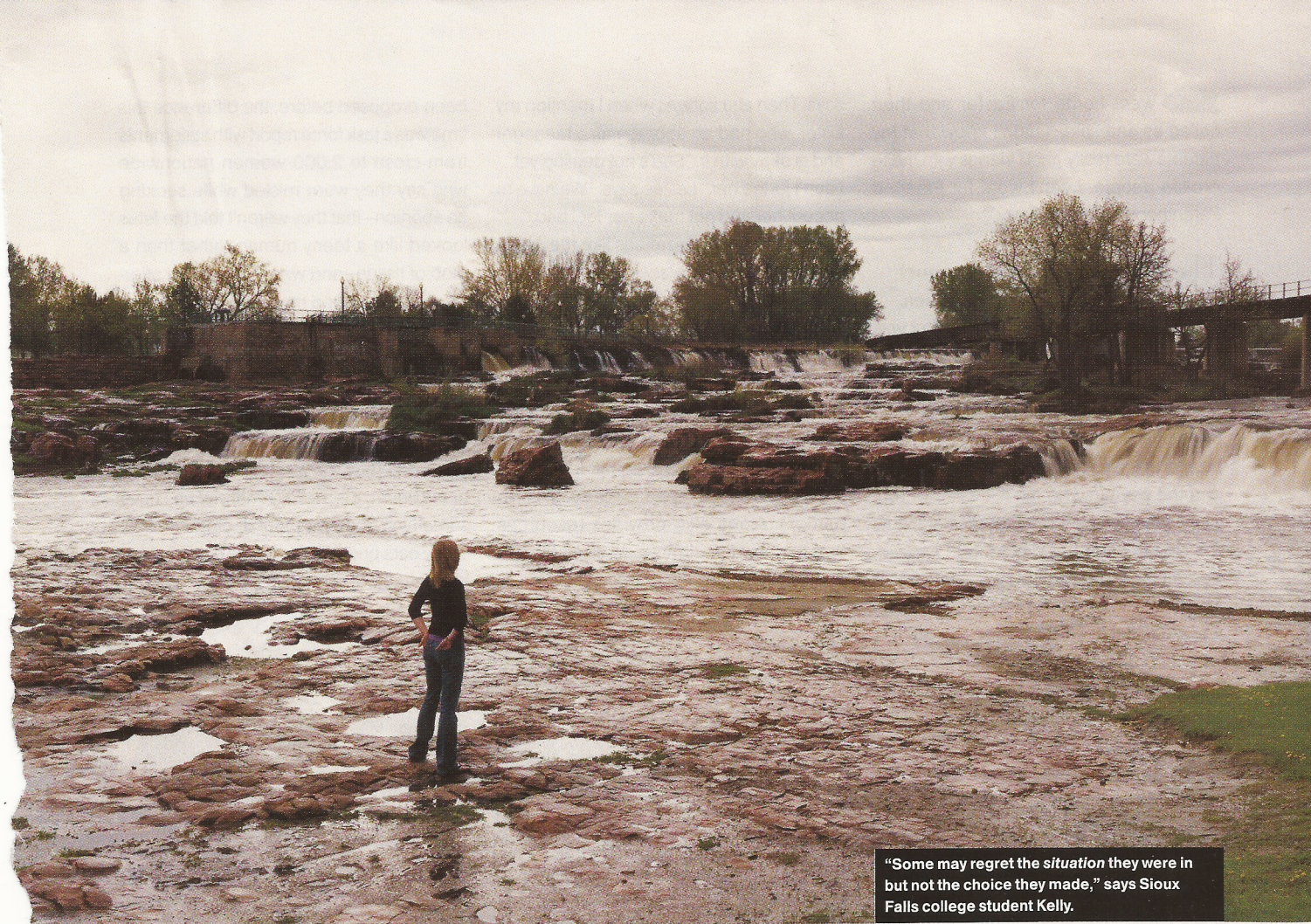
Before you start thinking, "Okay, but this could never happen where I live," back up. Fact is, many of the elements that caused South Dakota to go all Pat Robertson may already be in your state—including "abstinence only" education, a male-dominated legislature and a beleaguered abortion-rights establishment that isn't meeting women's needs. Stir in a charismatic anti-abortion activist like Leslee Unruh and before long, your state *is* South Dakota. Here's what you can look forward to.

You face nonstop shame if you have sex before marriage.

Five miles into South Dakota, amid the silos, windmills and cows, I see the first of

many anti-abortion billboards: ABORTION STOPS A BEATING HEART. A few miles later, another sign proclaims, DAKOTANS REJECT ANIMAL ACTIVISTS! OUR STATE DEPENDS ON FUR, LIVESTOCK, AND HUNTING. Apparently, respect for life does not extend to our furry friends. When I finally arrive in Sioux Falls, the state's largest city, it too is covered in billboards advertising free pregnancy tests along with "abortion information"—if one considers gory pictures of fetuses info. And one shop, Kay's Bridal, adorns each dressing room with posters that read WHAT TO WEAR FOR SAFE SEX, featuring a woman in a wedding gown.

"Just as I learned yet another clinic wouldn't help me, a truck covered with photos of dead fetuses drove by," says Kelly, 23, a senior at Augustana College in Sioux Falls. She's at the end of a story that started with a bad breakup with a longtime boyfriend last year. Kelly went to see a local doctor to go on an antidepressant. The doctor asked if she'd slept with her ex. When she said yes, he said, "For your health, you should not have sex with anyone until he is ready to



“Some may regret the *situation* they were in but not the choice they made,” says Sioux Falls college student Kelly.

put one of these”—he tapped his wedding ring—“on your finger.” Then he suggested she stop taking birth control because it might be increasing her depression.

She refused. A year later, she went to a female doctor instead. All went well until Kelly requested a prescription for emergency contraception, because she’d missed a couple of pills that month and had a potentially risky encounter the night before. The new doc wouldn’t prescribe it and instead referred Kelly to a doctor who didn’t have any available appointments for the next 72 hours—meaning Kelly wouldn’t be able to get help until after it might be too late. Frustrated, she parked in a lot to make more calls. That’s when the fetus truck showed up. “I sat in my car and thought, ‘I hate South Dakota,’” Kelly tells me.

“We call them ‘the feisties,’” says her friend Julia, 21, “people who are really outspoken and constantly organizing for abstinence.” She had her own run-in with them last year when she had an abortion at the Sioux Falls Planned Parenthood, which then was and still is the only clinic

in the state that will provide the procedure. Three protesters gripping photos of bloody fetuses approached her and said, “Don’t do this. We have families who will take your baby.” Julia went through with it and says she feels like she made the right decision. Kelly ended up finding emergency contraception at the same clinic.

Still, neither Kelly nor Julia would let me use their real names for this story. And during my week here, I can’t find a single young woman who’s had an abortion who will agree to be photographed head-on. This sort of surprises me, because a couple of years ago I worked on a documentary, *Speak Out: I Had an Abortion*, encouraging women to talk about their experiences. I’d quickly found more than 100 women across the country who were okay with using their real names and being filmed. In South Dakota, not so much.

Your gynecologist has to be flown in from a different state.

The Sioux Falls Planned Parenthood building is as generic-looking as my old

orthodontist’s office, and few people are interacting with the 15 patients in the waiting room. Today, Monday, is the only day of the week when women can obtain a surgical abortion—when a Minneapolis doctor flies in to perform the procedure. The one local doctor who used to perform it retired nearly a decade ago. Back then, some locals referred to him as “the butcher.”

I sit down with a sweet-faced, 24-year-old single mother of a kindergartner, who recently became pregnant after a one-night stand. She is aware of the ban and was surprised when she found out that the Sioux Falls clinic still offers abortions. If it didn’t, she says, she would’ve had to drive all the way to Omaha, Neb., for the procedure. That’s eight hours one way.

It’s bad enough that Planned Parenthood has to import doctors to do abortions, but Ky Guse, their director of community outreach, tells me they even have to fly in doctors from Minneapolis for regular gynecological care, like Pap smears and birth control refills. “We hired a new physician’s assistant recently,” says Ky, 26. “She continued”

continued went home for Easter and then called us and said, 'I didn't know that my parents were really good friends with these pro-life people. I can't work for Planned Parenthood anymore. Sorry.'

The only postabortion support group talks about "dead babies."

When Brooklyn, N.Y., artist Sara Woster was a teen in Sioux Falls, she prepared to be confirmed by her Catholic church. One of her community service options was to visit the Alpha Center, a pregnancy-crisis organization. "It was bright and contemporary, and the woman who ran it, Leslee Unruh, was a young, cool mom," recalls Sara, now 34. Leslee plied her visitors with two videos; the first, on David Bowie and Freddie Mercury, was about "how they were homosexual Satan worshippers," Sara says. "The irony was that I had never seen David Bowie, and I thought, 'He's fantastic!'" The second video? "A montage of bloody fetuses and babies in wastebaskets."

The Alpha Center is well funded. Along with the national Abstinence Clearinghouse, which Leslee, 51, also heads, it received a joint \$500,000 grant from the Bush administration last year. And in contrast to the Planned Parenthood building, Alpha is indeed

says. Then she softens when I mention my sister, who had an abortion as a teenager and is okay with it. "She's not dealing yet... I don't judge her," Leslee says. "We have to accept her and not make her feel bad."

At present, organizations like the Alpha Center are the only places in South Dakota where you can go to talk about your feelings after an abortion. Leslee has created a program to help women mourn their "dead babies" and installed a wall where they can leave commemorative plaques. She says that 452 women have done so (although I ask numerous times to speak to some of the women she's helped, Leslee won't give names). Alpha also provides resources that the abortion-rights side often forgets about, like diapers and a place to live.

been proposed before, the difference this time was a task force report with statements from close to 2,000 women nationwide who say they were misled while seeking an abortion—that they weren't told the fetus looked like a teeny human rather than a blob of tissue—and were devastated afterward. Leslee found many of these women, like Karen Bodle of Harrisburg, Pa., who said she "suffered from chronic depression, feelings of shame and worthlessness" and thinks "information still is denied to women." As does Leslee, who asks, "If you're raped, why don't they tell you there are so many hours before it is a baby? That you can have something done with your doctor?"

My ears prick up: Does she actually support the use of emergency contraception?



You Say

Should lawmakers be able to ban abortion?



"No, but it's important that abortion be regulated, because using it as birth control isn't fair to anyone."

—Brandi, 21, Charleston, S.C.



"It's our body, our choice. Restricting it'll just cause more crude surgery. People will abort no matter what."

—Jenna, 20, Madison, Wis.



"No, and I wouldn't vote for anyone who wanted to ban it. They shouldn't be limiting what women can do."

—Kyrstin, 23, Los Angeles

I ask Ky why Planned Parenthood doesn't offer postabortion counseling. "I'd love to have an Exhale program [an abortion hotline] here," she says, sounding deflated. "But we're in the hole already. We don't get government money. If it wasn't for the fact that we're part of the Minnesota affiliate, we wouldn't even exist."

"I don't believe in EC—it's all Planned Parenthood garbage," Leslee scoffs, caressing a 2-inch model of a baby curled up as if in the womb. "I believe in a doctor helping you before, so the egg and the sperm don't come together. Then you're not having an abortion." I ask several doctors what this magical nonabortion, non-EC procedure might be. "The only thing that I can think of is endometrial evacuation—a mini D and C," one respected OB/GYN tells me, referring to a "dilation and curettage," where doctors swab the inside of a woman's uterus. "But," he adds, "if someone is assaulted, why would you then put them through an invasive procedure when emergency contraception is cheap, easy and so effective?"

cheery with its purple decor, flowers and elegant dishes printed with the Clearinghouse logo. Leslee tells me emphatically that she can't believe someone would not regret an abortion. "They're lying," she

If you are impregnated by a rapist, you'll still have to give birth.

That goes for incest, too. Even though similar legislation for a ban in South Dakota had

Even abortion-rights activists can be kind of wack.

Soft-spoken, 65-year-old Evelyn Griesse is one of the strongest voices for abortion rights in South Dakota. Raised on a farm and not at all wealthy, she's funded more than 305 poor women's abortions, most out of her own pocket. Evelyn tells me about her own abortion 35 years ago, when it was legal in only three states, including New York. "The abortion was done in a Planned Parenthood in the Bronx," she says. It was only her second plane ride (the first was to attend a 4-H conference). "I was single, putting my sister through college, and it wasn't really a decision." Evelyn says she's never had any regrets about it. But she does note that she's hearing from more women these

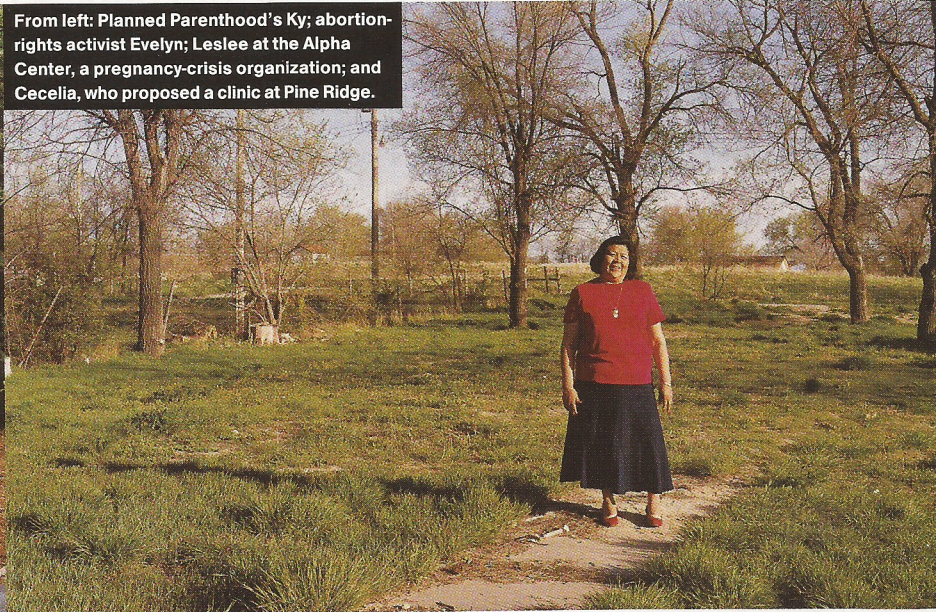
The following day, I spend a few more hours with college student Kelly, who, in a sad coincidence, has found out that she's pregnant since our talk about her emergency-contraception difficulties. Now Kelly is trying to decide whether to have an abortion. She knows that she eventually wants to have kids with the guy in question, her fiancé, but she also has a list of things they want to do together before starting a family. When I call her several days later—after she has induced a miscarriage by taking Mifeprex—she tells me it was a hard decision for her and her fiancé. "He kept saying he was sorry he wasn't happy enough when I told him I was pregnant," Kelly says. "It was difficult finding someone we could talk to."

might provide that service of abortions as part of their care," she says. Not long after I get home, I receive an e-mail from one of my South Dakota sources about a "very emotional" meeting in which tribal elders spoke out against Cecelia's proposed clinic. At press time, she'd been suspended from the tribe without pay for 20 days and was facing impeachment.

Could all this become your state? Yes. Despite a recent survey that found 60 percent of Americans don't want new laws making an abortion more difficult to obtain, there are 100 such state measures currently being considered. Fifty-two state laws restricting abortions passed last year. And Bush's Unborn Victims



From left: Planned Parenthood's Ky; abortion-rights activist Evelyn; Leslee at the Alpha Center, a pregnancy-crisis organization; and Cecelia, who proposed a clinic at Pine Ridge.



days who sound sad when they call to see if she can help pay for their abortion: "Some of them say, 'I wish I could have this baby.' And I say, 'Maybe by having the procedure now, it will put you in a better place to have children when you can really enjoy them.'"

I'm a little shocked by this. In my view, this is when you need to find out for sure whether a woman wants an abortion or just needs resources to help have the baby. Seconds later, Evelyn calls single-motherhood "immoral," saying, "Babies need both parents." This troubles me, since I'm raising my own toddler, Skuli, out of wedlock and consider doing so part of the pro-choice mandate. If this is how "our" side helps women here, I'm less surprised that the anti-abortion crew is making such strides.

The only place for a legal abortion may end up being on a reservation (but don't count on it).

Next I drive almost six hours, much of it off-road, to reach Pine Ridge Reservation, where Cecelia Fire Thunder, the first female president of the Oglala Sioux tribe, has publicly proclaimed her willingness to open an abortion clinic. Tribal governments are sovereign nations, which is why activities banned in most of the U.S.—like casino gambling and dumping nuclear waste—are allowed on reservations.

By the time I meet with Cecelia, though, she's already talked to media from *The New Yorker* to PBS, and has somewhat revised her bold offer. "People are talking about making a clinic for our people that

of Violence Act is setting the stage for *Roe v. Wade* to be overturned. The result is almost sure to be a higher abortion rate, since—as I witnessed in South Dakota—"abstinence only" values limit access to contraception, leading to more unintended pregnancies.

When I get back to Fargo (yes, North Dakota), I notice a brand-new billboard looming over busy 10th Street: AFTER ABORTION TRAUMA, it reads. NIGHTMARES? ANXIETY? CALL 1-800-450-4457! A new law similar to South Dakota's is now being floated here, and I fear people may soon ask me what the hell is wrong with my state. But by then I'll probably be able to point to the two dozen other states that aren't far behind. ♦