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

# Newsletter



## A Message from the National Office...

### The Making of a Playhouse

Ever wonder how a Playhouse actually gets started? In New York, they are days away from opening their own Playhouse. It doesn't happen overnight, and in New York they are closing in on this milestone only after months and months of hard work, community organizing, raising of funds – and most importantly – finding the right location.

In New York they are on the brink of realizing their goal thanks to a lot of hard work on behalf of their Board of Directors and their Site Coordinator, Britt. The Board and Britt have been busy raising the necessary funds and getting the word out in their community, but faced the challenge of finding a location for their Playhouse that was in a New York City location with good visibility, relatively easy to get to, and affordable. If you know anything about New York, the visibility and accessibility of a location can be pretty easy

to find – it's the affordable part that can be the challenge.

However, we are so happy to announce that GiGi's New York is about to become a reality. New York has the distinction of becoming our 10th Playhouse to open and the first of 2012. Thank you to the Board of Directors of GiGi's Playhouse New York for their dedication and unwavering commitment to bringing the mission of GiGi's to their community.



### Why We Do What We Do

As our lives seem to get busier and busier and days seem to go by faster and faster, it is necessary to slow down, stop, and reflect on the positive impact we are having on

the lives of people with Down syndrome, the families, and the communities in which they live.

A recent story came out of our Playhouse in Atlanta that helps illustrate how the success of one little girl can be part of the vision for an entire organization.

*"My daughter recently started the Literacy Program at the GiGi's Playhouse in Atlanta. She is struggling in school with reading, and ironically, I had a meeting with her classroom teacher four days before her first tutoring session at GiGi's. Her teacher suggested the IEP goals for my daughter were too*

*lofty. One of her objectives is to recognize 40 sight words by the end of the school year. Her most current progress report indicated that she's only grasped 3 words thus far.*

*Within fifteen minutes of her first tutoring session with her tutor I knew our IEP goals weren't lofty at all. By the end of the 45 minute session she had my daughter reading a few basic sentences. I stood outside of the tutoring room with headphones on listening to the session, with my jaw on the floor, and finally, a feeling of hope in my heart. I could see the pride on my daughter's face, too. The cookie cutter approach to special education simply doesn't work for her. The GiGi's Playhouse specialized approach taken from years of research-based study on the learning abilities of children with Down syndrome did.*

*We are excited to participate in everything GiGi's has to offer our clever little girl."*

*by Christine Perkins, mother of Eliza (age 7). Elize's tutor is Kate Bruce.*

## Chicago

### Thanks To Our Young Volunteers!

We're always happy when people get involved in the Playhouse, but we're especially inspired when that involvement comes from teens and pre-teens.

We recently received a note from a group of 7th graders from Washburne Middle School in Winnetka, IL. Because one of the members of their class has Down syndrome, the class organized a week of bake sales to benefit GiGi's Chicago, raising \$346 for the Playhouse and awareness in general.

This month, we'll also benefit from having an intern, Cara Culbert, a senior at Chicago Waldorf High School, who will be working with us for three weeks as part of her senior project exploring the care and treatment of developmentally disabled

individuals from the 1800s until now.

Finally, late last year we received an e-mail from Nadia Estrada, who attends John L. Marsh Elementary School. Nadia has a 6-year-old brother with Down syndrome and has worked to get students at her school to stop using the "R-word."

We appreciate and are doubly motivated by all the work these young Ambassadors have been doing on our behalf to help raise awareness (and funds) in our community. They're helping change the attitudes not only of their peers, but of an entire generation.



## New York

### Happy Birthday GiGi's Playhouse New York City

On February 25th GiGi's Playhouse New York City opened its doors for the first time with a Grand Opening Celebration that coincided with the "i have a voice" National Gala. In March, GiGi's NYC opens for programs, including more Grand Opening Events!

As a parent or person who has given birth to anything or anyone will tell you, birthing this playhouse has been so much more challenging than we ever imagined. And the elation we feel is indescribable!

I remember the first time I saw a GiGi's Playhouse calendar. I was still "in the closet" about my son's diagnosis - I hadn't told my extended family - and the playhouse message gave me goose bumps. I understood in a way I never had before, looking at those beautiful faces of children with Down syndrome; that I could be proud of my son.

Thank you, GiGi and Nancy Gianni. Thank you, National Playhouse staff and sister playhouses. Thank you, volunteers and generous donors who have brought us to this momentous occasion.

Please come visit us in the Big Apple at 106 West 117th St. NYC, NY 10026 or write to us at P.O. Box 925 NYC, NY 10026.



## Sioux City

### 2 and Under Program

This group is growing and growing at the Sioux City location! They meet on the 2nd Saturday of every month at 10:00 am. This program promotes positive beginnings for families with an infant or toddler with Down syndrome, with a focus on ongoing support and networking for new and current families. They play with therapeutic toys, exercise balls and a variety of musical toys that stimulate the senses. They work on crawling, rolling over, scooting and some are even walking. We will be inviting Physical Therapists as well as Occupational Therapists in the future. They are also incorporating sign language during this class as well! Our Playhouse has several sign language resources that are available for check out to parents and families. There is also a fun themed craft/activity incorporated each month as well...so come and join us!



## Fox Valley

### Fox Valley Math Program

We have 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.

Thanks to funding from our sponsors we have been able to have over 150 people who have participated in the trainings, tutoring or as families in the program itself.

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



## Bradley

### New Playhouse in Bradley/Bourbonnais



GiGi's Playhouse Bradley/Bourbonnais will be opening in 2012. Our latest fundraisers have been a Barnes and Noble book fair and a Monical's Pizza Community Night. We are doing a

GiGi's Night Out Dinner this Spring. We will be doing an i have a voice Gala next year and we can't wait! You can follow our progress and get updates at our Facebook page GiGi's Playhouse Bradley/Bourbonnais.

## Atlanta

For information about all the exciting things happening at GiGi's Playhouse Atlanta, please visit our website at [www.gigisplayhouse.org/atlanta](http://www.gigisplayhouse.org/atlanta).



## Rockford

### New Program at Rockford Playhouse

With March brings the hope of Spring but at GiGi's Playhouse Rockford, we are excited to say it also brings a new GiGi's program, "Dad and Me". The very first Dad and Me program will be on Sunday, March 4th at the Rockford Playhouse at 8801 N. 2nd St., Suite 2, Machesney Park, IL.

So.....if you are a father and enjoy our Playhouse, give mom a break and come get to know other dads and their kids. Babies, toddlers, kids, teens and adults are welcome – then enjoy your Playhouse with your kids from 11:00 – 1:00. Pizza and pop will be provided. Barry, Brendan, Nate and their kids will be here to welcome you. No extra volunteers this day, just some dads and their kids. Any questions, call the Rockford Playhouse at 815-654-7529.



*Dad, Nick and son, Landon attend Rockford's 1st Anniversary Party.*

## Des Moines

### Language Group & So Much More

Anne Fessler is a Speech and Language Pathologist who is volunteering with our Language Group. "As a therapist, I enjoy seeing my students begin their education & watching them grow; socially, emotionally & academically. I believe each child's potential is limitless, despite need or disability.

I grew up in Clear Lake, Iowa. My uncle & oldest sister have Down syndrome and, four years ago, my parents adopted two 5 year old boys who also have Down syndrome.

I am hoping to grow the Language Group at GiGi's Playhouse. I want this group to become another resource for parents with questions regarding their child's speech/language development. For the children participating, this group is a time to interact with peers in a language rich environment so they may build & strengthen those speech, language & social skills."



## Hoffman Estates

### Educational Opportunities for All

For the months of February and March, Hoffman Estates Playhouse is bringing in wonderful educational opportunities for tutors and family members.

In February, for our tutors, a seminar was presented by Jill Rabin, a Speech Therapist who is proficient in American Sign Language (ASL).

In March, for all our families, Lora White will be presenting a seminar on the development of speech skills in children with Down syndrome. Lora has been a Pediatric Speech and Language Pathologist for over thirty years and works with a wide array of communication challenges and delays.

This seminar is targeted for parents of children birth – 3 years old.



## Quad Cities

### Literacy in the QC

The highly anticipated Literacy Program is now underway in the Quad Cities, and the Playhouse is full of smiles and high fives from our extremely successful students and their proud parents and tutors!

During this inaugural pilot session, there are 10 students receiving 45 minutes of private tutoring on a weekly basis for 8 weeks. Our Playhouse was so very fortunate to have trained 30 tutors and look forward to getting the remaining 20+ tutors assigned to students in upcoming sessions.



### Celebrating our first "Graduate"

The 2 & Under group celebrated their first graduate as Miss Kayla turned 3 and will be moving on to Hop, Skip, and Jumpers! Along with Kayla's birthday and graduation, she will be entering the world of preschool. The 2 & Under group and the rest of GiGi's Playhouse Quad Cities congratulate Kayla and her mom and dad, Nick and Kelli, and

look forward to watch Kayla's continued development!

## McHenry

### A Blessed Adoption

Frequently when you hear of a child being adopted by a loving family you don't think past the initial announcement. You don't hear about the legal issues, the twice monthly home visits, multiple consents, or the medical complications that are so often a part of adopting a child with Down syndrome. But those of us that have met Erin and Josh Horton and their sons, Malachi and Elijah, have

been informed of many of these details along the way. Malachi was a charmer from the start. His parents were there for him when he struggled with health complications, including many heart issues, a stroke and then subsequent brain surgery. Throughout this time, however, Erin and Josh have not been able to legally sign their names as Mom and Dad. This all changed on February 3, 2012. They can FINALLY legally

call him Malachi Horton, they can sign school forms as "Mom" and "Dad" and they can make every decision regarding him. Congratulations Erin and Josh, or should we say "Mom and Dad."



GiGi's Playhouse  
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Email [ihavevoiceproject@gigisplayhouse.org](mailto:ihavevoiceproject@gigisplayhouse.org) to schedule it in your city!

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

## Save the Date! GiGi's 5K Run & Walk

June 10th, Arboretum Shopping Center  
100 W. Higgins Road (Corner of Rt. 72 & 59)  
South Barrington, IL

