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A Teenage Mother Breaks the Boundaries

After setting down her new high school diploma, Isis Patterson was holding her squirming 3-year-old son when her red graduation sash fell to the ground.

“This is like this all the time,” Ms. Patterson said, laughing as she bent to retrieve it. “I’m so happy I had him, because he just taught me so many things about myself and boundaries that are put up against you sometimes that you can break.”

Ms. Patterson, 18 years old, who graduated Friday from Manhattan’s Murry Bergtraum High School, has had to break through more boundaries than many her age. With her mother and five siblings, she has lived in an abandoned building in Coney Island, then in a homeless shelter. A teenage mom by 15, she later moved into a foster care group home overseen by New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services.

Despite these challenges, Ms. Patterson collected not only a diploma at Friday’s graduation ceremony at Hunter College, but also a scholarship from the Financial Women’s Association, an achievement award from the City Council and two gold medals from her school for academic success.

She will spend the summer as an intern at the Deloitte consulting firm before heading to Massachusetts in the fall to attend an undergraduate program for single parents at Endicott College.

“She’s an extraordinary young woman,” said Katharine Case, an English teacher at Murry Bergtraum. “A passion for dialogue and critical thinking is evident in her in a way that is utterly rare.”

Ms. Patterson appears to be defying the odds. Nationwide, only 38% of teen mothers earn a high school degree before age 22, according to 2012 figures from the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. And only half of children in foster care graduate from high school by 18, according to statistics compiled by the Working Group on Foster Care and Education.

“There’s a lot of statistics that are put on certain people that I don’t really like,” said Ms. Patterson. “You’re a teen parent and people are like, ‘Well, that’s the end of your life.’”

As a child, Ms. Patterson said, her family moved around “like gypsies,” living in New Jersey, Maine, Vermont and four of New York City’s five boroughs.

When she was about 11, the family lived for two years in an abandoned building in Coney Island, said Echo Valera, Ms. Patterson’s mother. One day, a construction crew came and boarded up the windows, and Mrs. Valera and her kids ended up in a homeless shelter.

“It was really difficult,” Ms. Valera said. “And then Isis had the baby, which made it more difficult.”

In Ms. Patterson’s sophomore year, she decided to move with her son, Kaiden Taylor, into a group home for single mothers run by SCO Family of Services.

“There wasn’t a lot of resources that my mom could provide me at the time,” Ms. Patterson said. “We had little. And we had a lot of people.”

“I’m stuck,” Ms. Patterson recalled thinking. “How did get to this point in my life?”

“I thought a homeless shelter was the lowest point and then I moved into a mother-and-child group home and I’m just like, this is just beyond. And that was my lowest point.”

Moving into the group home turned out to be “the worst but best experience of my life,” she said. It was hard to leave her family, but she found she was able to focus on herself and her son, she said.

“I’ve found myself and my own identity, and my mom has grown, too,” Ms. Patterson said.

While living in the group home, Ms. Patterson kept in close contact with her mom, who was able to move the rest of the family to a home in New Jersey.

“She’s going to change the world,” Ms. Valera said of her daughter. “I believe it.”

“I’m just someone who wants to be great in what I do,” Ms. Patterson said. “I know that there’s things out there for me.”