



GiGi's
PLAYHOUSE

Down Syndrome Awareness Centers

educate. inspire. achieve.



December 2011

Newsletter

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Hoffman Estates
1069 W. Golf Rd.
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Rockford
8801 N 2nd
Machesney Park, IL 61115
815.654.PLAY (7529)

Des Moines
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Fox Valley
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Chicago
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Chicago, IL 60613
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Atlanta
549-4 Amsterdam Ave.
Atlanta, GA 30306
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McHenry
5404 W. Elm St.
Suite A.
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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 our 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!



What a Team!

Pictured here are over 90 board members representing 11 Playhouses in 4 states! Last month, this incredible team came together for a weekend of shared learning in Playhouse best practices, fundraising, board development and much more! It was a day of learning, networking, and collaborating as, together, we talked about our vision and goals for 2012 and beyond. Inside this newsletter you will

see how your support has allowed the growth of the Playhouses to continue nationwide, reaching thousands of families, and changing countless lives along the way. You will read about stories of new

parents, literacy and math successes, and even hear from donors on why they believe in our mission. We look forward to implementing our future goals with your help and support!

2012 National Goals

- Creating Uniformity! With 11 Playhouses and counting, we are focusing this year on standardizing all of our programs and mate-

rials to be given to our local Playhouses!

- Opening 3 new Playhouses!
- Creating the National Training Center in Hoffman Estates - this will provide the model Playhouse to be used for all programs, board member, and volunteer training!
- Creating new educational and therapeutic programs to be implemented at every Playhouse!
- Continue spreading positive awareness about Down syndrome!

Look inside to see how you can help!

Your donation of any amount assists in changing lives, one person at a time!



How Your Donations Are Changing Lives!

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.

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.



The Benefits of Circle Time

By Gillian Marchenko

I have to admit, I was nervous approaching our first Little Handsclass 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.



A Literal Literacy Success!

Rebecca N. has been in the Literacy Program at GiGi's Playhouse McHenry intermittently for the past 3 years. While we followed the instructions and practiced each day with her, the 3 tutors Rebecca had were instrumental in her enthusiasm for reading. Her first tutor, Hope, was a special education teacher who tapped into Rebecca's awareness of family and places she frequented, such as her doctor and favorite lunch spot- "soup and bread, please." Next was Sue, who took a real and intense interest in Rebecca's successes each session. Last summer she was paired with Tierney, a young college student and younger sister to an adult with DS. All three tutors had a few things in common that lit up Rebecca's world; they were creative, adaptive and knew how to provide structure and limits all at the same time. On days when Rebecca wanted to get in the pop-up tent, under the desk, or on her belly, her tutors were right there with her. If she was feeling silly and wanted to throw the word cards across the room when she matched them correctly, Sue had her aim for a bucket instead –creative and yet limits were still in place. And the results speak for themselves! This past month she was evaluated and is reading ON GRADE LEVEL for the first time. We are true believers in the literacy program at GiGi's Playhouse and hope for ongoing successes.



How You Can Continue to Help!

100% Success!

Volunteer, 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!" They exceed them every time! We piloted our new Math Program this year and our assessments showed 100% improvement in every child that attended each session! Wow! Not many programs can boast a success rate of 100% - we know this has to do with the program methodologies which have been custom created to meet the unique learning style of our kids, as well as the high expectations we have for each of our students.



How YOU can help!

From \$10 which goes to support 1 child in Open Play for a month, to \$100,000 which gets your name on the new National Training Center, no gift is too small!



GiGi's Goes International!

When Malena first heard about GiGi's Playhouse, she knew it was something that her community in Mexico needed. Being in a different country and not knowing anything about running a business, she let the idea pass. But it kept coming back to her and she knew that she needed to do something about it! So she emailed Jenni at the National Office for information. Malena explains why she took action...



"It's funny I was thinking about this project and sometimes I get afraid (how am I a going to get the money, how do I start, what should I tell to people, etc.) but in my heart I know I have to do it, then your email comes... so I will continue and start calling friends, I have to take the first step."

After that day, she had her first informational meeting and over 50 people showed up! Since then, they have gotten government approval to become a legal entity and will be our 1st international Playhouse! Find them on Facebook and 'like' them!

Why I give Annually

The first time Paul and I walked into GiGi's Playhouse to make a donation, we were personally greeted by Nancy Gianni. She gave us a big hug and could not have been more enthusiastic about all GiGi's Playhouse has to offer. Though we do not have a child with Down syndrome, we want families that receive a Down Syndrome diagnosis to know that they are not alone and that there is a local Playhouse that will provide the support they need. But what touched Paul and I the most was the vision Nancy had for the future. We want to be part of GiGi's mission to make the world a more accepting place for those with Down Syndrome.

Changing Perceptions Nationally

An older man was looking at the Traveling Gallery and smiling. The Gallery, a 30 foot exhibit with portraits of individuals with Down syndrome featuring quotes in their own words, was displayed at the Willow Creek Community Church in Chicagoland this month. Julie, a friend of the Playhouse, commented, "It's a beautiful display, isn't it?"

"Yes," the man agreed. "Each person is beautiful. I didn't realize so many of their features were so similar."

Julie explained that Down syndrome is a genetic condition and that there are certain characteristics that are common to most individuals with Down syndrome.

The man asked, "Can they learn?"

Julie was taken aback by this question. While her initial response was "of course they can!", she paused and looked at this man. Clearly, no one had explained to him the abilities of individuals with Down syndrome. Perhaps, he grew up in a generation that didn't believe in the potential of all people with special needs. Julie realized that this conversation was the very reason the Gallery was brought to Willow Creek - to help this man, and the countless others, replace their outdated perceptions with an accurate picture of Down syndrome.

"Yes," she told him, "children with Down syndrome can learn to read, write, drive, work - just about anything you and I can do!"

"Wow, thank you," the man said. "Thank you."

Often, we think we live in a world where acceptance is the norm. Unfortunately, that is not always the case. Our mission is still as needed as ever and GiGi's is here to help you create that awareness and acceptance in your community as well as across the world. Please contact ihaveavoiceproject@gigisplayhouse.org if you are interested in having the Gallery displayed in your area or call your local Playhouse for ideas on how to spread awareness in your community!



GiGi's Playhouse
1069 W. Golf Rd.
Hoffman Estates, IL 60169

nonprofit organization

u.s. postage

paid

schaumburg, il

permit no. 93

Wow!

Look inside to see what GiGi's Playhouse, Inc has been doing this year with YOUR support and how you can continue to help us change 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



Venues in:

Chicago

Sioux City

New York

Quad Cities

Des Moines

Twin Cities

Rockford

Atlanta

Querétaro, Mexico

educate. inspire. achieve.

www.gigisplayhouse.org

*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!

*Rockford's Gala is 2.18.2012 and Atlanta's Gala is 3.3.2012