



Down Syndrome Awareness Centers

educate. inspire. achieve.

December 2011

Newsletter

www.gigisplayhouse.org
info@gigisplayhouse.org

Hoffman Estates
1069 W. Golf Rd.
Hoffman Estates, IL 60169
847.885.PLAY (7529)

Rockford
8801 N 2nd
Machesney Park, IL 61115
815.654.PLAY (7529)

Des Moines
10430 New York Ave
Suite A
Urbandale, IA 50322
515.252.PLAY (7529)

Fox Valley
4024 Fox Valley
Center Dr.
Aurora, IL 60504
630.778.PLAY (7529)

Chicago
3948 N Lincoln Ave
Chicago, IL 60613
773.583.PLAY (7529)

Atlanta
549-4 Amsterdam Ave.
Atlanta, GA 30306
866.946.PLAY (7529)

McHenry
5404 W. Elm St.
Suite A.
McHenry, IL 60050
815.385.PLAY (7529)

Sioux City
1551 Indian Hills
Drive, Suite 7
Sioux City, Iowa 51104
712.226.PLAY (7529)

Quad Cities
3906 38th Ave
Moline, IL 61265
309.762.PLAY (7529)

Coming soon:
New York, NY
Mexico

A Message from GiGi and the National Office...

DEAR FRIENDS,
THANK YOU FOR GIGI'S PLAYHOUSE.
I LEARN TO READ, DO MATH, CHEERLEADING,
MEET NEW FRIENDS AND PLAY.
Jessica is my BFF! LOVE
GiGi



What she didn't write here (but would have if I let her!) are the things that she tells me everyday, "I want to be a teenager, I want my license, I want to go to college, I want a job". She watches all of her favorite Disney stars

progress in life and she wants to be on that same path. She gives 100% to everything she does, but no matter how hard she tries she will still be judged by people because she wears her diagnosis on her face. Did you know that 3 out of 4 kids with special needs will be bullied? The worst part is 80% of people will stand by and let it happen. Yes, 80% (www.cnn.com). What is GiGi's doing to change this? Our national awareness campaigns and our educational programming are a catalyst for change by giving a voice to our kids, our siblings, our families, and or communities, which in turn will give a voice to anyone with a disability.

We are able to do all of these things because of people like you who support the Playhouse. Building the infrastructure to support such growth has been a challenge but our 2012 plan is full of initiatives, projects and deliverables that will ensure our success and the success of our many Playhouses to come! With that comes the

success of the children and families served by the Playhouses.

Down syndrome is the largest chromosomal disorder, yet we are the least funded. By helping individuals with Down syndrome reach their potential, we are laying the ground work for acceptance – not only for our kids but for everyone. One Playhouse, one community, one child at a time. Thank you for helping us make this happen!

Over a million people across the country have viewed the i have a voice Traveling Gallery.

- + **Thousands of kids** with Down syndrome are participating in our educational programs.
- + **Hundreds** of siblings are joining forces to show the world the potential in their sibling.
- + **Multiple** GiGi's billboards are up around the country eradicating stereotypes.
- + **THREE** new Playhouses opened around the country this year.
- + **The FIRST** International Playhouse is getting ready to open in Mexico.

Equals=

An **INFINITE** number of perceptions changed, kids being educated, communities and countries opening their hearts and minds, kids with Down syndrome being included and a better world for us all!

Read on to learn how your local GiGi's Playhouse is changing lives daily in your community!

Letter from your local President

What a great year 2011 was for GiGi's Playhouse Chicago! We began the year with a new (and newly re-energized) board, who made it their mission to ensure the lasting success for GiGi's Playhouse and its new home in Chicago's NorthCenter neighborhood. Despite having little in the bank and only a smattering of programs, every member of our new board rolled up his or her sleeves and got to work. Now, as the year comes to a close, we have, in addition to our core Literacy Program, a Drama Program that teaches teens poise, confidence and a love of the arts; Fine Motor Skills classes that use songs, fun and games to build the strength and tools for handwriting and art; and we've expanded our Open Plays to include weekend hours.

We owe a huge debt to our Program leaders: **Debby Hanrahan** and **Rachel Burke**, who head up our Literacy Program; **Mal-lory Schuh** and **Katie Yohe**, who developed our amazing Drama Program from just a vague suggestion from one of our parents, and **Rhonda Schleis** and **Katie Frank**, who crafted a Fine Motor Program from scratch that is sure to be replicated at Playhouses across the country.

Because all of our programming is free to participants, we couldn't have done this without a lot of help from our surrounding community, from the neighbors who walk by and pause to gaze at our storefront windows, to the business community who've stepped up with donations and support at every turn, and to other service organizations (like the **Belle Centre** and the Girl Scouts) who've enabled us to expand our programming through unprecedented partnerships. We couldn't have accomplished all that we have without their collective embrace and acceptance.

But perhaps the highlight of our year came in October, when we unveiled our new Window Decals, two giant mosaics showcasing the children, teens and adults who frequent our Playhouse. They are the true testament to what the Playhouse is all about: universal acceptance and unyielding potential.

Thank you all for a great year.
Aaron Baar,
2011 President, GiGi's Playhouse Chicago



GIGI's Playhouse News

Mira's Story

By Kate Szczudlo



Even before my daughter Mira, who was prenatally diagnosed with Down syndrome, was born, friends were recommending I go to GiGi's Playhouse. They were drawn in by the pictures on the windows; I was impressed with the programs that offered a promise of something great for my little girl.

Immediately upon walking in, I was surrounded by parents oohing and aahing over my child, asking me questions and wanting to hold her. When I mentioned Mira's recently completed heart surgery (and the second one coming up) several expert parents shared their own stories, reminiscing about hospital stays, angelic nurses, scary-looking tubes and early discharges. After each story, they called their kids over to show me how healthy, happy, and strong these brave children are. Before we said goodbye, there were promises of prayers and playdates, and a future community for me and my daughter.

It was an experience surrounded by comfort, knowledge, and camaraderie, an experience no Google search could possibly emulate. As soon as Mira recovers from her second surgery, she and I will be regulars at the playhouse, a truly welcoming and inspiring sanctuary.



GIGI's Playhouse News



The Benefits of Circle Time

By Gillian Marchenko

I have to admit, I was nervous approaching our first Little Hands class at GiGi's. Our daughters, Polly and Evangeline – despite both being 5-year-olds with Down syndrome – are very different. Polly loves group activities and is working on the alphabet and numbers. Evie's goals are simpler: shared attention and basic sign language, and crowds can over-stimulate. I wasn't crazy about attending class each week, either. I'm a busy mom of four kids. Did I have the energy and time to do one more thing?

At the first class, Polly jumped into circle time and quickly added her voice to a rousing rendition of the Hokey Pokey. Meanwhile, Evie was off to the side stealing quick glances at her surroundings. Before long, Polly was messing with the kid next to her, Evie was crying, and I was sweating.

I looked at the other moms standing at the edge of circle time and wondered if they could tell that I was ready to leave.

Every gaze I met said the same thing: give this a chance. I took a breath, wiped the sweat off my brow and decided to stay.

Now, weeks later, Polly has memorized all the songs, and Evangeline is a happy circle time participant. No doubt, the class has benefitted both girls developmentally and socially.

But I think I have grown the most. Every week, I look forward to talking with other parents in our own version of circle time. For an hour every Tuesday afternoon, as we discuss IEPs and potty training, I don't feel so alone as Evie and Polly's mom.

My time at Little Hands has served as a reminder that, not only are there great programs at GiGi's Playhouse to strengthen my children; there is a network of parents ready to give and receive support. Circle time is a powerful thing, both for my kids and for me.



How You Can Help

Every donation, big or small, makes a difference. Here are some ways you can help:

- \$6,000 funds an entire 10-week session (20 students) of our Literacy Program
- \$5,000 funds an outdoor awning and sign
- \$4,500 supports a spring session of our Teen Drama Class (including final performance costs)
- \$3,000 funds a color copier for us to make books and materials for all our programs
- \$1,200 supports one session of our Fine Motor Program for one age group
- \$300 funds a child through one 10-week session of Literacy or Math tutoring
- \$200 funds costumes for a session of our Drama Class
- \$100 funds notebooks and journals for our Drama Class
- \$80 funds an additional laminating machine to create materials for our Literacy Program
- \$50 funds three new parent celebration packets

As we move into 2012, we're looking to build on the momentum of 2011 to expand our program offerings and outreach. Through a potential partnership with the Junior League of Chicago, we're moving forward with plans to launch a Math Tutoring program in the spring; we'll be expanding our Spectacular Siblings program (offered in partnership with the Belle Center) to younger children; and we're making moves to greatly expand our outreach into schools, other social service agencies and underserved communities where English may not be the primary language.

We'll also be stepping up our fundraising efforts. In January, we'll be forming a grant-writing subcommittee, whose sole purpose will be to identify and apply for grants to help us expand our programming and outreach efforts. And in 2012, we'll be turning our mural into a "Sponsor Wall" recognizing our most significant donors through integrated artwork on our southern wall.

We've come a long way in a year, but we still have more to do. And you can help in any number of ways. Volunteering as a tutor, staffing an open play, or helping with school outreach are all great ways to help us continue our mission of spreading positive and accurate information about Down syndrome throughout Chicago. By helping individuals with Down syndrome reach their highest potential, we can change the outdated perceptions that may persist in the community at large, leading to a world that is empowered through knowledge, compassion and inspiration.

GiGi's Playhouse
3948 N Lincoln Ave
Chicago, IL 60613

WOW!

Check out our NEW local newsletters!
Look inside to see how far your local
Playhouse has come and how you can
help continue changing lives!

**2012 calendars
are here!** Give
a gift of love and
acceptance and
help us change
the way people see our kids!



RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

You are invited!

one night. nine cities. two countries. your voice.
save the date!

The 2nd Annual
have a voice

International Gala
Saturday, February 25, 2012

**GiGi's
PLAYHOUSE**
Down Syndrome Awareness Centers



educate. inspire. achieve.

www.gigisplayhouse.org

Venues in:

Chicago
Sioux City
New York
Quad Cities
Des Moines
Twin Cities
Rockford
Atlanta
Querétaro, Mexico

*The honor of
your presence is
requested*

Saturday February 25, 2011

Belvedere Banquets
1770 West Devon
Elk Grove, IL

rsvp_gala@gigisplayhouse.org
Hosted by Rob Johnson
Entertainment by 7th Heaven

Black tie with a rockin' edge!
*Celebrate Down syndrome,
GiGi's style!*

Go to www.gigisplayhouse.org to register!