Tyneisha Wilder sings to her son Tayden, who is 11 months old, while bouncing him on her lap during a
Tyneisha Wilder had no idea she would lose her son, Tayden, shortly after he was born.

She is still puzzling it over. “They just came and took him. They said, ‘Ty, we gotta take the baby.’”

Eleven months have passed since then. Tyneisha still wants her son back. But their reunification hangs on the uncertainty of finding a family that would be willing to adopt both of them. It’s hope against a deadline. They have three months until Tyneisha loses her parental rights.

Tyneisha is 18 and just last year, she was diagnosed with an intellectual and developmental disability [IDD]. She says some people with her disability cannot do things on their own, but she does well in her classes at East Allegheny High School, takes care of her own laundry, handles her own hygiene and says she knows how to clean and care for Tayden.

But Tayden lives away from her. In South Hills, with his foster mom. Tyneisha’s caseworker didn’t believe she could take care of Tayden by herself, so the county Children, Youth and Families [CYF] office took him four days after he was born.

These days Tyneisha only gets to see her son twice a week during supervised visitations at CYF on Lexington Street in Point Breeze. This is after an eight-hour school day.

As Tyneisha is sharing her story, Tayden is sitting on her lap. She bounces him on her knee and starts to sing, “The wipers on the bus go, swish, swish, swish.”
ACHIEVA, a Pittsburgh agency that offers lifelong support for people with disabilities, has been working with Tyneisha since January 2017.

They hope to help Tyneisha find a family for both her and Tayden through Life Sharing, a residential program option that connects families who want to open their homes to people with disabilities. This new family would be able to accommodate Tyneisha and Tayden and provide a healthy environment for both mother and son to grow and learn.

“They said I can never live with him by myself again.”

If Tyneisha doesn’t find a family for herself and her son through Life Sharing in three months, Tayden will be adopted by another family.
ACHIEVA is searching for a family that is the right fit. Adrienne Bradshaw, Tyneisha’s Family Community Worker through ACHIEVA, says it largely depends on who volunteers to take them, much like foster care.

In January, Tyneisha was still living in a group home at Familylinks, a human-services organization that provides support to people with intellectual disabilities; now she’s been placed with her foster mother, Michelle Swanson.
Tyneisha would like to get retested for IDD. She maintains that she is more than capable to care for her son, that she has received the wrong diagnosis. Unaware of the consequences of this diagnosis, Tyneisha was not prepared to lose her son to the state.

As the weeks go by with Tayden living with a foster mom, Tyneisha has found a maternal instinct and has gotten frustrated at times. Like the time Tayden’s foster mother dropped him off without a coat or socks. It was a rainy Pittsburgh winter day, around 45 to 50 degrees.

Throughout the visit, Tyneisha kept asking that Adrienne and the other workers at CYF convey to Tayden’s foster mother her concern for his poor wardrobe: “He didn’t have no coat on, no socks, no blanket or anything. He was shivering. His little lip was moving.”
Despite her diagnosis, Tyneisha graduated from East Allegheny High School on Friday and plans to enroll in the culinary program at the Community College of Allegheny County in the fall. She plans to go to nursing school after that: “I am going to be busy. Ever since I was younger, I always wanted to be a nurse. I like helping people. I’m trying to see if I can work in a nursing home now.”

Adrienne expressed how impressed she is with Tyneisha’s growth as mother, commenting on how her skills in changing diapers, feeding, talking to and teaching Tayden have improved over their short time together.

“She’s playing with him. She’s engaging with him. And as you can see, he’s real active. He wants
"all of her attention," Adrienne said. However, she shared that she still feels Tyneisha needs "constant support" to ensure Tayden is being adequately cared for.

"Young mothers in general have difficulty taking care of a baby because of their developmental stage, so in Tyneisha's case, this is magnified because of her intellectual disability," she wrote in an email. "Having someone who can be there with her constantly as she tends to Tayden and his needs is key to her success."

Tyneisha credits ACHIEVA with helping her become a better mother.

"They're helping me learn how to talk to Tayden, change his clothes, feed him...I proved them wrong. They just thought I was incapable," Tyneisha said.
In and out of foster homes since she was 10, Tyneisha has largely relied on volunteers, caseworkers, foster parents and friends. She suffered abuse at home and has been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result — sometimes even experiencing flashbacks so debilitating, she’s had to be hospitalized. When she got pregnant at 16, she was unsure of where to go.

“My mom helps sometimes. My dad don’t help at all.”

Both of her parents live in Pittsburgh. Several of Tyneisha’s siblings also live with foster families. She worries that because the abuse she experienced is in her file, the state believes she will repeat the behavior she experienced. She fears they think she will be like her mother.

“I can’t think right sometimes when I have flashbacks. I get really bad and have panic attacks. My brain thinks too much,” she explained.

“Nobody have to be sorry [for me]. It’s what my mom chose to do.”

But Tyneisha has other family, at Michelle’s home.

It is the home where Tyneisha was preparing for prom: a warm and inviting living room with deep red colors and overstuffed couches. Pictures of Michelle's children are everywhere. Almost on every wall is the word, ‘Family.’ Michelle even paid for Tyneisha’s best friend, Mimi, to go. They were each other’s date: Tyneisha, a vision in red. Mimi, wearing a beautiful purple gown and nails to match.
Tyneisha was rather stoic as she got ready, introspective almost. Once she stepped into her gown, once she was outside and ready to get into the car her foster father had pulled up out front, she transformed. Her dress, a true princess silhouette, was provided through Project Prom Gown Giveaway, an initiative started so that underprivileged teenage girls could acquire a free dress for prom. Tyneisha tried on 10 dresses before she found the right one.

Outside, Tyneisha struck a pose, she popped her hip and smiled. Tyneisha, who is just starting her life in so many ways, whose future as a mother lies in the hands of system, climbed into the back seat of a shiny black car, her vibrant red dress billowing around her.

When asked what being a black girl meant to her, she said, “Being a black girl means a lot. It means everything. I can do everything. All I know is that I am proud to be one. And I hope

Tyneisha Wilder leaves her foster home in Wilkinsburg for East Allegheny High School’s Promenade. Promenade is a high school tradition when the couples line up and are presented before an audience of family, friends and community members. (Photo by Martha Rial/PublicSource)
everyone is proud to be a black girl.”

Brittany Hailer has taught creative writing classes at the Allegheny County Jail and Sojourner House as part of the Words Without Walls program. Her work has appeared in The Fairy Tale Review, Word Riot, HEArt Online, Barrelhouse and elsewhere. You can read more of her work at BrittanyHailer.com.

Tyneisha Wilder watches her friend and prom date pose for photographs in the lobby of East Allegheny High School in North Versailles before prom. Wilder graduated from the high school last weekend. (Photo by Martha Rial/PublicSource)

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THEIR STORIES

Tyneisha continues quest to prove herself as a parent with a disability, but she could still lose her son