



Down Syndrome Awareness Centers
www.gigisplayhouse.com

GIGI'S NEWS

Serving two locations

Loving a child with Down syndrome is contagious... Help us spread the love!!

Hoffman Estates
1069 W Golf Rd • Hoffman Estates, IL 60169
847-885-PLAY • www.gigisplayhouse.com

Plainfield
10052 S. Bode Rd, Unit D • Plainfield, IL 60585
630-778-PLAY • www.gigisplayhousetoo.com

December 2006

November is National Adoption Month

and what better time to spotlight some special families that have adopted children with Down syndrome! This is not only about the parents who open their hearts to adopt a child, but also about the parents who love them enough to give them up for a life they can not offer the child.

Last year, we received a call that a baby with Down syndrome, named Jessica, had died due to complications from being premature. Both the adoptive parents and the birth parents were heartbroken. We went to the wake to give them both Down syndrome awareness bracelets and to thank them for the incredible choices they both had made. They BOTH had other choices in life and they both chose what was best for Baby Jessica. We thank them for that and would like to thank all birth mothers who love their child enough to carry them to term and all the adoptive mothers across the country who have opened their hearts and lives to our beautiful children.



Kami and her mom



Gabby

The Playhouse has since helped Baby Jessica's family adopt another child with Down syndrome! Nothing will ever replace baby Jessica, but Gabby is a gift they never saw coming! The Playhouse has been involved in getting two children successfully adopted in this area!

Donna Swanson from West Chicago adopted her daughter with Down syndrome six years ago and celebrates her life everyday! On November 18th, Donna held a party at GiGi's Playhouse Too in Plainfield to Celebrate National Adoption Month. Look for pictures from the event in next month's newsletter!!!

To read Donna's story and Jessica's mom's story go to page 5.



Who wants to read???
I DO!

GiGi's Playhouse Free Learn to Read Literacy Program

was featured as a poster session at the Annual DEC conference in Little Rock, Arkansas this October! The DEC is the Division of Early Childhood for the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). Hundreds of educators, researchers and parents from around the country attend this National conference every year.

The GiGi's Playhouse Free "Learn to Read" Literacy Program currently has over 120 individuals with Down syndrome (ages 2-26) participating at the Hoffman Estates location and 20 at our Plainfield location with an active waiting list! Please call the Playhouses if you would like to volunteer to help with this incredible program! (Our next big step is to try to get speech therapists to assist the kids in the program!!)

The new Chicago GiGi's Playhouse is looking for your input!! As you know, GiGi's Playhouse is your Playhouse too!! Help be a part of your child's future!!

OUR MISSION: to increase awareness of Down syndrome by providing programming, support, and education.

RAFFLE!!!!

As you know, the GiGi's Playhouse Holiday Raffle is here!!!

This raffle is what helps us pay our rent and offer all of our activities, programs and awareness materials for free to our families! (And if we raise enough it can help us get started on some of our dreams too!!) This years prizes include:

- Private jet
- Trip to Hawaii
- Diamonds

The tickets are \$100.00 and a tax write off!! Buy yours now for the 2006 write off or in January for 2007!

Santa and his Playhouse elves will be at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange and the Board of Trade selling tickets and spreading awareness this year!!

We usually do the drawing on New Years Eve but have extended it this year to Valentine's weekend where we will pick the winner at our 2007 "Spread the Love" Gala!! Talk about a party! Rob Johnson from CBS2 will help host the event along with many other amazing people!

Call the Playhouse or go on-line to purchase your tickets!



HOFFMAN ESTATES LOCATION

These feet are made for walkin'!!

Calling all WALKERS...GiGi's Playhouse is very excited to offer this program at the Hoffman Estates location in January!

Robin Wyzinski is a licensed Physical Therapist, and she will facilitate this new activity. Robin will run this structured gross motor group focusing on post-walking skills, peer activities, music and, of course, a whole bunch of fun! Children need to be walking independently and be accompanied by a parent.

Space is limited!! You must sign up for this class and sign a waiver before you can participate. This class does not take the place of your PT!! This is a structured, fun class where everyone learns from each other!

We are also looking for more therapists to help with this program and others like it! Please talk to your therapists about volunteering an hour of their time once a month.



Leaps and Bounds has turned the kids into the "The Playhouse Performers"!

The kids did such a great job dancing that we are taking the show on the road!! Practices will be held the third Saturday of the month. You will be given a CD so you can practice at home, and you will be given the itinerary of where the performances will be. The kids did an amazing job of following directions, staying on their "X" and having a great time.

You must RSVP for this program--space is limited.



Happy Halloween!!!!

Bumble, bees, chickens, and Yoda too! Everybody came out to make new friends! We also decorated cookies, made some crafts, ate yummy food and had a parade!

What a party! The Friday Friends gang partied BIG TIME this year!

Mummy wraps, games, food, singing, dancing and lots of flirting too!!



The kids had a great time parading through the new Infiniti dealership of Schaumburg showing off their costumes! Infiniti of Schaumburg are great new friends to the Playhouse!



The 2 and under group is growing like crazy! Come by to meet new friends for both you and your baby!!

Literacy

The Hunting Ridge School in Palatine has a Back-to-School picnic every year. One of the big activities at the picnic is the bake sale. Girl Scout Troop #3720 (5th grade) was in charge of running the bake sale and deciding where the money should be donated. The troop voted to give the money to GiGi's Playhouse "Free Learn to Read" Literacy Program. Ashley Costigan's big sister, Natalie, is one of the girls in the troop. Ashley has participated in the literacy program for over a year. The students and families of Hunting Ridge raised over a thousand dollars for the literacy program! THANK YOU!!

Friday Friends...

Mark your calendars! Our annual Holiday Bowling party is December 15th at 7 p.m. at Hoffman Estates Bowling Alley (located at the corner of Roselle and Higgins Road) You must RSVP to Roberta by December 8th at 847-839-8966 to attend!!!



HOFFMAN ESTATES LOCATION

December

2006



SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
					1 Reserved 2-4	2 Literacy Program 8:00 - 10:00 Tree Trimming Party with Santa 10-12
3	4 Literacy program 10:30 - 5:30 	5 Literacy Program 9:00 - 12:00 3:30 - 6:30 	6 Literacy Program 10:00 - 2:00 	7 Open Play 12:30 - 2:00 Everyone welcome! 	8 Reserved 2-4	9 Literacy Program 8:00 - 10:00 2 & Under Group 10:00 - 12:00 HOP, SKIP & JUMPERS 12:00 - 1:30
10	11 Literacy program 10:30 - 5:30 	12 Literacy Program 9:00 - 12:00 3:30 - 6:30 	13 Literacy Program 10:00 - 2:00 	14 Open Play 12:30 - 2:00 Everyone welcome! 	15 Reserved 2-4	16 Literacy Program 8:00 - 10:00 Leaps & Bounds 10:00 - 11:00
17 Hispanic and polish group Holiday party! 1-3	18 Literacy program 10:30 - 5:30 	19 Literacy Program 9:00 - 12:00 3:30 - 6:30 	20 Literacy Program 10:00 - 2:00 	21 Open Play 12:30 - 2:00 Everyone welcome! 	22 Reserved 2-4	23 Literacy Program 8:00 - 10:00
24	25 Christmas Day	26	27 Literacy Program 10:00 - 2:00	28 Open Play 12:30 - 2:00 Everyone welcome! 	29 Reserved 2-4	30 Literacy Program 8:00 - 10:00
31 New Years at Noon party! 11:00 - 12:30						

Open Play-Every Thursday! Everyone is welcome! Stop by for pizza, pop and fun! We have volunteers to assist with the kids so the parents can hang out! It is awesome!!!!

The literacy program- GiGi's Playhouse provides FREE private tutoring to children with Down syndrome. Customized materials are provided for each individual student. The program also assists teachers and parents on how to tutor their children.

"Future" Friday Friends- Ages 6-8 only. Kids create lasting friendships through facilitated interactive play, while promoting good social skills. Each session ends with a pizza dinner in which social skills and table manners will be encouraged.

Friday Friends- Ages 18 and up only. Party with the gang! Equal numbers of peers with Down syndrome as without. Karaoke, dances, laser tag, bowling, prom, movie nights, friends and fun!

2 and under group- Families with kids 2 and under get together to play, and have fun while the parents network with each other!

Hop, Skip and Jumpers- For 3-5 year olds, this program will help promote friendships, good social skills and interactive play through fun creative activities!

Hispanic Group- Spanish speaking families gather for food, fun, friendship and education.

Polish Play Group- Polish speaking families gather for an afternoon of fun and friendship.

Reserved- Playhouse may be reserved for private play groups, parties or support groups

The Playhouse can be reserved for any Down syndrome related event. When it is available it may also be used by other groups with special needs.

Everyone is welcome at GiGi's Playhouse!

Due to the need for scheduling volunteers and acquiring supplies, reservations are greatly appreciated.
(847) 885-PLAY, or you can e-mail nancy@gigisplayhouse.org. Feel free to leave a message!

Check the website for constant updates and to see pictures of the activities
www.gigisplayhouse.org!

GiGi's Playhouse is located 3 miles West of Woodfield Shopping Mall next to Schaumburg Toyota in the Brandess Center at
1069 W. Golf Road
Hoffman Estates IL, 60169
847-885-PLAY!

PLAINFIELD LOCATION

Harvest Party

Sunday, October 29th, was a scary evening at the TOO. Some of the best Halloween costumes were on display! It was wonderful to see everyone enjoying pizza, brownies and, of course, CANDY. A big thank you to our teen volunteer group from St. Raphael's Church for their assistance.



Mark your calendars for the next gathering at the TOO. January 14th, the WINTER FEST--A Chance to Get Out of the House!! 5 to 7 p.m.



The Difference One Family Makes

Many of you already know the Schafer family: Dean, Beth, Brandon, Amanda, Joey, Evan, Ben, William and Landon. If you don't know the family as a whole, you might know Beth or might have read about her in previous newsletters. Beth and Dean's twin sons, William and Landon, appeared in the 2006 GiGi's Playhouse calendar. If you do not know them, read on, because they are people that you should at least know about.



Although they live in Chebanse, IL (just south of Kankakee), they do their best to take part in activities at the playhouse in Plainfield. They even, from time to time, make their way to Hoffman Estates. But what they might lack in attendance, they more than make up for in their fund-raising. If they are not directly running a fund-raiser, they are helping others get their fund-raisers organized, or they are making contacts with people who end up making donations to the playhouse.

In 2006 alone, the Schafer family raised over \$10,000 and brought in a donation used to purchase a new X-Box game system for the Plainfield playhouse. Their fund-raising efforts have ranged from selling calendars to holding a thrift sale. They helped set up a local Buddy Walk, and they helped an association of high school student councils organize a service project that benefitted the playhouse. Friends of their family received money for their 50th wedding anniversary and donated it to the Plainfield playhouse for the purchase of the X-Box. Not only have they raised needed funds, they have also raised valuable awareness!

Beth is not one to call attention to her and her family's efforts. She said recently, "I just want to make it clear, whatever we do, it is because we want to." This article is not meant to call attention to Beth and the Schafer family, but to express a heartfelt thank you. Beth's enthusiasm, attitude, and humility are refreshing. Her family's efforts are amazing. Beth and her family are proof positive of the difference people can make.

Thank you Schafer Family!! From all of us at GiGi's Playhouse in Plainfield.

Winter Fest

A Chance to Get Out of the House!!

Sunday January 14th

5 to 7 p.m.

RSVP to the playhouse 660-778-PLAY



Kids Matter Volunteer Award Ceremony

Mayor Pradel of Naperville and the Naperville City Council members recently honored those students who are outstanding volunteers.



Our very own **Amanda Meli was presented with a plaque for her continued support of GiGi's Playhouse Too.** Amanda is a Naperville resident and a freshman at Neuqua Valley High School. She first attended the town hall meeting in Spring 2006 and expressed a strong desire to get involved. That she has done! Amanda has helped with the BRAG literacy program and the golf outing. She serves on our Birthday Committee, and she helps recruit other teens to volunteer at the playhouse. THANK YOU Amanda for your dedication and hard work. *Your commitment to GiGi's is greatly appreciated!*

X-Box Donated

A very big thank you goes out to Wayne and Delores O'Connor. The O'Connor's celebrated their 50th anniversary this year. They received some money in celebration and decided to donate the money to purchase an X-Box game system for GiGi's in Plainfield. Mrs. O'Connor's brother had Down syndrome and passed away at the age of 40. The system will be a welcome addition to our teen group. Thank you Wayne and Delores, and welcome to the GiGi's family!!

Calling all teachers, student teachers, and therapists! Our literacy program is in great need of tutors. Please call Melissa at the playhouse for details.

PLAINFIELD LOCATION

December 2006



SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
<p>**Literacy Program is a FREE Literacy Program for all ages (by appointment only, please call Melisa at 630-904-6960 or email cleary@wowway.com) <i>We are looking for tutors and students.</i></p>			<p>All Events are Free unless noted. *RSVP to 630-778-PLAY Bring a friend who doesn't have Down syndrome</p>		<p>1 Private Play Group 12-2pm Teen-Tastic 7-9pm</p>	<p>2 2 & Under 9:30-11:00am 3-5 Playgroup 11:00am-12:30pm</p>
3	<p>4 Literacy Program 3-6 <i>By appointment</i></p>	<p>5 Literacy Program 3-6 <i>By appointment</i></p>	6	7	<p>8 Private Play Group 12-2pm Signing Time 4:30-5:30 pm</p>	<p>9 Daddy & Me 3-4:30pm</p>
10	<p>11 Literacy Program 3-6 <i>By appointment</i></p>	<p>12 Literacy Program 3-6 <i>By appointment</i></p>	13	<p>14 Intro to Sign Language 6-7 pm</p>	<p>15 Private Play Group 12-2pm</p>	16
<p>17 Hispanic Group 11am-1pm</p>	<p>18 Literacy Program 3-6 <i>By appointment</i></p>	<p>19 Literacy Program 3-6 <i>By appointment</i></p>	20	21	<p>22 Private Play Group 12-2pm</p>	23
24	<p>25 Christmas Day</p>	<p>26 Literacy Program 3-6 <i>By appointment</i></p>	27	<p>28 Intro to Sign Language 6-7 pm</p>	<p>29 Private Play Group 12-2pm</p>	30
31						

2 & under playgroup: Families with children 2 and under get together and play while the parents network with each other. Siblings always welcome.

3-5 year old playgroup: Families with children ages 3-5 get together and play while the parents network with each other. Siblings always welcome.

GiGi's Crawlers: This group focus' on crawling skills as well as fine motor skills, social interaction with peers in a semi-structured environment. Children need to be crawling and are accompanied by a parent/adult.

GiGi's Walkers: This group's focus is on post walking skills with peers to prepare children for school activities (balance beam, kicking, throwing, jumping, etc.) Children need to be walking and must be accompanied by a parent/adult.

Teen Tastic: This group usually meets the 4th Fri. of the month from 7-9pm. We order pizza for dinner and have lots of fun watching movies and playing games with each other. 6th-12th grades.

Hispanic Group: Spanish speaking families gather for food, fun, friendship and education.

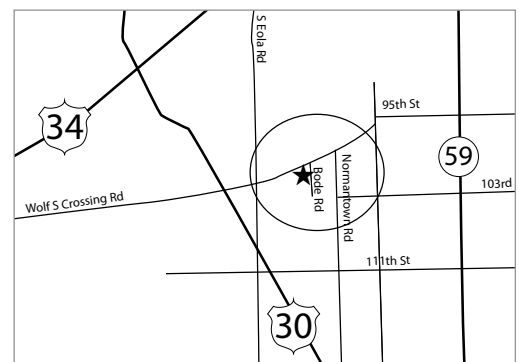
Intro to Sign Language: Come with your child to learn Sign Language. All ages are welcome.

Signing Time Group: Learn sign language by signing along to the songs from the TV series. All ages are welcome.

Daddy and Me: Dads get out with the kids and get together with other dads. All ages.

Birthday Party: All ages

10052 S. Bode Rd, Unit D
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630-778-PLAY (7529) • fax (630) 778-7519
www.gigisplayhousetoo.com



Stories of Adoption



As the holidays approach we all have so much to be thankful for. Please read these stories of hope and inspiration and see how the beauty of Down syndrome has changed their lives!

"Hi, my name is Kamille. I am five years old and my Mommy adopted me when I was only a few days old. My mommy told me a story about how I was adopted and I want to share it with you..."

One day, two women were walking down the same road. They didn't know each other, so God brought them together in the middle. They talked for a while and came to understand they had the same goal in life – to love and care for a special angel.

One day, one woman said to the other, 'I can only take care of this angel with my heart and my mind. Could you love this little girl and lead her on life's journey?' And the other woman said, 'I would be honored. This has been my lifelong dream.'

So, when the time came for the baby to enter the world, both women were ready and waiting. Everything was all set up. Through many tears, smiles and profound love and strength, she gave you to me and said, 'What will you name her?' I answered, 'Kamille, my little Kamille.'

It was then that God silently told mommy, 'I gave the gift of birth to her, but the gift of motherhood to you.'

And then my mom got to bring me home! We have been together ever since and love each other so much. We have our own best friend club and play all the time. We even go to the park, the mall and lots of other fun places! I also have a sister now, Abigail. She is almost four years old and we play and fight together all the time!

I also have brothers and sisters in my birth family – Matthew, John, Celeste and Sarah, my twin. I love all of them so much and we see each other often.

I love DVDs, especially Barbie, Shrek and Scooby Doo. I am good at swimming, love to climb up high at the park and take care of my dolls very well. I go to kindergarten in Aurora and am working on my colors,



Kamille

letters and counting. I love to read books and can even count to 13! I am full of smiles, laughter, trouble, love and the best hugs ever!"

Mom's note: I can't tell you how lucky I am and how lucky my family is that Kamille came into our lives. It was God's perfect plan to do this. I adopted her as a single parent without any problems and if you are interested in adoption – whether it be of a child with Down Syndrome, special needs or perfect health – you can do it, too. Everything went very smoothly and just fell right into place. It has been awesome to watch her develop at her own pace and get so excited about accomplishing small things. The Down syndrome community and all the love, hope and sharing that it brings is so awesome to be a part of.



I have always wanted to adopt a child. Even though I already have three healthy children, my heart always jumped when I heard stories about adoption. God has blessed me with a very loving and accepting family and I wanted to share that blessing.

In 2004 my husband, Rick, and I started working with an adoption agency. In early 2005, we were told about a possible adoption situation for a little girl with Down syndrome. We knew very little about Down syndrome.

In researching DS, I went to the Internet, checked out a DVD about the first 18 months for a child with DS and anonymously joined some discussion groups online. I found Gigi's Playhouse and the Ups for Downs group. Everyone's support was overwhelming.

Our agency set up a meeting with the birthparents. We really liked them. We respected them and their decision that was obviously fueled by their deep love for their daughter. Jessica (Jessie) Grace was born at 29 weeks and weighed 2 lb 8 oz. She was born with an AV canal, Down syndrome, and prematurity. We were thrilled to have her join our family. After getting a staph infection that wracked her little body, Jessie passed away at 4½ months old without ever leaving the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. She passed away in my arms with Rick reading her the 23rd Psalm. We just kept telling her how much she is loved by Jesus, her birthparents and us. During the last month or so, she hardly ever opened her eyes. I took comfort in knowing that when she was finally able to open them, she saw Jesus' smiling face.

We had a wake and funeral for Jessie. Our church family, The Chapel, was outstanding in supporting us. Not only did they love and pray for us when Jessie was ill, but they were there to stand by our side when she passed. I was also very touched that Nancy Gianni and Gayle Gianopulos came to the wake. I had never met them before. They brought both me and the birthmother a DS awareness bracelet. I treasure it to this day.

Jessie passed on June 1, 2005. Rick, our daughter, Sarah, and I went on the GiGi's Playhouse awareness walk that year. It was



Gabby

hard to see all the children, but we wanted to honor Jessie. The following months were difficult, but God was always present. I desperately wanted to do something, something with significance. Rick and I decided to reactivate our foster care license. In December, we not only got our first foster child, but we also got a call about a baby with Down syndrome who needed to be adopted. Because we were currently fostering a newborn, they could not consider us for adoption.

Our first foster child had just moved out in April when we got an unexpected call—the caller ID read “Gianni.” I froze when I saw it. In that instant, I was scared to answer. I guess it was the connection back to Jessie. When I did call Nancy back, she told me about a 4-month-old girl with DS that an adoption agency had called her about. I was guarded. I took down all the information she had, I was surprised again when the agency turned out to be our original agency. This was the very same child we had heard about in December! God had been saving her for us.

We soon met the birthparents. They were great. It was clear that this was the most difficult decision they ever had to make. It was just as clear that they loved their daughter very much. On May 4th, Gabriella (Gabby) joined our family. Our life will never be the same. She is a huge blessing! She is full of such joy, she just makes you smile.

We are thankful to God for allowing Gabby to join our family. We are also thankful to GiGi’s Playhouse – first for the support and awareness that helped us decide that we could parent a child with DS. Second, for

the part they played in bringing Gabby into our lives. You rock!



The Playhouse had only been open for a month and a half when we were asked to help find a home for a newborn baby girl with Down syndrome. Like other Mother’s who give their babies up for adoption they wanted the baby to be adopted locally. There are organizations across the country that have waiting lists to adopt children with Down syndrome, but there are none in Illinois. Anyway, with the mom wanting the baby to remain in Illinois the networking began! By that night we had a few families interested, but of course only one family would be perfect for this baby. It was the Vargas family. They had wanted children for years and were not afraid of the Down syndrome diagnosis. Probably because their 3 year old niece had Down syndrome and she was the light of their lives.

Here is what they have to say 3 years later!!.....“She is such a blessing. Everyday brings new hope and we see how incredibly well she is doing. She is almost 3 years old now and we know we received the best gift we could have ever asked for. Alaina surprises us constantly with her adorable personality and sweetness; we are just awed by her beauty. She has fit so well into our family and is adored by so many people. She has fantastic therapists



Alaina

that have helped her make huge strides of achievement. She is walking, saying so many words, is very curious and ever so loving. She will begin preschool in Jan. and is definitely ready for some new challenges. Alaina just captures peoples attention where ever we go.

We truly feel we could not have loved our own biological child more than our love for her is. Alaina has made us better people and has opened our world to so many things. We thank God everyday and are very grateful for our precious little angel.”

DS Support would like to send a **BIG THANK YOU**

to everyone who attended and donated to the 2006 Chicagoland Buddy Walk. We broke all records! **There were over 1200 in attendance and we have raised over \$95,000...**and we are still receiving donations. The funds will be used to support area support groups, GiGi’s Playhouse, NADS and NDSS. NDSS uses the funding for national education, scholarships, and funding research grants. *See you next year!!*





1069 W Golf Rd
Hoffman Estates, IL 60169

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**HAPPY
HOLIDAYS**

SANTA'S BACK To help us trim the tree!!

Get your pictures taken with the sweetest Santa in town!
Saturday December 2 from 10-12 at Hoffman Estates location



GiGi's Store is open for the holidays! Check out our new fleece jackets, sweatshirts, carry all and the Bella shirts for the kids! Top of the line and adorable!! Spread some awareness and look good doing it!
www.gigisplayhouse.org

Start a family tradition with us!

Every year we sing holiday songs at the Friendship Village Retirement home to over 100 of our biggest fans! They love us so much they book us over a year in advance!! It is a wonderful experience for all involved. Bring your family and show them the true meaning of the Holiday season.



Friendship Village Wednesday December 13th at 6:30.
350 West Schaumburg Road Schaumburg IL
RSVP with number of people so we can have enough sleigh bells for everyone!



Don't forget about the 2007 Down syndrome awareness Calendar "BELIEVE"!! They make great gifts!!! Please don't just give it to someone, ask them to really read it and read it to their kids! There is a beautiful message everyone can learn from!

