



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!

Meet Your Local Board President!



Meet Michele Ptaszek, President of the Fox Valley Playhouse Board of Managers. Michele has been involved with GiGi's Playhouse since 2004 where she began as the volunteer coordinator for the Plainfield location. Mom to three including Vince (9), Gianna (7) and Sela (6), Michele

works full time for ComEd in Oakbrook Terrace.

Michele's inspiration is her son, Vince, who has Down syndrome. He participates in the programming at GiGi's and is a great reminder to Michele about why she does all that she does for the Playhouse! Vince is featured in the National Awareness Campaign, the i have a voice Traveling Gallery - he is the center picture and when he sees that gallery, his pride is undeniable!

What does it take to be a board member? A two-hour per month commitment attending a monthly board meeting; beyond that monthly meeting, any other time you can give each month to help our Playhouse grow. We are so proud of all that Fox Valley has accomplished since our opening in February 2009, but could always use a hand. If you are interested in becoming a board member, chairing a committee or running a group, please contact the Playhouse at 630-778-PLAY





Kathryn Smith

When you first meet Kathryn Smith you notice her great smile, friendly disposition and her eloquence. Ms. Smith is passionate about her life, is an avid reader, a successful college student and is an exciting addition to the Fox Valley Board.

She also happens to have Down syndrome.

"Kathryn really provides our board with an incredible insight and point of view...we are blessed to have her skills to round out our team" says Fox Valley Board President Michele Ptaszek.

The following is our Q&A session with Kathryn, in her own words:

- What excites you most about serving on the board at GiGi's?
I want to work with the younger kids at GiGi's because I like kids and I think it is good for them to see that a person with Down syndrome can help them learn. I also want the parents to see me and see how I got an education in school and with hard work their kids can do the same.
- What are your passions in working with children with Down syndrome – what drives you to want to work with the younger children?
In my family we have grown up volunteering to help others and now that I am a young adult, I would like to continue to help others. I know I can be a good role model for the kids at GiGi's
- Is there anything specific you wish people know about you, or what your experience as a person with Down syndrome has been like thus far?
My family has always been open with me to talk about Down syndrome. I think that it helped me understand that I had to work really hard in school and always try to do my best work. I am the oldest of three kids in my family. I take responsibility at my house. I take care of my own stuff and I can cook, but I love to bake the best.

One thing I want people to know about me is I have a really good attitude about my life. I have dreams for my future. I want to get my education and work to make money and one day get married to my boyfriend, Justin, that I have been dating for over 3 years. Right now I am studying hard to get a certificate in data entry and I take academic classes in the afternoon. I also work once a week at an office job for our State Representative Darlene Senger.

We look forward to experiencing Kathryn's work with GiGi's Playhouse Fox Valley!

Welcome Jack Foster as our new Art Class Program Leader!

Our new art group is held on the 2nd Wednesday of the month with our next offering e-x-p-a-n-d-i-n-g to include Preschoolers through 5th grade at 7:00 PM on December 14th. Come join us for kid-friendly art instruction and to complete a holiday-themed project to bring home to show off your work!

In addition to being a proud father, grandfather and uncle to his niece who happens to have Down syndrome, Foster is a professional illustrator for children's books, online children's magazines. Foster is a strong supporter of organizations that support children's development and those with special needs. To learn more about Jack, go to <http://jacktoon.blogspot.com/>

Please RSVP to the Fox Valley playhouse to help us plan for supplies and volunteers needed.



New Math Program a Success!

We have just completed our 1st year of the pilot math program and we have so many success stories! Our math program developers, Genia Latka and Beth Spenadel, have provided in-depth training sessions that included parents, tutors and educators from surrounding school districts. "Our goal was to have methods that anyone can walk away with and incorporate at home, in every day life and in the classroom!" says Latka.

Thanks to funding from our sponsors we have been able have over 150 people who have participated in the trainings, tutoring or as families in the program itself. 'We are hearing overwhelmingly positive feedback from the teachers in the district who are incorporating some of the methods and using the manipulative materials designed to reinforce the math concepts!' says Spenadel.

Our families are very interested in the math program, not only in the one-on-one tutoring opportunities, but in reinforcing what their children are learning at home, at school and discovering how fun math can be!





Literacy Success!

"My favorite part of tutoring is watching those 'AHA' moments for the children. When they make those connections and master a skill, there is nothing else like it!" says Laura, a veteran tutor at GiGi's Playhouse Fox Valley. One parent, Elizabeth, shares "My son was hitting the stage where we needed to reevaluate his academic

modifications. The school team was very interested in learning what works for us in the GiGi's program and attended a training session on modifications. By the end of the semester, he was showing progress and meeting some of his academic IEP goals!

Literacy coordinator, Pam Cahill, shares "Our program really is designed to support each child at their level, and to design a customized plan to help them form the building blocks children need to put the pieces together. The methods we use consistently show improvement and parents often share their excitement as their children learn to read!"

Part of Something Special

"Your child has Down syndrome" isn't something we were prepared to hear when our first child, Sarah, was born. We weren't in a risk category, nothing in any prenatal testing came up indicating that there was anything we should be concerned with. We were young, new parents and we really didn't know what this all meant. Thankfully, we had a compassionate nurse who congratulated us and complimented us on our beautiful daughter. She also told us about GiGi's Playhouse and gave us a brochure that we tucked away in our hospital bag.



The next few weeks were filled with a lot of the typical new baby activities, well visit check ups, sleep deprivation, diaper changes and conversations about what types of therapy would benefit Sarah and when to start them. When I finally got around to unpacking my hospital bag, the brochure from GiGi's fell out.

It wasn't until I walked in to a Family Night when I saw so many beautiful children playing together, some with Down syndrome and some without, that I realized we were a part of something very special. Yes, our daughter is beautiful, yes she is special, and yes we will have our very own unique journey with her in this life. Knowing we are not alone, and that we have other parents who have been on this road is such an encouragement to us.

Vocational Program Volunteer Recognized by City of Naperville

Abby Carter, an outstanding vocational volunteer from School District 204, received the Youth Service award from Kids Matter for her work with GiGi's Playhouse Fox Valley. "Abby is the kind of volunteer you wish you could clone" says Fox Valley Site Coordinator Annie Sloka. "She just has such a positive energy and willingness to serve others. Her enthusiasm encourages those around her to give their best!"



District 204 Vocational Director, Traci Vanlarhoven-Myers, says "What is great about our partnership with GiGi's Playhouse is that our students not only get to experience that hands-on learning with their vocational skills, but they are doing so for an organization that helps other students and they feel good about making a difference."

Since 1993, the City of Naperville has presented the Naperville Youth Service Award to recognize and honor outstanding volunteer efforts by local Naperville area students and to encourage all youth to get involved in community service. Nominations for this year's awards came from local organizations and agencies that specifically provide young people with opportunities to volunteer. These volunteer opportunities give teens a sense of purpose, provide them with valuable hands-on experiences, and ignite the volunteer spirit.

Goals for 2012

The Fox Valley Playhouse has five goals for 2012:

- To survey our families to determine their wish list for GiGi's Fox Valley
- To begin 3-5 new programs that cover a variety of age groups
- To grow our literacy & math program with new students and tutors
- To successfully fundraise in 2012 to meet our 2013 budget plan
- To bring on chairpersons for programs & education, fundraising & development and volunteer recruitment & placement.
- **Did you know** it costs over \$100,000 a year to run the Fox Valley Playhouse?
- **Did you know** that all GiGi's Playhouses are 100% donation funded?

We would like to thank all of our families for their generosity over the years.

If your child or family member enjoys one or more programs at GiGi's Playhouse, please consider volunteering your time.

GiGi's Playhouse
4024 Fox Valley Center Dr.
Aurora, IL 60504

nonprofit organization

u.s. postage

paid

schaumburg, il

permit no. 93

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 **i** 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!