

"I WOULDN'T GIVE UP ON MY SON"

tamika Keith peered through the hospital nursery window. It was August 2003, and her baby, Jamal, not even two days old, was having a routine physical. But then the pediatrician called in a second doctor, and a third. Each looked on as the pediatrician shone a light into Jamal's eyes. Back in her room, Tamika's fears were confirmed: "Your son may be blind," she was told.

"We ran to doctors, trying to find out what was wrong," says this Queens, New York, mom. A cold, a respiratory infection, colic—the doctors offered up several possible culprits, but never a firm diagnosis. "My mother, who's a nurse, said, 'Don't let them tell you there's nothing wrong with this baby.'"

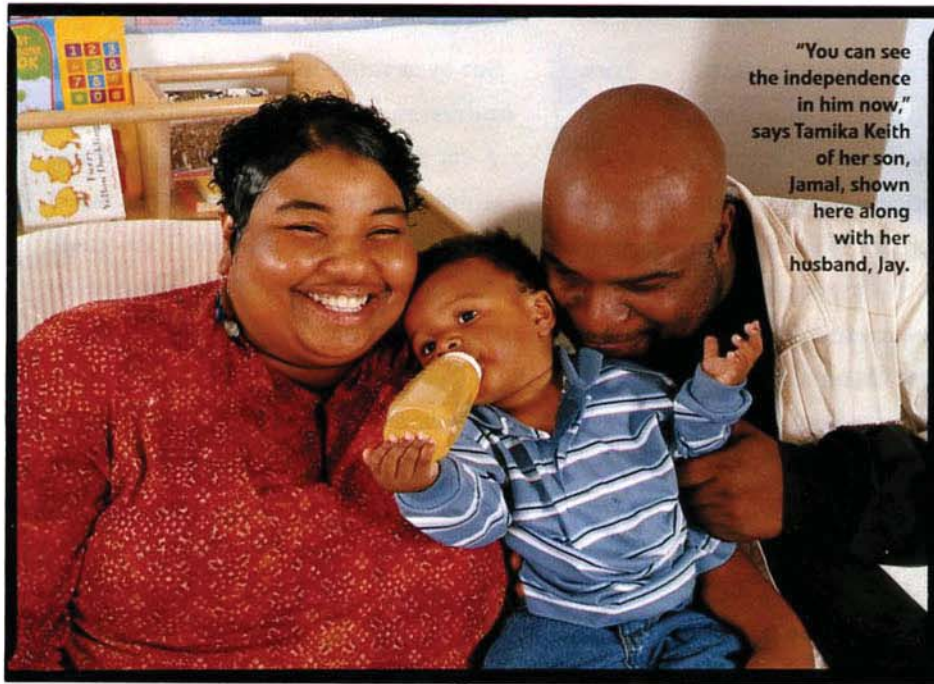
And Tamika wouldn't. She'd begun learning when she was pregnant to stand up for what she wanted with the help of Room to Grow,

Keith's sense of humor and intelligence. But she also noticed something different about the 21-year-old would-be DJ raised in the housing projects of Long Island City, New York. Jay's right eye wandered a little. Tamika, then a 19-year-old single mother who'd just moved out of a home for teenage moms, finally asked him about it. He dismissed it with a joke, saying, "When I was a kid, my eyeball was taken out and dropped on the floor."

Tamika then realized that certain parts of Jay's past were too painful for him to discuss. Still, she knew that, like her, he wanted to provide a good life for the family they planned to raise.

The couple married in 2002, and by 2003, they were expecting their first child together in a spread-too-thin situation. They were on welfare and living in a studio apartment with their kids from past relationships: Toni, now 11, Shaniyah, 6 (Tamika's children), and Shameek, 7 (Jay's son). Tamika felt they'd have an easier time making ends meet if they left New York City, but Jay disagreed.

After a heated argument one night, Tamika, who was



"You can see the independence in him now," says Tamika Keith of her son, Jamal, shown here along with her husband, Jay.

Doctor after doctor couldn't stop her baby's suffering, so this mom pushed—hard—for the answers she needed.

BY KIMBERLY GOAD

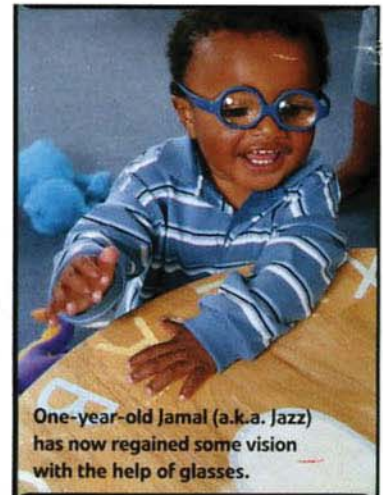
Tamika cried hysterically as she phoned her husband, Jay, who was bringing their other three kids to meet their baby brother. "He's possibly blind," she said. "Hurry up and come back!"

A pediatric ophthalmologist later told the Keiths, "It takes time for babies to develop their vision." But Tamika sensed that her son, nicknamed Jazz, was ill. He'd stare blankly at whoever was holding him. And his breathing was heavy, labored, and congested.

a New York-based organization that helps parents of babies born into poverty. The nonprofit group provides essentials, such as clothing, books, toys, and strollers—all free. But, more important, Room to Grow gave Tamika parenting information and the support to help her find crucial answers.

A rough start

From the moment she met him 11 years ago, Tamika was drawn to Jamal "Jay"



One-year-old Jamal (a.k.a. Jazz) has now regained some vision with the help of glasses.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAN HALLAM

three months pregnant with Jazz, gathered her kids and moved into a shelter, where they stayed for the duration of her pregnancy. When she was eight months pregnant, a social worker she knew told her about Room to Grow, which works with families in New York City (and starting this December, in Boston as well).

Every three months for the first three years of her baby's life, Tamika could visit Room to Grow to get everything necessary for that stage of her child's development. She could discuss her parenting and child-care concerns with a social worker. "We wouldn't have made it without Room to Grow," says Tamika. "They gave me whatever I needed, right down to the emotional support."

The first visit focused on the family and Jay, recalls Melissa Groves, program director of, and a social worker for, Room to Grow.

Says Tamika: "With Melissa, it wasn't just, 'I'm here to provide supplies.' She was there to listen and remind me I'm strong. That made me more confident."

Ultimately, Tamika and Jay resolved their issues, but bigger challenges lay ahead.

Finding answers

In the first months of Jazz's life, Groves empowered Tamika to get to the bottom of his health problems. She'd take the bits and pieces Tamika received from the doctors and research ways to help Jazz. Then the two discussed next steps. "I took all my questions to Melissa," says Tamika. "One time a doctor mentioned early intervention programs, but I'd never heard of that. Melissa referred me to a therapist who showed us exercises to help Jazz with his developmental skills."

After receiving several off-base diagnoses from doctors, Tamika and Jay had a breakthrough. Following Jazz's continued bouts of breathing problems, they brought him to a nearby emergency room, where they were told he had pneumonia. Skeptical of yet another random diagnosis, Tamika spoke with the attending physician, who was sympathetic to the Keiths' frustration.

He reexamined Jazz and diagnosed him with trachea malacia, a softening of cartilage in the throat. They tried to see this doctor again at the clinic there, but he wasn't on their insurance plan. Still, they'd heard good things about another hospital he was affiliated with, Long Island Jewish Hospital, so they brought Jazz to the ER there.

"Tell us what's wrong with our baby," Tamika said to a physician. He looked at Jazz's eyes and told the Keiths, "You're not leaving." The diagnosis: congenital cataracts. If Jazz didn't have surgery to remove them

right away, he'd be completely blind by age 1.

"I said, 'What are cataracts?'" recalls Tamika. "Then I told Jay, 'You seem to know what they're talking about.' He said, 'It's just that I've been dealing with eye doctors all my life.'"

Tamika pressed him further until he confessed: When Jay was a child, his mother went through the same medical runaround until *he* was diagnosed with congenital cataracts.

Jay—who is blind in his right eye—withheld the information because he assumed nothing could be done to cure his son, just as no one had been able to help him.

But right now, the couple had another pressing issue to deal with. The 6-month-old was so congested on the day his surgery was scheduled for that the anesthesiologist wanted to delay the procedure. He feared Jazz wouldn't be able to breathe on his own afterward.

The eye doctors, meanwhile, didn't feel Jazz had the luxury of time. A second

anesthesiologist was called in, and he said that Jazz could withstand the surgery.

The new, bolder Tamika took matters into her own hands. After listening to her baby labor for each breath, she told the doctors, "I understand his eye surgery is very important, but you have to wait. I'd rather my son be blind than dead."

A new beginning

The eye surgery was delayed again and again because of Jazz's congestion. A month later, he had the operation, which restored a fraction of his vision; with glasses, he can see the shapes of things. But Tamika never second-guessed her decision to postpone the surgery. "He's my baby," she says. "I wasn't going to take a chance."

Room to Grow played a big part in fortifying that inner strength. "I've always been a go-getting person, but they helped me be more positive, to cope."

Indeed, says Groves, "Tamika stepped up to meet this challenge, and that's given her so much confidence, which will make her a better parent. If we improve the way parents rear their kids, that can have a huge impact on how well children function as adults."

Already, it's easy to see how Tamika is passing her can-do attitude on to her son. Sitting in his Bungee Baby Bouncer, Jazz rambunctiously plays with a rattle, only to drop it—just out of reach. So he uses one foot to drag it closer to him, then both feet to pick it up and bring it to his hands.

"Jazz is going to be a great problem-solver," predicts Tamika. "He's determined—just like me. When I decide something needs to be done, I'll find all the means to do it. And that's Jazz, too." □

WHY THE FIRST THREE YEARS REALLY COUNT

"A child's earliest years have a profound impact on his or her future well-being," says Julie Burns, founder and executive director of Room to Grow.

"The foundation for emotional, psychological, and intellectual development is formed at that time."

A newborn's brain has about 100 billion nerve cells. Between birth and age 3, these cells make most of the connections that determine the child's healthy development. This process can be compromised by a lack of basic comforts, poor nutrition, and unpredictable or unstable surroundings.

"When there's deprivation during this time, study after study shows that children are at a serious deficit," adds Burns. "It's vital that *all* children have their basic needs met, emotional as well as cognitive." And Room to Grow helps parents like Tamika do just that.

For more information on Room to Grow, log on to roomtogrow.org or call 212-620-7800.