



NOV. 9, 2016

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**ACCEPTANCE IN ACTION: GIGI'S PLAYHOUSE LEADERS COME TOGETHER NOV. 2-5 IN CHICAGO AREA
FOR 'BIGGER, BETTER, STRONGER TOGETHER' NATIONAL LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE**

HOFFMAN ESTATES, ILL: In the midst of unprecedented growth, [GiGi's Playhouse Down Syndrome Achievement Centers](http://WWW.GIGISPLAYHOUSE.ORG) held its National Leadership Conference Nov. 2 to 5 in Schaumburg, Ill. Some 250 leaders from 39 existing and soon-to-open Playhouses came together to work toward further expanding outreach to the underserved population of people living with Down syndrome. GiGi's Playhouse started 13 years ago in Hoffman Estates, Ill. with one location and has experienced non-stop growth due to demand and its strategic model, which is now attracting the attention of other non-profit groups. GiGi's Playhouse provides life-changing therapeutic and educational programs for 26,000 people throughout the U.S. and in Mexico and is reaching at least 250 new families each month.

The "Bigger, Better, Stronger Together" Leadership Conference gave leaders of the individual Playhouses a chance to collaborate with and learn from the organization's National Leadership Team, corporate partners and sponsors. The conference included more than 50 general session presentations and breakout training groups – covering timely topics such as new program rollouts, literacy and math tutoring, strategies and resources for grant writing, corporate partnerships and large donor cultivation, and media relations.

The conference attracted representatives from other non-profits who came to learn how they might expand their visions and outreach and plan for a future that includes the type of significant growth that GiGi's Playhouse has experienced. "We're proud that other organizations want to learn from us and our unique model," says GiGi's Playhouse founder and president Nancy Gianni, who has been named a CNN Hero for 2016. "We've come a long way in 13 years. We're happy to share our journey and how we've been able to make a lifetime commitment to so many families while also breaking down barriers and changing the way the world sees people who are different."

Saturday's sessions ended with local musicians performing Tim McGraw's "Humble and Kind," along with members of the GiGi's Playhouse family. The song's message parallels the message of the GiGi's Playhouse #GenerationG campaign, which promotes acceptance for all. Veronica Farrell, conference attendee and literacy coordinator at the GiGi's Playhouse in Syracuse, says she felt "grateful, humbled, inspired and, more than anything, excited" to partner with her colleagues from across the country and Mexico and share ideas for "reinventing acceptance and kindness."

During an awards banquet, the following honors were given for outstanding accomplishments in 2016:

- **National Volunteer of the Year:** Erin Alexeff and Kim Fennell, Cleveland
- **Shining Star** (a Playhouse Staff member who really knows how to "Get It Done"): Kristen Sweet, Twin Cities
- **Shooting Star** (a Playhouse startup location that demonstrates exceptional enthusiasm and potential while working toward the grand opening): GiGi's Playhouse Rochester
- **Rising Star** (a Playhouse that has opened in the past year and has had an outstanding start): GiGi's Playhouse Raleigh

- **Neutron Star** (a location that leads from behind, quietly packing in all the tools and resources to do almost everything right): GiGi's Playhouse Fort Wayne
- **Star Struck** (a team that has demonstrated outstanding impact to its community): GiGi's Playhouse New York City
- **Super Star** (a Playhouse that is an example of how to do things right in so many ways): GiGi's Playhouse Phoenix
- **Hollywood Star** (a Playhouse or person that just simply needs their own category): GiGi's Playhouse Fox Valley

Some of the leading sponsors of the conference included A&E Television, Ford Motor Company, Gesture, Patterson Medical, Staples, Apple, Dignity, Insperty Lakeshore Learning Materials, LinkedIn, and more.



Photo caption: Leaders from GiGi's Playhouse Down Syndrome Achievement Centers gathered Nov. 5 to 6 in Schaumburg, Ill., for the organization's annual National Leadership Conference.

More about GiGi's Playhouse

Founded in 2003, GiGi's Playhouse is the only international network of Down syndrome achievement centers, changing lives through free programs for individuals of all ages. The organization makes a lifetime commitment to support and empower families from diagnosis to adulthood. GiGi's Playhouse also works to break down barriers and change the way the world sees people who are different, by promoting acceptance for all through the #GenerationG campaign. The goal is to have a GiGi's Playhouse in every state by 2021, targeting the underserved population of more than 450,000 Americans living with Down syndrome. The organization's national recognition is growing, with founder Nancy Gianni being named a 2016 CNN Hero. In October, she was featured on the national "Steve Harvey Show" as a "Game Changing Woman." GiGi's Playhouse survives completely on donor funds and is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt charitable organization. For more information about how you can help, visit www.GiGisplayhouse.org.

GiGi's Playhouses are located in the following cities: Atlanta; Chicago; Cleveland; Indianapolis; Milwaukee; New York; Phoenix; Bradley, Ill.; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Des Moines, Iowa; El Paso, Texas; Fargo, N.D.; Fort Wayne, Ind.; Fox Valley, Ill.; Gainesville, Fla.; Hillsborough, N.J.; Hoffman Estates, Ill.; Layton, Utah; Madison, Wis.; McHenry, Ill.; Nashville, Tenn.; Quad Cities, Ill.; Raleigh, N.C.; Rockford, Ill.; Sioux City, Iowa; Sugar Land, Texas; Syracuse, N.Y.; Tinley Park, Ill.; Twin Cities, Minn.; Westchester, N.Y.; and Queretaro, Mexico.