



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

Newsletter



national newsletter summer 2012

A Message of Gratitude...

by Richard Reilly, NYC Board member and Louis's Grandfather

As GiGi's Playhouse NYC – Playhouse number 10 in a national family of Playhouses - enters its' 5th month of operations, we are overwhelmed with gratitude.

How do we say 'thank you' to so many who have come before? Many have blazed the trail. Many have removed obstacles. How do we thank the guides who accompany us on this journey, assuring a safer passage, the promise of a destination?

We walk many paths every day. We often feel that we're doing things for the first time, until we stumble upon evidence of so much that has gone before. We soon discover that we ourselves are the new, others have been there, explored the terrain and, in fact, paved the trail that we are rediscovering.

The National GiGi's office recently visited our New York City Playhouse to help us launch our literacy program and guide our growth, as the newest Playhouse in the GiGi's family of Playhouses. Their visit to New York City was inspiring.

Nancy, when you stood on our Playhouse stage and shared your heart with our community, it was as if the stage was finally dedicated. Your presentation was from the heart – filled with all the sensitivity and personal insight we have grown to expect

from GiGi's mom, the Playhouse Founder and Director. Your New York visit planted many seeds.

Gary Masching, a man of comfortable character and exceptional listening skills, your observant and instructive critique is a catalyst for discussion and improved

performance. We look forward to your continued communication, direction, and the many things you will bring to the Playhouse in your role as Executive Director of the National Office.

Shari Andress, as the National Literacy Director and our teacher, you have unleashed such hope and excitement for the literacy of New York youth touched by Down syndrome. Your skillfully presented seminar has sent our literacy program into motion. Your knowledge and passion have made it possible for our Playhouse to pass along the joy of reading and math to many young minds. Our community will benefit from the GiGi's Literacy Program well into the future.

And to the national family of GiGi's - Playhouses across the continent who, like us, experience the joy of hope, acceptance and learning that the Playhouse brings:

We each have our own journey, but our strength is that we are on this path together. It's reassuring to know that we have each other's experience to draw on, even as some walk briskly, others help carry, others are carried – each in turn. We will all get there. We walk on the path of promise – that of a better tomorrow.

New York City is so happy to be a part of the family of GiGi's Playhouse!



When Jim Cerkleski, CEO of Clover Technologies, first started coming to the GiGi's 5K 6 years ago, he came as part of Team GiGi. This year, he decided to start his own team and share with his family a friends a cause near and dear to his heart. Jim does not have a family member with Down syndrome but he supports GiGi's because he believes in the mission of the Playhouse and has several personal friends with Down syndrome, including Christine Maxwell and GiGi Gianni.

Several weeks before the 5K, he sent out an email to his colleagues and friends and raised over \$10,000, just through one email! Jim says it best himself, "The benefit to my company was huge. It raised a sense of morale and camaraderie between our employees. It also gave us all a sense of accomplishment that we were doing our part to have a meaningful affect on the lives of others – that we are literally changing lives by raising funds to support GiGi's programs. Everyone has the power to make a difference. You don't have to write a \$10,000 check. You don't have to have a family member with Down syndrome. With technology these days, it's too easy NOT to do it – it's just an email sharing something you believe in with others and giving them a chance to make a difference." And make a difference he did! Team Clover has raised over \$14,000 to date! All funds go towards the free programs at GiGi's Playhouse and will make a difference in the lives of hundreds of children with Down syndrome. **Go Team Clover!**



**Hoffman
Estates**
847.885.PLAY (7529)

Fox Valley
630.778.PLAY (7529)

McHenry
815.385.PLAY (7529)

Rockford
815.654.PLAY (7529)

Chicago
773.583.PLAY (7529)

Sioux City
712.226.PLAY (7529)

Des Moines
515.252.PLAY (7529)

Atlanta
866.946.PLAY (7529)

Quad Cities
309.762.PLAY (7529)

New York, NY
646.801.PLAY (7529)

Opening Soon
Bradley, IL
Queretaro, Mexico

Syracuse, NY
Twin Cities, MN

A Message from the Executive Director

I joined GiGi's in late March. Not unlike many others, after many years in the for-profit world, my heart started stirring to do something more significant with my life. I believed that my experience and expertise could benefit the not-for-profit world. As a result, I left a corporate career in 2011 and sought a leadership opportunity in a caused-based or faith-based organization. I was introduced to GiGi's through a common acquaintance, began to serve on GiGi's Finance committee last year and eventually was asked to join the GiGi's team as Executive Director.

Although I have only been here a short time, I have been amazed at the character of GiGi's kids and their families. I would like to tell you about just one of our families that I have encountered to emphasize my point. My first week on the job, I was in between meetings when a mom and her daughter walked into the room. I introduced myself and asked the mother what brought her to GiGi's. Forty-five minutes later, I knew I had made the right career move.

Laura went on to tell me about their struggles with Lydia's school district. She was told that Lydia would never be able to really learn and that they should just come to accept that fact. She described how she and her husband had spent an inordinate amount of time fighting for Lydia's rights and dignity within the school district and made little headway. At the same time she told me that her son, who was older than Lydia, began to feel left out and starting acting out in school. I could see the pain in her face as she shared her struggle to balance advocacy for Lydia with proper attention to her son. As tears began to roll down her cheeks, I felt my eyes welling up and fought my own tears- to no avail.

Fortunately that was not the end of the story. Laura then came to life as she talked about how well their kids are doing now. She and her husband eventually overcame their pride and indignation and gave up their fight for justice within the school district. They began to home school Lydia in order to save their son from falling further away - and it worked. Their son is now doing terrific in school and would do anything for his little sister. And standing before me that day was Lydia, a cute, shy but quietly confident little girl. Thanks to her very dedicated parents and Gigi's, she is now reading and writing, doing math and is a "Flyer" on her local cheerleading team! Lydia is even featured as one of our star students in GiGi's Tutor Training videos! So much for "never being able to learn"!

Laura and Lydia are just one example of what we get to witness every day at GiGi's. The kids are so determined, loving and courageous and the families are strong and dedicated. I sometimes stand in the Playhouse and just marvel at how fortunate I am to serve these individuals on a daily basis!

To all our supporters and volunteers, I can't thank you enough for your partnership and hope that we have a chance to meet soon! It is your work and support that make stories like Lydia's happen every day!

Gary Masching
Executive Director



GiGi and Cub Ryan Dempster

GiGi Shines!

In April, GiGi was the featured speaker at the Cubs Care Annual Gala at Chicago's Navy Pier Ballroom. GiGi's mom (you might know who she is!) likes to describe how well GiGi performed that night. She tells how GiGi was really nervous as they entered the room. Who wouldn't be... over 1,000 people in attendance! But when GiGi's foot hit the platform, she knew why she was there and got down to business. Nancy tells how Gigi got to the podium and smoothed out her dress, admonished her mom for interrupting and knocked her speech out of the ballpark (so to speak). After the event, GiGi mingled with the athletes and high rollers as if they were not big deal (as it should be). Way to go GiGi!

awareness is working!

In part, GiGi's mission is to build positive awareness of Down syndrome. We are constantly taking calls from individuals that are inquiring about how to open a GiGi's Playhouse. We have inquiries from Illinois, Tennessee, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Iowa, Massachusetts, Oregon, Texas, Colorado, California, Oklahoma and Florida to name a few. We just opened up our 13th Playhouse with four of them in the last year!

Quad cities

New pilot inspires others:

L-M-N-O-P! Happy sounds fill the Quad Cities Playhouse on Tuesday mornings in an exciting new program called L-M-N-O-P (Language, Music, 'N Our Peeps). Heather Malli, SLP, and mom to Christian age 7 (who also happens to have Down syndrome) approached the Playhouse with her programming concept and it has been a huge success!

L-M-N-O-P is a speech/communication and music therapy program for children with Down syndrome ages 6 months to 3 years. Each week a new theme is introduced (alphabet, animals, foods, etc.) complete with signs and songs to tie in with the week's theme.

The best part of L-M-N-O-P...the children are having fun, making friends, and learning! Thank you, Heather, for so generously donating your time and passion to our Playhouse! Guess what Heather? Your vision is already spreading! The Hoffman

Estates started this program last week with great success!!



Bradley open September 15th!!!

It was one year ago that I decided to open a GiGi's Playhouse in Bradley/Bourbonnais after my daughter, Avery, was diagnosed with Down syndrome. Shortly after her birth I struggled to find a place that offered the support and accurate information that we so desperately needed. We loved visiting the Fox Valley Playhouse, but the two hour drive limited our visits.

I first established a board of 10 passionate and enthusiastic women in the community that were willing to devote their time to this amazing organization. We then spent the next 11 months fundraising. Currently, we are nearing our fundraising goal, have secured corporate sponsors and we are working on getting our playhouse ready to open on September 15th! It has been an eventful and rewarding year for the GiGi's Playhouse Bradley board, and we are thrilled to be the next playhouse to open in Illinois!



Chicago

What an amazing quarter we had at the Chicago Playhouse! From the conclusion of our first year of Occupational Therapy and Handwriting small group classes to a rousing performance of Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" by our teen drama class, we really showcased what people with Down syndrome can do when given the opportunity.

"Because of the Teen Drama Class's free play, dramatic interpretation, and improvisational exercises, Emily is blooming into a precocious and optimistic young lady," Says Anna Kwidzinski, sister of Teen Class member Emily. "Her involvement in GiGi's Playhouse is honing her critical thinking skills, and she is grasping concepts through dramatic exercises and applying them to similar situations she faces every day."



We also boosted our awareness, heading downtown to promote the Chicagoland 5K (with Nancy and GiGi herself going with us) on NBC5 and on Jonathan Brandmeier's morning show on WGN-AM radio. For the second year in a row, we had a featured spot in the kids' area of the Northcenter Chamber of Commerce's Ribfest, and we continued to spread awareness throughout the city. We also received significant donor support, with grants from Cubs Care (a fund of the McCormick Foundation), Steve and Sharyl Hanna, Kelly Chiropractic and Black Rock.

For the Fall, our teen drama and OT/Handwriting classes will resume (with the teens preparing to perform scenes and songs from "Wizard of Oz," and we're excited to launch our math tutoring in the Fall, as well as introducing some opportunities for adults and parents.

McHenry

This past June we held our 4th annual Hawgs and Hot Rods Ice Cream Poker Run. It was sponsored by the McHenry County Road Pirates and the Woodstock Harley Davidson Store in Woodstock. Over 100 bikes and passengers set off on a hot Sunday to visit various ice cream shops, collect their poker hand and raise money for our playhouse. While the riders were gone, it gave time for the cars entered in the car show to get all the attention from customers and families. The families that came got some welcome relief with a jumpy house, face painting and musical entertainment, as well as food and drink. Despite the dire weather predictions, it was smooth sailing the entire way for all of the riders. When the bikers returned, they entered for a chance at over 60 raffle prizes and silent auction items. Every year we are supported by some of the same bikers and their friends as well as new ones. We thank each and every one for the continued support and a fun day for all.



This is exactly what the world needs! Thank you for your passion and love, not just for your family but for all of us. You are an inspiration to all. I live in Trumbull CT and I can't wait to visit the NYC location with my family.



Genia Latka and Beth Spenadel are the architects behind creating our Math program. They are both educators and parents of children with Down syndrome. They will also be presenting the math program. We are so blessed to have these passionate and determined women on our team!!

Hoffman

The Hoffman Estates Playhouse has been very busy with the hiring of full-time Site Coordinator Lori Baker! Lori has been meeting our amazing families and connecting with volunteers both new and those who have volunteered for many years. Adding new programs and rejuvenating current programs is a focus for Lori.

We are piloting a new program from our Quad Cities location called L-M-N-O-P (Language, Music 'N Our Peeps) - which includes Sign language, music, and language stimulation strategies for infants and young children (6-36 months) with Down syndrome. Rebecca Morris, a new volunteer with a background in speech-language pathology is very excited to lead this program and meet our wonderful families!

Reaching out to our families to increase attendance at our programs has been very successful! Our Open Play and New Parent Group numbers are skyrocketing and we hope the same will happen with all of our programs. We are so excited to have new program leader Samantha Slager, a special education teacher bringing new life to our Hop, Skip & Jumpers Program starting in August.

Our families enjoyed participating in the 5k Fun Run and Walk along with the Kids Dash on June 10, 2012. It was a wonderful day spent enjoying each other's company while helping support Playhouse programming. Highlights of the day included a visit from Celebrity Lauren Potter from the television show Glee, and great entertainment from our very own Gems Cheerleading group! A big thank you to Hoffman President and TEAM Oli's Marachas leader, Jamie Rios, as her team won first place and raised almost \$10,000!!

We love seeing our families visit the Playhouse to participate in programs, make new friends, and share information.

A grant from the Coleman Foundation has allowed us to create the much needed training videos for our educational programming!!!

The videos, Teaching the Learner with Down syndrome, a Training video for the GiGi's Playhouse Literacy Program and a Training video for the GiGi's Playhouse Math Program will be invaluable to our tutors, parents and educators. Shari Andress, an educator, developmental therapist and the creator of our literacy program (she is also the mother of a child with DS) is travelling from Playhouse to Playhouse to do workshops and present on these videos.

Sioux City Gets a Facelift

This summer, the Sioux City GiGi's Playhouse has been undergoing a complete renovation! The Literacy and Math rooms were in desperate need of some changes! So, after a few walls were torn down, 2 new, sound-proof rooms were built! They are now complete with all the bells and whistles to make our tutoring program what it needed from the start! We have a larger space to accommodate play groups and a meeting area for Board meetings and parent groups. We will be celebrating all these wonderful changes on July 26, 2012 at an Open House from 5:00-7:00pm. Nancy and GiGi Gianni will be in town to join in the festivities!!! Come on over to GiGi's Playhouse, enjoy some refreshments and take a peek at what we've been up to! We are also scheduling the Fall Literacy program now as well...so email us at literacysc@gigisplayhouse.org



Rockford

The Teens have just about taken over our playhouse this summer in the Rockford Playhouse.... In a very good way! We knew we wanted to offer our Teen Tastics, ages 13 – 19 yrs of age, more time at the playhouse this summer. We began by asking interns to be the front leaders of the programs and have they been busy! This program is meeting for 9 weeks on Wednesdays 12:00 – 5:00 and is filled with Teen Mentors, Volunteers and local Community Leaders, all helping to make an impact on our Teen Tastics. We set 3 goals to accomplish this Summer with our Teen Tastic Teen Time Program.

#1 Goal - Life Skills such as cooking, cleaning and good hygiene

#2 Goal – Activities – Physical and Creative such as scooter races, water balloon toss, art projects, watching movies and playing games

#3 Goal – Education (subliminal at times) such as measuring and reading while cooking, money management while buying your way into a movie, even using the correct denominations as they purchased their popcorn and candy for the movies. Thanks

to BMO Harris Bank in Rockford for providing a lesson and practice tools on money!

Yes, the Teens have taken over our playhouse with purpose, zest and very intentional time spent together in Summer 2012!



Thank you from a parent..

I just have to thank you again for fitting Kyle into the summer literacy program. We had our first session yesterday and it was just absolutely, positively wonderful. Claudia is just amazing. Kyle and I both learned so much in just an hour. I know that he is going to gain so much from this program and I've already learned some great tips for helping him get there.

Thanks again!

Atlanta

Recently, GiGi's Playhouse of Atlanta received three brand new iPads to be used as additional tools in our new and growing literacy-tutoring program! With the help of several generous 2012 Gala donors, we received the funds needed to purchase the iPads and load them with lots of great apps. All of the iPad apps are targeted for a variety of ages and skill levels in order to practice and learn new literacy skills. We believe this exciting new technology will grow with us and allow us endless educational tools, all at our fingertips. As a tutor, I can say that all three of my students can't wait to tap away at the various games that make learning so much fun. We still use the tried and true methods, and also involve movement in our sessions, but I don't think anyone can deny that the iPads are a great new asset and resource! Thanks again to our amazing donors, volunteers and tutors!!!



Syracuse Update

We have come a long way since our first board meeting in January. Our goal at that time was to have each board member raise \$1,000 by mid-May. Well, it's early July and we have far surpassed our early expectations. We have raised a grand total of \$34K so far, including two grants from the Allyn Foundation (\$10K) and the Reisman Foundation (\$7K). Both organizations were willing to take a chance on our startup and have expressed interest in continuing to support our cause in the future. Aside from other private donations, we partnered with the Russo family during the silent auction portion of their annual golf tournament and also held a garage sale, both of which will continue to be annual fundraising events. Our first annual 5K fun run and walk, scheduled for October 20th, 2012, is our next big event.

We have made significant strides in community awareness by participating in two community parades for Memorial Day and the Fourth of July. We also recently had an article written about our startup in Syracuse Post Standard and Ally Donofrio (board president) and her daughter Addison were interviewed on Bridge Street, which is a local morning television program. We are working hard to open our Playhouse in October, to coincide with Down syndrome awareness month. We have selected a space in the community wing of a local mall and are currently negotiating a 3-year lease. The build-out for our space, which was designed with the help of Todd Lewis, is going to be performed by the Silver Hammers, a local group of retired carpenters. With the help of another generous donor, Jack Werksman, we hope to have our space fully furnished.

We want to thank everyone who has contributed time, money, and support towards our endeavor.



Twin Cities new playhouse orientation and training at the Hoffman Playhouse with Nancy Gianni and Gary Masching

Twin Cities

We are so excited to open GiGi's Playhouse Twin Cities! Our Board has been meeting, planning, and fundraising for the past 10 months and we plan to have our location open this coming January! Our Board training in Chicago at the end of April helped us immensely! We are looking forward to our VIP 'Friendraising' Event taking place on July 24. It will be a great opportunity to meet potential volunteers. We are also in the process of site selection – a very rewarding step in the process. See you soon!



Fox Valley & Best Buy "Tech Talk"

"When we met your team and saw how passionate they were, and we met the teens in your program, we wanted to get involved and really connect with an agency that we could build a relationship with...to support a cause our team felt passionate about!" says Aurora Best Buy Assistant Manager, Mike Remkus.

The Aurora Best Buy store team members have been involved with the Fox Valley playhouse for a few years. They recently volunteered to provide training and teach our teens and their parents about technology available to them at a "Tech Talk" seminar. From iPads to internet safety, parents and teens came to tap in to the expert knowledge base and learned how to harness technology for their teens.

Teen Tastic group leader, Marissa Yelenosky adds, "It was wonderful to see the interaction of the teens with each other and the Best Buy team rolling up their sleeves and really connecting with our participants. When Best Buy generously donated an X-box Kinect to our Playhouse to help support ways to be physically active, that was an amazing and very welcome surprise for our group! This group of volunteers clearly has such compassion and enthusiasm for our teens."

GiGi's Playhouse Teen Tastic programs integrate teenagers with and without Down syndrome and provide opportunities to learn, grow and enhance life experiences. GiGi's Playhouse is currently seeking teen mentors and adult volunteers to be a part of these exciting, socially and educationally focused programs.



Mexico



GiGi's Mexico is continuing to work hard to get their Playhouse up and running and they sure are raising some big awareness along the way! GiGi's Playhouse Mexico is now an established entity in Mexico and they just received their official registration RFC (Registro Federal de Contribuyentes) from the Tax Ministry (Mexican IRS). With that they can now request to be an authorized tax deductible organization! They are so excited! They still have one more step to do but they are really on their way now!!

Nothing is going to slow them down! Last year they created a Spanish version of the GiGi's Playhouse 2012 awareness calendar and they just finished shooting the 2013 GiGi's Spanish version calendar which will be available for sale here in the states this Fall! They participated in the GiGi's Gala

this year and they also have their own gallery!! We are so proud of them!!!

If you have any connections that may be able to help them or just want to offer words of encouragement, please email Mexico@gigisplayhouse.org. You can also contact ngianni@gigisplayhouse.org if you think there is anything we can do for them here in the states!!



One Million Voices



We are taking reservations for the Des Moines One Million Voices Gallery to come to your business, corporation, expo, or event! Starting this September we will have two portable Galleries available that are approx. 100 sq. feet each with 21 life-size, breathtaking photographs of individuals with Down syndrome from the Des Moines GiGi's Playhouse. These Galleries will weave each person's unique journey into a collage of images and stories

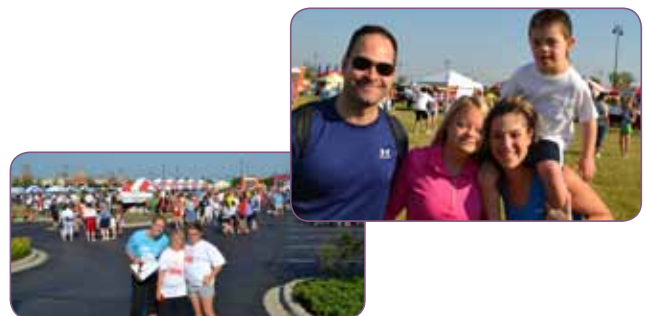
that will change how people view and perceive Down syndrome. The goal of the One Million Voices Gallery Campaign is to positively influence the perception of Down syndrome in over one million people throughout the country by 2015. It is another avenue for us to spread Down syndrome Awareness by sharing our 'voice' with others; it is our goal to share those 'voices' with over one million people! Our children have a voice, but they need an advocate- our voices to speak up for them! Each gallery will be set up at your location to be displayed for up to 4 weeks. Together we will reach our goal of over one million voices! You can book one or both Galleries by emailing us at: onemillionvoicesDSM@gigisplayhouse.org.

'One Million Voices' can turn ignorance into advocacy. 'One Million Voices' can turn fear into love!



Our annual 5k event raised over \$200,000 this year!!! This is a regional event that is put on in Chicago with the National office. All proceeds go towards programming so everyone will benefit from this event!

Lauren Potter from Glee helped us host this amazing event! We had almost 3000 attendees!!



RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED

We have 26 different programs, all free to our families



our mission is to increase positive awareness of Down syndrome through national campaigns, educational programs, and by empowering individuals with Down syndrome, their families and the community.



Check us out on Youtube
[youtube.org/gigisplayhouse](https://www.youtube.org/gigisplayhouse)



Our Global Awareness Committee is proud to launch the one million voices campaign!

As you know, our incredible *i have a voice* thirty foot gallery travels the country giving a voice to Down syndrome. We are extending that voice with individual galleries for the local

Playhouses. The galleries will feature local children and will tell their story. The purpose of the mobile galleries is to increase cultural awareness and build advocacy for our kids. We will do this by influencing one person at a time until we have one million new voices that will speak up for, defend and befriend our kids. Each gallery will tell the story of that local playhouse

and the people it serves. It will share family stories, stories of community acceptance and the individual tales of a life meant to be.

THE ONE MILLION VOICES PROJECT

The size and make up of this gallery allows for easy set up and take down which will open it up to unlimited venues. Be on the look out in your area as the gallery launches begin in September. If you are interested in hosting or sponsoring a gallery in your area, email onemillionvoices@gigisplayhouse.org. To learn more, join our facebook page.