



# ACHIEVING ACCEPTANCE AT



BY ALICE OSBORN



GiGi's Playhouse in Raleigh is part of a national community that provides free life-changing therapeutic, educational and career programs for more than 26,000 people across the U.S. affected by Down's syndrome. The organization's goal is to change how the world sees someone who has Down's syndrome—this is a national movement of acceptance, not just awareness. Six thousand babies every year are diagnosed with Down syndrome and GiGi's Playhouse believes these children should not have to struggle for acceptance in all areas of their work, school and play.

Nancy Gianni founded the first GiGi's Playhouse in Hoffman Estates, Illinois, after her daughter, Gigi, was diagnosed with Down's syndrome in 2003. Since that time, Gianni is now a 2016 CNN Hero running a growing organization with 31 locations in the U.S.

and Mexico. GiGi's Playhouse offers three kinds of support for infants through adults: therapeutic support, educational and social support for parents and siblings, and a strong message of acceptance out into the community so they can support those with Down syndrome when they reach employment age.

Located in Swift Creek Shopping Center between Cary and Raleigh off of Jones Franklin Road, the local GiGi's Playhouse is one of the newest achievement centers, having just opened in June 2016 because of president Jeanhee Hoffman's vision. Living in Chapel Hill but originally from Chicago, Hoffman's brother, Sam, has Down syndrome and enrolled in the adult GiGi's Playhouse program in May 2015. Hoffman made it her mission to bring GiGi's to Raleigh and the Triangle where families could benefit from the center's programs

as well as meet families who share in their struggles and triumphs. Says Hoffman, "My end major goal is to create a career development center here in Raleigh so our Down syndrome population can use their job skills training to get out into the real community." Currently, GiGi U offers adults classes in career and communication skills as well as fitness, nutrition and personal safety workshops. The younger classes offer infant programs, math and literacy tutoring, as well as therapeutic programming for speech and social skills along with fine and gross motor skill development.

Bright green walls, magenta ottomans and teal couches welcome participants and visitors into the warm and friendly space that's staffed almost entirely by volunteers. "These past nineteen years we've met amazing people as a result of my son, Matthew, who has Down syndrome. "Even people with no connections to Down syndrome volunteer here," says Michelle Schwab, the vice president. GiGi's Playhouse is proud to partner with local businesses in the community that wholeheartedly collaborate and give their support. For instance, Colonial Baptist Church in Cary gave GiGi's the use of their playing fields and also let them use their conference rooms for volunteer training before their center was built. PMC Commercial Interiors in Morrisville donated GiGi's furniture and their interior design services. Says Michelle Pfeiffer, the outreach leader, "Our community is so amazing and supportive." By fostering this community and fellowship "one child, one diagnosis and one community at a time," the staff and volunteers at GiGi's Playhouse demonstrate every day how individuals with Down syndrome can be empowered to become their very best.

To check out all of the offerings or to volunteer at GiGi's Playhouse visit <http://gigisplayhouse.org/raleigh/>.

*Alice Osborn is the Editor of Wake Living magazine.*