

## After abortion attempts, two women now bound by child



Evelyn, 25, holds a stuffed bear that weighs the same as her daughter, Olivia, at birth.



Story by [Amber Ferguson](#)

Photography by Callaghan O'Hare

April 6 at 6:05 a.m.



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HOUSTON — It had been nearly a year since Evelyn had seen Olivia in person, and she had grown nervous about a planned reunion.

When she finally arrived at the three-story townhouse where a party for the baby she placed for adoption was being held, she was greeted by Carolyn Whiteman, the 44-year-old woman Evelyn had chosen to raise her child. Whiteman held bright-eyed Olivia in the doorway.

“I can’t believe she’s gotten so big. She’s so cute,” Evelyn, 25, said, beaming with tears in her eyes.

### Deep reads

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For hours, Evelyn’s and Whiteman’s families marveled at Olivia’s eight teeth and how she crawled and grabbed their pant legs to pull herself up on her feet.

“It’s so crazy being here and looking at Olivia,” Evelyn’s dad told Whiteman. “She crawls just the way Evelyn did when she was a baby.” His gaze locked on the infant as her tiny toes gripped the hardwood floors.

But Evelyn’s dad, a retired military veteran, resisted the urge to hold the infant, rebuffing Evelyn’s encouragement until the end of the party. He was confident in his daughter’s choice but didn’t want to become attached to a grandchild he couldn’t help raise.



### **How her failed abortions fulfilled another woman's dreams** 7:38

Evelyn's repeated attempts to have an abortion were thwarted by Texas's six-week ban. This is how she gave a home to her baby. (Amber Ferguson, Drea Cornejo and Reshma Kirpalani/The Washington Post)

A year earlier, Evelyn had been consumed by guilt, depression and hopelessness, she recalled in months of interviews. Her world had shattered when two lines appeared on a home pregnancy test.

She lied and hid the pregnancy from her parents for 34 weeks and traveled to two states to try to end it. She detached herself from the baby growing inside her, ignoring the flutters of movement in her expanding stomach.

Her repeated attempts to have an abortion were thwarted by Texas's six-week ban and a pregnancy clock that worked against her. She and her immediate family spoke to The Washington Post on the condition that their last name would be withheld to protect her privacy.

Now, here she was with a woman she barely knew, visiting the child she birthed despite all of her plans.

The women, Evelyn and Whiteman, couldn't be more different.

Evelyn, half-Native American and half-Black, with curly, sandy brown hair, felt internally broken as the weight of unmet expectations and the fear of the unknown seemed to overtake her when she accidentally became pregnant. While Evelyn struggled academically, Whiteman had degrees, a community of friends, and a supportive, boisterous Grenadian family. But after struggling to find a Black sperm donor, she would stand in the entryway of the empty guest bedroom in her newly constructed home, praying and longing for a baby.

Now Evelyn and Whiteman were bound together, by a child.





Evelyn, 25, gets ready for a reunion with her daughter, Olivia, who was adopted by Carolyn Whiteman.

**E**velyn spent most of 2022 terrified.

After graduating from high school, she enrolled in a San Antonio community college. But she says she wasn't motivated, sometimes skipping classes and hanging out with people she knew weren't the best for her. By January of that year, she was on academic dismissal — for the third time — after her grade-point average dropped below 2.0. This time, she would have to sit out an entire academic year.

Evelyn began talking to a guy she met on social media. They dated for a few weeks and had casual sex.

A few weeks later, in February, the air in her body seemed to disappear as she stared at the positive pregnancy test on her bathroom counter.

A single thought swirled through her head: *I can't have a child. I can't have a child. I can't have a child.*

Her relationship, brief and tumultuous, went downhill swiftly and ended after she told him about the pregnancy. She immediately began making plans to have an abortion.

She decided not to tell her parents. Her mom (a nurse) and her dad (a former pilot) were retired military veterans who had struggled to conceive. They were in their mid-40s when they adopted Evelyn at 3 weeks old.

Although Evelyn had always felt close to them, she was petrified to tell them about the pregnancy.

“My parents are in their early 70s. I didn't have a job or any money. I didn't want to put it on them to raise the baby,” Evelyn remembers thinking. She felt ashamed.

A friend, Bianca Hernandez, accompanied her to Alamo Women's Reproductive Services, in San Antonio three days after the positive pregnancy test. Around 8 a.m., Hernandez says she watched Evelyn walk past screaming protesters holding antiabortion signs and into the clinic.

Evelyn knew about the new law. A few months before she entered the clinic, Texas had become the first state in history to ban abortions beyond six weeks of pregnancy. It was one of the most restrictive abortion laws to take effect in the United States in nearly 50 years.

Abortion clinics were bombarded with calls from women rushing to get appointments to terminate their pregnancies. Evelyn was one of them.

When it was her turn, she reclined on the exam table and crossed her fingers, hoping she wasn't too far along.

“You’re six weeks and four days pregnant,” she recalls the doctors saying.

“So it’s too late?” she asked.

Yes, she was told.

The clinic’s staff advised her to go to Oklahoma before that state adopted an abortion ban, too.

Evelyn texted Hernandez, who was waiting outside: “It’s not good.” Back in the car, she started to weep. “I have to go to Oklahoma,” Hernandez remembers her saying.

It was time to tell her parents, Hernandez told her. Evelyn refused.

Her appointment at Tulsa Women’s Reproductive Services wasn’t until mid-April — nearly four weeks later. She didn’t want to make the six-hour journey alone, so she called her birth mother, Tamela, who lived near the Oklahoma border.

Her birth mother was a teenager when she became pregnant with Evelyn. With the encouragement of her adoptive mom, Evelyn had found her on Facebook in 2016. They stayed in touch. Evelyn hoped she would be able to understand her predicament.

Tamela says she was surprised by Evelyn’s call but immediately understood her fear. “You don’t think it’s going to happen to you, that you’re going to get pregnant so young. And it’s scary. It’s very scary because it happened to me,” Tamela remembers thinking.

During the hours-long car ride to Oklahoma, Evelyn says they sat mostly silent while listening to music. Evelyn thanked her birth mother for accompanying her and keeping the secret from her adoptive parents. She remembers Tamela telling her that she was making a good decision and that ending the pregnancy

would be best for her future.

They checked into a DoubleTree hotel, and Evelyn spotted the clinic through the window.

Early the next morning Tamela watched as Evelyn maneuvered past yelling antiabortion protesters and entered the clinic. At the time, the Tulsa clinic's caseload had tripled to 500 cases per month, says Andrea Gallegos, the executive administrator at the Texas and Oklahoma clinics Evelyn went to. Most of the patients were from Texas.

The clinic's doctor estimated that she was nine, possibly 10 weeks along and handed her a prescription for mifepristone, Evelyn says. She should dissolve the pills under her tongue to start a medication abortion, according to the prescription she received from the clinic. She was told to take the remaining four pills, misoprostol, "orally" at home within 48 hours.

Back in the car, Tamela says Evelyn showed her the paperwork from the clinic and appeared relieved and happy. "They made me feel welcomed and were really supportive in there," Evelyn told her birth mother.

She didn't take the second dose until she returned to her home in San Antonio, nearly two days later. She wanted to be at home where she would have more privacy, Evelyn says. Her stomach had started to cramp. Then she saw the blood clots in the toilet. She bled for hours and had spotting for a couple of weeks.

Confident it had worked, she says she didn't bother to make the follow-up doctor's appointment the clinic had strongly recommended.



Evelyn found out she was pregnant in February 2022 and chose to give up her child for adoption after she was unable to get an abortion.

May and June passed. Evelyn started working as a fulfillment associate at Macy's. But she still hadn't gotten her menstrual cycle. She took another pregnancy test and was stunned when it came back positive.

A family friend, Yvette, a registered nurse, says she arranged for Evelyn to get bloodwork done at a hospital. At the hospital, a midwife, Monica, also measured Evelyn's uterus and conducted an ultrasound. Both women spoke on the condition that their last names be withheld because they were not authorized to speak by their employer.

Evelyn fainted when she saw that there was a heartbeat, and was in and out of consciousness for about five minutes, the midwife recalled in an interview. She was obviously in denial, Monica said. Perhaps it's time to consider adoption, the midwife told her.

“No, no, no, I can’t go through with the pregnancy,” Evelyn responded.

Evelyn says she didn’t know the pills sometimes didn’t work. It is a rare occurrence, but she later learned that 3 percent of medication abortions fail when gestation reaches 70 days, or 10 weeks, according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. The odds of failure increase if the patient waits longer than prescribed to take the second dose of the medication, several medical experts said.

The Oklahoma clinic has since closed, and Gallegos said she doesn’t have access to Evelyn’s medical records. Failure is uncommon, but the clinic advises all patients to make follow-up appointments and receive an ultrasound, she said. “Have we had patients who have failed pills? Yes. Is it the norm? No,” Gallegos told The Post. “We would try to schedule every patient to come back for a follow-up and ultrasound to make sure that everything was completed. Sometimes patients made it to those appointments, sometimes they didn’t.”

Desperate, Evelyn found a website, Aid Access, that shipped abortion medication across the country. After speaking with a doctor by phone and paying \$150, she waited for pills that were being mailed from India.

Evelyn had told the doctor she wasn’t sure the date of her last period. At the time, Aid Access prescribed medication abortion pills for patients who were up to 10 weeks pregnant, taking into account the two-week shipping time. “Aid Access trusts women to tell the truth about their situation,” Rebecca Gomperts, the company’s director, told The Post in a statement.

It may already have been too late for the medication to be effective, Evelyn says she told herself. But she was convinced that she didn’t have any other choice.

When the pills arrived, she ripped open the package and read the instructions over and over. She said she wanted to do it right this time.

For a couple of hours she had cramps but no bleeding. She emailed the

company. They advised her to take the additional pills they sent, according to the email. Still, Evelyn says, nothing happened.

She was nervous, she wrote the company in another email reviewed by The Post. “I’ve been through this before and started bleeding within two hours,” she told them of her previous experience with a medication abortion.

In the email exchange, the company offered to send more medication to a pharmacy near Evelyn, but she remembered the warning of Yvette, the registered nurse: At this stage, nearly five months into her pregnancy, an abortion was becoming risky to her health. She refused the offer of more medication.

Evelyn spent August and September in an emotional haze, pretending that life was normal around the house she shared with her parents but researching states that offered abortions later in pregnancy. She was still hanging out with friends, most of whom were oblivious to her pregnancy. During family dinners, she and her parents would chat about the latest movies, and they would stress the importance of her returning to school.

She found a clinic in Albuquerque that offered second-trimester abortions. She was past the halfway point in her pregnancy and approaching the third trimester, but she still had time, Evelyn told herself.

The clinic staff warned about the health risks of having a surgical abortion so late in her pregnancy but helped connect her to two abortion organizations that covered the cost of her plane ticket, hotel, food and the \$12,000 procedure.

“There are no circumstances surrounding your pregnancy that will make you more or less deserving of assistance,” the New Mexico Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice wrote Evelyn in an email confirming she was approved for assistance. The organization doesn’t keep abortion seekers’ information, said Janeth Orozco, spokeswoman for the nonprofit group. Evelyn’s travel documents to New Mexico list the coalition as the payee.

At the beginning of October 2022, Evelyn told her parents she was going to visit a friend across town but instead boarded a plane to Albuquerque. She called the midwife who had conducted her ultrasound while waiting to take off. Evelyn needed her bloodwork and lab results. She sounded desperate, the midwife says.

### **Behind the reporting**

Washington Post senior video journalist [Amber Ferguson](#) has written extensively about women’s health issues. In 2022, she explored the [shortage of Black sperm donors](#) and the difficulties it creates for some Black women who want to have children.

The next morning, Evelyn found herself staring up at fluorescent light panels. A nurse moved the curved ultrasound wand across her belly and tickled the long dark line that had emerged in the center of her stomach as the baby grew.

“I’m so sorry,” Evelyn remembers the nurse telling her, looking at the screen. “You are too far along, 32 weeks pregnant,” she said, pausing before adding, “We can’t help you.” The clinic’s doctors aren’t trained to perform abortions after 24 weeks, according to Southwestern Women’s Options.

Evelyn burst into tears.

Suddenly out of options for ending the pregnancy, Evelyn began to consider a future that had once seemed impossible. She would be giving birth.

Her parents were already upset she had been kicked out of school. The weight of disappointing them further and having them find out she had unprotected sex

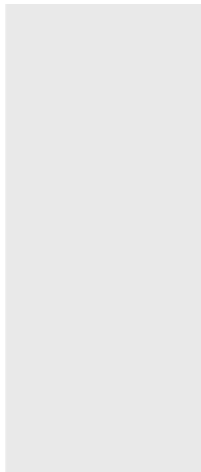


was something she had not wanted to face.

She hadn't seriously considered adoption until now, despite being adopted herself. But now that seemed to be the only option.

Evelyn says she knew adoption could be positive. Her parents had given her an ideal childhood. There were trips to Argentina and France. She played soccer and basketball before falling in love with volleyball.

She was grateful for her family but sometimes had questions. *What was her birth mother like? Did she have any biological siblings?*



When she returned home to San Antonio, she called the Gladney Center for Adoption, in Fort Worth, the agency her parents had used.

After concealing her growing belly from her parents for months, it was time to stop lying. She was starting to show.

One day, before heading to the movies for a family outing, she asked her mother to join her in her bedroom. By the time she had the courage to tell her mother, Evelyn was more than seven months pregnant. The words spilled out through tears — the abortion attempt, her fear.

Her mom, she learned, had been suspicious of the big robe she had been

wearing around the house. But Evelyn was still too terrified to tell her father about her pregnancy. So her mother did.

His head dropped in disbelief, Evelyn's mom recalled. "Go talk to her. She needs you," she told him.

Her dad gave Evelyn a long hug in the kitchen. He was shocked, disappointed and hurt. She should have come to them sooner for help, he told her.

Her parents assured her they would support any decision she made, including placing the baby up for adoption.

Two weeks later, on Nov. 10, her mom began timing Evelyn's contractions. Evelyn had initially mistaken the throbbing for gallbladder pain. She quickly packed a hospital bag. Six hours later, she gave birth.



Carolyn Whiteman, 44, struggled to find a Black sperm donor and was denied by two adoption agencies because she was single.

**T**wo hours east, in Houston, Carolyn Whiteman, a human resources executive for a chemical company, had been struggling with becoming a mother for years.

In 2020, she had tested positive for BRCA2, a hereditary gene that puts her at increased risk of developing ovarian and breast cancer. Her OB/GYN told her she would need to have her ovaries and uterus removed in her mid-40s.

She had always seen herself as a career-oriented Black woman who should have been married with kids in her mid-30s.

Now she was out of time and couldn't wait any longer if she wanted to be a mom.

At 41, Whiteman underwent two cycles of egg freezing, in 2021. She froze 24 eggs and felt "pretty lucky."

For three months, she says she meticulously searched cryobank websites daily for at least an hour. She joined Facebook groups for women looking for donors. There, she read posts from other Black women expressing the same struggle: There were hardly any Black sperm donors.

*[America has a Black sperm donor shortage. Black women are paying the price.]*

A few months after Whiteman ended her sperm donor search, her younger sister, Anika, sent her an Essence magazine article about a single woman who had adopted a baby at 49 after she too froze her eggs. Whiteman began researching private open domestic adoption, an increasingly common choice for keeping birth parents involved in the child's life.

Whiteman met the income requirements and had good references. She confidently called two adoption agencies in early 2022 but was rejected because she wasn't married.

She was devastated but contacted three other adoption agencies. They couldn't help her either. They already had long waitlists and weren't accepting applications from new prospective parents, they told her. Another door is closed, Whiteman remembers thinking.

Then a co-worker referred her to another agency, Gladney, which accepted her application. There was a need for more Black adoptive parents and it would make her an attractive applicant to many birth parents, she was told. It was expensive — \$50,000 — and took months as she went through various interviews and trainings. But she finally had hope.

Her profile went live on the agency's website in October 2022. "I will ensure you always hold an honored place in your child's life," Whiteman wrote in her letter to prospective parents. She prepared for a lengthy wait that she was told could last two years.





Olivia at the hospital (Courtesy of Evelyn)

**E**velyn had not had any prenatal care and didn't know the gender of her baby until she delivered. But the baby, a girl, was healthy.

It felt like whiplash. She had tried for months not to have the child she was silently cradling. And she says she quickly discovered she was in love.

She took selfie videos, with playful social media filters, holding her daughter. Her photo album quickly filled with videos of Evelyn bottle-feeding, learning to swaddle and admiring the baby's fussy sounds.

She named her Kaya, the same name Evelyn had been given at birth — before she was adopted.

She was becoming attached but knew the decision she wanted to make.

The next day, Evelyn chose five prospective families to interview. But after reading Whiteman's profile four or five times, she gravitated toward the woman's warmth. Evelyn admired all of the pictures of Whiteman's family and friends and how she talked about traveling, working out and spoiling her goddaughters. To Evelyn, she seemed like someone who was "ready to give a child everything."

When they met over Zoom, the women say they talked of spirituality, faith and the importance of family time.

Whiteman mentioned that she was on the local board of Girls Inc., a nonprofit that encourages young girls to become leaders. Evelyn smiled. “I was part of Girls Inc. when I was younger,” she told Whiteman.

Eight hours later, Whiteman received a call from the adoption agency.

She was about to become a mom.

She hung up, went online and signed up for an infant CPR class scheduled for 8 a.m. the next day.

The next 10 days were chaotic.

Whiteman hired a nanny and started shopping. She tested strollers and bought a formula maker.

Evelyn and her mom picked out a fluffy, light-pink dress from a children’s store for the baby to wear on adoption day. They went to a craft store and bought soft fabric with rainbows on it. Evelyn knit the fabric into a baby blanket.

#### **Adoption on the rise**

The Post spoke with 10 adoption agencies in states that have recently restricted abortion. Eight reported experiencing an increase in the number of children placed for adoption over 2023, which they said correlated with the rise in abortion restrictions.

The night before Evelyn was to turn her baby over, on Nov. 29, 2022, the women traveled to Fort Worth and met in person for the first time over a chicken quesadilla dinner. Whiteman had grown nervous that Evelyn would change her mind but learned she had already signed the relinquishment papers.

The soon-to-be mom told Evelyn she had always loved the name Olivia.

“In honor of you, I want to keep the name that you had for her. So I will name her Olivia Kaya-Simone,” Whiteman told her.

Evelyn hadn't taken Olivia home when she left the hospital, worried it would be too hard to parent her while the adoption was finalized.

In the moments before officially handing Olivia over to Whiteman, Evelyn sat alone with Olivia in a Gladney office and whispered: “I love you, I love you, I love you.” She kissed Olivia's forehead and promised she would have a great life with Whiteman.

Eventually, when she was ready, Evelyn walked into a room as her parents followed her. Nearly all of Whiteman's family was there recording the moment and taking pictures. Face red with tears, Evelyn handed her child to her new mom. The two women sat and held hands for two hours.

Their case workers allowed them some time alone. Before they left, Evelyn says she wanted to explain to Whiteman how she had become pregnant and tell her about her abortion attempts.

“I really hope you won't judge me,” she told her.





Evelyn, left, moments after she handed her daughter to her adoptive mother, Carolyn Whiteman, on Nov. 29, 2022. (Anika Whiteman)



**I**n the weeks after the adoption, Evelyn says she barely left home. She cried every day and slept with Olivia's hospital clothes next to her for comfort. Her mother held her and said it would be okay.

She was sad but confident about her decisions, including her failed abortion attempts. A therapist helped her make peace with the guilt.

Olivia was in a good place, and Evelyn would get to watch her grow up, her therapist assured her.

As she grappled with her feelings, she watched the abortion landscape that had tripped up her decision to end her pregnancy continue to tighten. Twenty states had enacted laws limiting abortion access. The clinic in San Antonio she initially went to for an abortion closed, and the Oklahoma clinic that gave her medication abortion pills relocated to Illinois.

Other women should have the same choices she had, Evelyn remembers thinking, including an abortion.

 PHOTO GALLERY

**Carolyn and Olivia at home**

+4

Click or tap an image to see all the photos.

Slowly, Evelyn's fog began to lift. In January 2023, her academic dismissal period ended, and she enrolled in classes at a community college. To return, she was required to submit a letter to the dean and wrote about her unplanned pregnancy and how much restarting her education meant to her.

She attended every lecture, went to tutoring and turned in her assignments on time. She passed all of her classes and, for the first time, earned straight A's.

"I'm going to use everything I went through to motivate me," Evelyn remembers telling her mom. "I want Olivia to grow up and be proud of me."

In the summer, she applied to a four-year historically Black college near Houston. "So pleased to hear you are back on track to continue your higher education," the acceptance letter said.



(The Washington Post)

Eleven months after giving birth, Evelyn poured buttermilk pancake mix onto a hot pan, a late breakfast for herself and her new roommate before class. She had moved into an off-campus apartment, her first time living away from her parents, and was basking in life as a college student.

She goes to the gym four days per week, attends a midweek Bible study meeting on campus and is looking for a criminal justice internship. She goes out with her friends on the weekends and hopes to try out for the club volleyball team next year.

But she and her roommate were still getting to know each other, and Evelyn hadn't told her about her pregnancy yet.

Instead, her roommate watched as Evelyn giggled in excitement about a birthday party planned for a new friend on campus the next night. She reviewed the contents of her overstuffed closet, looking for an outfit and pulling out different crop top options.

“I’m trying to shop my closet. I don’t want to spend money on a new outfit,” Evelyn told her.

But the evidence of Olivia is everywhere. Evelyn sleeps with a gray 6-pound, 11-ounce teddy bear — Olivia’s birth weight — that her Gladney caseworker gave her after she relinquished custody.

In the morning, she fluffs her hair and swipes through videos of Olivia on her phone.

She watches clips of the 1-year-old sitting in a highchair and stuffing cereal into her mouth. In another, Olivia is having her ears pierced.

Receiving Whiteman’s photos and videos of Olivia over the months had comforted Evelyn, but seeing her for the first time in a year, holding her, would be different.

She had longed for this planned reunion for months — circling the date in her spiral planner, buying a small gift.

Whiteman had bought matching mommy-and-daughter multi-print dresses for herself and Olivia. She asked Evelyn to wear a bright-orange top so that they would all coordinate.

On a sunny fall afternoon, Evelyn drove 45 minutes to the townhouse where Whiteman had said they would reunite. Her parents traveled two hours to join her. Evelyn again laid eyes on the baby she had given birth to.

 PHOTO GALLERY

## **A family reunion**

+5

Click or tap an image to see all the photos.

In the kitchen, Whiteman gave her updates about Olivia, telling her about the baby's love of Elmo, Ms. Rachel videos on YouTube and the more than 90 bows she had collected to coordinate with her outfits. "Bows are the new barrettes," Whiteman joked.

While sitting next to Whiteman on the couch, Evelyn rolled up the left pant leg of her skinny jeans and showed her a small tattoo on her ankle — a heart inside a

triangle.

“The three points represent the birth mother, the adoptive mother and baby,” Evelyn said. “The heart represents the love they all share.”

It was a tattoo she had gotten years earlier to represent her own adoption, but it had taken on new meaning.

Whiteman watched as Evelyn studied Olivia’s every feature, took Snapchat pictures, and bounced her up and down in a corner of the living room.

“The more people who love Olivia, the better,” Whiteman said as she watched the two play.

As the sun began to set, Evelyn and her parents prepared to leave. She caressed Olivia’s soft curls and gently kissed her on the forehead.

She left a children’s book written by Gabrielle Union and Dwyane Wade on the dining room table. On the inside cover, she wrote: “Olivia, With this book, I hope you will grow to love reading. I love you forever! — Evelyn.”

Leaving the reunion, Evelyn felt a flush of calm. Olivia was happy.

On the car ride home, she received a text from Whiteman. It contained details about a garden brunch. Evelyn and her parents were invited to Olivia’s first birthday party the next month, where they would play Olivia Trivia.

There was no doubt, Evelyn knew. She would be there.

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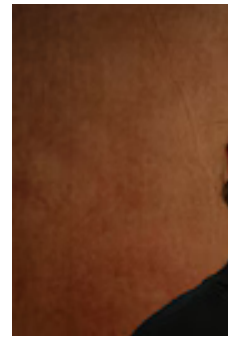
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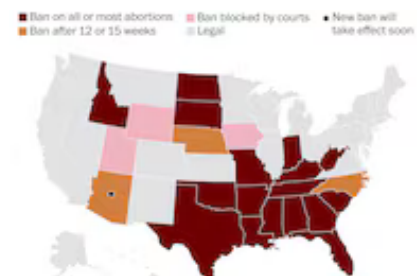
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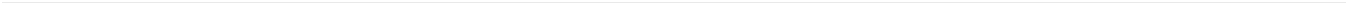





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