



Photography by Steve Buchanan

TOWNE SALUTE

Karen Tollestrup

GiGi's Playhouse

By Tom Worgo

Nearly five decades ago, Karen Tollestrup volunteered as an assistant to a speech pathologist at Fernald State Institution in Waltham, Massachusetts, working with patients with Down Syndrome. It didn't take long for her to realize she'd found her calling.

After a 28-year career as a speech pathologist, she's now retired and once again volunteering, for GiGi's Playhouse, in Annapolis.

GiGi's is a 17-year-old nationwide organization that works with children and adults with Down Syndrome and their families.

"I don't have to worry because I know she will get the job done. She wants the best for the kids and she know how to implement our program and she goes after it."

In 2017, after she and her husband Eric moved to Edgewater, she saw an notice in the paper that GiGi's Playhouse was holding an orientation meeting for people who wanted to volunteer.

"After the orientation, I went up to (site coordinator) Judy Co and said, 'You guys need me. This is what I do. I would like to be your literacy coordinator,'" Tollestrup recalls. "That's how it came to be and I have been there ever since."

As literacy coordinator at GiGi's, she has a mountain of duties to keep her extremely busy. At the outset, she took on the challenge of adapting the organization's reading program to suit local needs starting in February of 2018.

The 66-year-old showed her commitment right away.

"The way the literacy program works, there is a ton of training at the front end that she had to go through," says Kim Eckert, President of GiGi's board of directors. "As coordinator, she had to work with our home office in Chicago for as much as 40 hours a week for several months just to get up to speed with the program and implement it here. She is incredibly dedicated."

With relentless energy, Tollestrup trained tutors, supervised tutoring sessions and matched tutors with students and created her own program called Tutor Talk.

"It's important to have someone like her who is understanding, patient, knowledgeable and passionate," Co says. "She is really committed, reliable, and trustworthy. She loves to help people. She loves our participants. I don't have to worry because I know she will get the job done. She wants the best for the kids and she know how to implement our program and she goes after it."

When Tollestrup trains tutors, she includes Tutor Talk, which she feels is very beneficial.

"It's a time when the tutors get together in a group with me and we talk how the tutor sessions are going and if any concerns," she explains. "Sometimes, a tutor may have developed a new game, a new way of teaching the kids. We try to make it fun for the students, because they do a lot of work at school. We incorporate a lot of games and playing with words to help them learn."

In preparation for teaching, Tollestrup also creates "family books" for the kids. They are a big hit.

"I ask each parent to send in five to six pictures of their family," she says. "Let's say I have a picture of the mom. Her child calls her 'Momma' or 'Mom.' So, then I type the word 'Mom,' and then we do a whole process. During the actual session,

the tutor will go through the book and then go through what we teach, "I do, we do."

From then on, it's a slow teaching process of word association.

Along with her dedication, Tollestrup, a Boston-area native, also brings the accumulated knowledge and expertise from her long professional career.

After graduating from the University of Vermont with a B.S. in speech and language pathology, she went on to earn a master's degree in speech and language pathology from Western Michigan University.

At various points in her career and at various locales in Massachusetts, she served as director of the speech and hearing department at the Lemuel Shattuck Hospital in Jamaica Plain, speech and language pathologist in the Medford Public Schools, and speech and language pathologist in the Boston Public Schools.

"Her reward is when she sees the kids make progress," Jo says. "It's something you can't put into a single word. It's life changing, really, for her. She knows she's made a difference in someone's life, and it is energizing."

Tollestrup agrees that the students bring her much joy, and sometimes it's the highlight of her day. "They have special qualities, and they give me back so much and make me appreciate things so much more," she says. "They are happy, wonderful kids. I would like to see them succeed in anything they want to do."

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