"YOU A QUEEN":
TANIYAH HARRIS JOINS HOMECOMING COURT

Story and Photos by Christina Beam
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To see Taniyah Harris bounding down the 50-yard line during the halftime presentation of New Hanover High School’s Homecoming court, you would think she had already won.

In a black sequined jumpsuit and matching glittery combat boots, she bounced toward the cheering crowd with such energy that her escort, 6’2 Hanover linebacker and cousin Zihiem Graham, had to pick up the pace.

Struts mixed with skips, a fist pumping in the air, she moved like somebody was playing her personal theme song.

And it was a banger.

They hadn’t announced any winners yet, but it didn’t matter.

Being there, being seen, was the victory.

Taniyah lined up with the other young ladies, and over the loudspeaker her name was called: Taniyah Harris, honorary Homecoming queen.

As she accepted the bouquet and ducked her head to receive the tiara, the tears began.

“I didn’t understand. She was crying, so then I started crying,” mom Monique Harris said afterward from the stands. Then, gesturing to the entourage of aunties and grandmas: “We all started crying.”

Taniyah said the tears were happy ones.

“I’m so happy, me and my family are so happy, I cried a little bit,” she said, taking an auntie’s face in her hands and planting a kiss on her cheek.
“You a queen?” another member of the entourage asked.

“Yeah!” Taniyah shouted.

“That's right!” the chorus sang back to her.

Taniyah is a senior at New Hanover, and her teacher of four years, Denise Ebbinkhuysen, was there to see her crowned.

“She's just awesome,” said Miss E, as Taniyah calls her. “She's got this spirit, she's vivacious, she's hysterical, she's got a good sense of humor, she's a hard worker.”

Taniyah has a stubborn streak like most teenagers, but Miss E is there to meet her.

If she pouts and goes in a corner, “I go over there and we do a little ‘JuJu On The Beat,’” Miss E said, bouncing her shoulders to demonstrate the hip hop dance that brings Taniyah out of a rut.

Music is the way to Taniyah’s heart, and Miss E will take any path there she can get.

Often general ed students, or students with behavioral issues, will come to the special ed classroom to help and make connections with Taniyah and her classmates.

“They think they're coming to help,” Miss E said, “But by the time you leave, my kids are giving you something. They're going to teach you more about empathy and grace and hard work and determination than you would ever learn on your own.”

Taniyah and Miss E have an understanding, Monique Harris said, a give and take of mischief and effort, teasing and coaxing.

“She brings Taniyah out of her shell,” she said, “and she just lets Taniyah be her.”

That's what any parent would want in a teacher for their child, she said.

Taniyah's next big walk will be across the graduation stage next spring.

Though Taniyah loved the spotlight at Homecoming, the visibility — and representation — counted for more than that, Monique Harris said.

“It meant a whole lot to me. I don’t think a special needs child has ever been nominated in the Homecoming ceremony, since I've known,” she said. “I loved every bit of it.”