

More than 1,000 run, walk for Down syndrome

Third annual event raises money for literacy program at Hoffman Estates organization

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More than 1,000 participants came to the third annual Gigi's Playhouse 5K run and 1K walk Sunday at Busse Woods in Elk Grove Village.

The Hoffman Estates-based organization is a not-for-profit Down syndrome awareness center that opened in 2003.

All proceeds from the event will benefit the organization's literacy program.

Shari Andress, the literacy program director for Gigi's Playhouse, who also has a 5-year-old daughter with Down syndrome, said the event helps fund a growing reading class.

Skip and Gayle Gianopulos were one of the four founding couples of the organization. Their 3-year-old daughter Jessica has Down syndrome.

"Research has shown that children with Down syndrome learn to read differently than what's typically taught, and so my daughter is 3 years old and she's already reading," said Gayle Gianopulos of the reading program.

Skip Gianopulos said the organization fills a niche.

"Essentially Gigi's Playhouse really filled a gap within the Down syndrome community. There really wasn't an organization that helped promote positive awareness for Down syndrome," he said.

For Christine Maxwell, 29, of Evanston, Gigi's provided her with a challenge in the 5K run.

Maxwell, an adult with Down syndrome, gave a motivational speech before the race and then completed the 5K run herself. She trained during the past 12 weeks in the "Couch to 5K" program that Gigi's offers, where participants run three times a week to prepare.

"I liked it, it was fun. Gigi's has helped me a lot," Maxwell said.

Roberta Castion, advocacy coordinator for Gigi's Playhouse, said the event brought out a lot of people from neighboring communities.

Castion said that while the event does provide a good funding source, donations and volunteers were always welcome.

People who would like to donate their time or dollars can do so by calling the organization at (847) 885-PLAY.
