

GiGi's Playhouse

In Our Own Backyard

The Diagnosis



"There is no easy way to say this..." were the words that changed my life forever. That moment is seared in my memory just as September 11th or the Boston Marathon bombing. Dramatic as that may sound, it's truly that poignant and the most defining moment of my life. "There is no easy way to say this" were the words that flooded my heart with immense fear and violently swept away my joy and excitement of our second child. It was June 7, 2016 and I was 9 days early, but baby boy was ready to enter this world, and what an entrance he made. We pulled into the parking garage at Highland Hospital at 2:58 pm and Charlie William Bertino made his way into this world at 3:28 pm. It was an incredible moment and we were soon surrounded by our parents and daughter taking pictures, smiling laughing and celebrating this amazing new person who joined our family. As the minutes ticked on and the celebration continued, I stared at my little man and in my heart of hearts I knew that something was different about him. I made an off-handed comment to my husband about Charlie having Down syndrome which caught one of the nurse's attention. Shortly after came the questions.... did I have any ultrasounds, did I have prenatal care, did I have any difficulty during my pregnancy. These questions were different from my first delivery. As all of this was going on Charlie never took his eyes off of me. This intense silent and strong stare spoke to me. Kelle Hampton, a bestselling author, described an almost identical moment in her book titled Bloom: Finding Beauty in the Unexpected. She described this same exact stare as if her newly born child was saying "Love me. Love me. I'm not what you expected, but oh, please love me." Looking back, this is what Charlie's stare seemed to be saying. All my family members left the room for a few moments. I was alone with my new child when the words came... as she started to utter them I knew what she was going to say but they didn't hurt any less. "There is no easy way to say this, but I suspect your son has Down syndrome". My world went dark.

Our story of a diagnosis of Down syndrome is incredibly similar to many I have met who did not receive a prenatal confirmation. This new baby doesn't bring a congratulatory excitement, but rather, the diagnosis brings sadness, uncertainty and fear. For me, I couldn't quiet the fierce hurricane of questions and emotions in my head. What did I do wrong? What did I just do to my daughter's life? How are we going to get through this? These questions went unanswered for a while.

Fast forward two months, still immensely sad and terrified

that I was not the right parent to raise a child with Down syndrome I was connected with a few determined individuals who had been working incredibly hard to bring a GiGi's Playhouse to Rochester. For the first time since my son was born, I knew we would be okay. My worries and questions started to be answered. I was getting a future glimpse of the journey we had embarked on and it didn't seem so daunting anymore. At the very least, meeting our GiGi's community, had connected with families just like mine. It gave me a sense of relief and calm. More importantly than that, GiGi's offered direct support to individuals with Down syndrome to help them achieve their "Best of All" at any age and GiGi's is going to change the way people look at individuals with Down syndrome and other disabilities. We have this awesome resource in our own backyard now!

Welcome to GiGi's Playhouse!

GiGi's Playhouse is the ONLY nationwide network of Down syndrome achievement centers; changing lives through free, results-driven programs for individuals of all ages, families and communities. GiGi's Playhouse is an inspirational and dedicated place for families to celebrate their child and benefit from free programs that unleash joy, confidence and continuous improvement. Playhouses empower children and adults to achieve their "Best of All" and to pursue their dreams. Founded by GiGi's Mom, Nancy Gianni, in Hoffman Estates, IL, the organization now includes 33 community Playhouses including the first global Playhouse location in Mexico. Last year, over 26,000 individuals with Down syndrome benefited from free programs and positive empowerment.

In helping individuals with Down syndrome, we can address our larger vision of global acceptance for people of all abilities. Playhouse programs, marketing and PR campaigns, impact partnerships and community engagements all aim to change society's outdated perceptions by showcasing participants' skills, contributions and character.



By breaking down barriers and changing the way the world accepts individuals with Down syndrome, we can foster a daily mindset of life, love, acceptance and hope for everyone.

What makes GiGi’s Playhouse unique?

We have a brick and mortar location. A dedicated Playhouses enables consistent attendance and programming, positive support, continuing education for families, and a reliable resource for community-led social change.

We offer free therapeutic and educational programming from prenatal diagnosis through adulthood. GiGi’s Playhouse makes a lifelong commitment to individuals with Down syndrome and their families by offering purposeful programs rooted in continuous improvement and high expectations. Children and adults at GiGi’s Playhouse are empowered to achieve because programs are always available for free. Cost will never be a barrier to achievement or acceptance. Families are never burdened by program service fees due to tremendous commitments of gifted volunteers and generous donors. Within these programs we focus on having high expectations and accountability for all of our participants. Through core values and practices like “Best of All” and “Get It Done”: GiGi’s Playhouse raises the bar for participants and families to believe in themselves, act heroically, and celebrate life every day. These values and practices are

showcased on social media, in awareness calendars, at special events and more: impacting families far and beyond the physical Playhouses themselves.

Come Visit Us!

We are located at 372 N. Goodman Street, in the newly constructed building behind Village Gate. We have open hours where people are encouraged to come utilize the Playhouse for therapy sessions, socialization, exercising or learning! We also offer a variety of free programming for all ages! We are proud to welcome anybody who could utilize our services.

Life One Year Later

It has been a little over a year now since Charlie changed our family’s world for the better. These changes have lead us to become more compassionate and more involved in the community. Our family and friends have learned to celebrate all of life’s little moments. The vision of GiGi’s Playhouse is clear and simple. It is to improve lives and change the way the world views individuals with Down syndrome one child, one diagnosis and one community at a time. GiGi’s encourages everybody to become part of their movement called Generation G. Challenge yourself to make the conscious decision every day to Be more Generous, Be more Accepting and to Be Kind.

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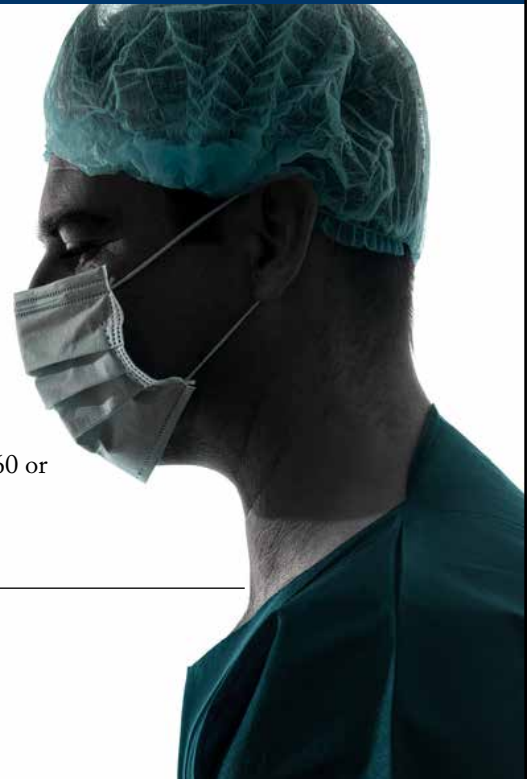
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