Our Mission:
To change the way the world views Down syndrome and to send a global message of acceptance for all.

Our Vision:
To see a world where individuals with Down syndrome are accepted and embraced in their families, schools, and communities.

Our Niche
We inspire and change lives through consistent delivery of FREE educational, therapeutic and social/life skills programs for individuals with Down syndrome, their families and community, all in effort to thrive based on their ability.

Our Promise
A lifetime commitment to families.

GiGi’s Twin Cities Offers 25 FREE Educational, Therapeutic and Life Skills Programs
Our calendar year begins every September, with close to 1,000 participant check-ins throughout our four semester sessions, including summer. Our programs range from one-on-one tutoring to small groups to larger, more socially-based programs. Our most popular programs include:

Education-Based Favorites
• One-on-One Math & Literacy Tutoring
• Drama Troupe (which includes an Annual Broadway Show Performance)
• Story Telling PJs and Books
• LNMOP – Language Music N’ Our Peeps

Therapeutic and Fitness-Based Favorites
• GiGi’s Music
• Dance
• Yoga
• Leaps and Bounds
• GiGiFIT

Life Skills-Based Favorites
• Social Skills /Self-Advocacy
• EPIC – The Empowerment, Participation, Independence and Community Involvement Center of Excellence
• GiGi’s Kitchen

“I want people to see the beauty and potential of our kids, and understand they are so much more than a diagnosis.”
-Nancy Gianni, Founder and GiGi’s Mom

Our DNA
GiGi’s Playhouse Down Syndrome Achievement Centers across North America provide FREE progressive, purposeful programs to educate and inspire individuals of all ages with Down syndrome. GiGi’s provides a tremendous breadth and depth of educational, therapeutic, and social/life skills programs from birth through adulthood.

GiGi’s Playhouse Twin Cities opened its doors in 2013. Our 10,000-square-foot space is equipped with one-on-one tutoring rooms, a full teaching kitchen, computer training room and other classrooms, a theatrical stage and a full gym. In 2018 we opened our first satellite in Hudson, Wisconsin, and in 2019 we opened our second satellite in the South Metro.

Twin Cities’ Impact:
Serving over 941 families annually
2,000 Volunteers
25,000 Volunteer hours
200 Volunteers for every staff member
Close to 3,000 hours of math and literacy tutoring
Dear Friends-

What a year it has been. At the beginning of the 2019-2020 school year, we had no idea the journey we were about to embark on or the challenges we would face. But together in true GiGi’s Twin Cities fashion, we have faced those challenges with optimism, passion, and a strong sense of community. Despite not being physically together for much of the year, we have had the opportunity to grow our community with our virtual programming and have reached even more families than we could have imagined.

Our 2020 Gala in February was our biggest celebration to date with 700 people attending and raising +22% more than in 2019! The evening was filled with a celebration of our Community’s momentum and an optimistic and contagious enthusiasm to expand our efforts across all three of our locations to reach and impact even more families across the metro.

On March 13th, we made the challenging decision to close the Playhouse due to the pandemic. However, within a few weeks we launched our first phase of virtual programming. The GiGi’s national office soon followed with a library of both live and virtual programming for all ages. In mid-summer we conducted a survey to better understand the virtual programming needs for our families. The primary take-away was the desire for more live sessions, which would allow our participants to see and interact with their friends and favorite volunteer leaders. As a result, in the fall of 2020, we offered more than 25 virtual sessions each month, along with one-on-one literacy tutoring.

This summer, following the death of George Floyd and in the face of this tragedy, we were reminded of the urgent need to examine whether we were truly meeting our mission of acceptance and inclusion. As a community we needed to ask what we can do to better serve and support Black — and more widely, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) — participants and families. Our goal is to be a Playhouse that fully reflects the diversity of the Twin Cities Down syndrome community. In response to this call to action, we formed the Racial Equity Advisory Team. The individuals on this team embody this diversity and are an integral part of the solution to what we can do right now for our community, during the pandemic. They have found creative ways to incorporate their theater program into our local teen virtual program, Teen Tastic, as well as our local adult virtual program, Fantastic Friends. They have consistently been in the rotation of our leaders for each of these two programs, to bring the joy of theater as well as continue the amazing connections that they have built over all these years with all the participants and their families. They are an important reason that GiGi’s continues to succeed today. This Fall they created a virtual Drama Troupe program, too!

In this past year Jenna and the 2020 Gala Committee were awarded the distinction of receiving our newly created award, the Medal of Love and Honor. This award was created to celebrate and honor our volunteer leaders’ heart and soul. The Medal of Love and Honor will be awarded on an ongoing basis to celebrate all those who unconditionally and continuously go the extra step for GiGi’s Twin Cities.

Volunteers are truly the life blood of a GiGi’s Playhouse. Nationally, for every GiGi’s staff member there are 100 volunteers. This is an amazing number, but what is even more amazing is that here in the Twin Cities that number is more than 200 volunteers for every staff member! Think about that – it is a staggering statistic, and it speaks to our well-deserved reputation as one of the most charitable communities in the nation. Our volunteers make the GiGi’s Twin Cities dream a reality. Thank you!

While there are so many volunteers who give their heart and soul to our community, this year the honor of Volunteer of The Year went to Jenna Elling. Jenna is a founding member of our Hudson satellite team, where over the past two years she has created and led countless programs, including PJs and Books, Leaps and Bounds, LMNOP, Kids Club, Tutoring, and Destination Discovery. She manages all of Hudson’s social media, runs volunteer trainings, leads fundraising efforts, and has traveled to multiple national leadership conferences. She has also sacrificed a large portion of her garage for the storage of the 997 boxes’ worth of program materials that our national office shipped to her. She is also Mom to Annabelle, whom we would like to personally thank for bringing her mom into the GiGi’s community. Thank you, Jenna, for everything you do and how you inspire us all to give of our hearts and our time!

Volunteers are chosen throughout the year for their dedication and work. Jenna Elling was also chosen as Volunteer of the Year for her tireless work and dedication to our community, and how she inspires others to do the same. In this past year Jenna and the 2020 Gala Committee were awarded the distinction of receiving our newly created award, the Medal of Love and Honor. This award was created to celebrate and honor our volunteer leaders’ heart and soul. The Medal of Love and Honor will be awarded on an ongoing basis to celebrate all those who unconditionally and continuously go the extra step for GiGi’s Twin Cities.

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This past year has been full of lessons for all of us. When it comes to GiGi’s Twin Cities, we have never been more impressed by and thankful for our community and your contagious can-do spirit. We are incredibly grateful for our volunteer network of truly amazing and caring individuals, as well as our thousands of generous financial supporters and, of course, our participants and their families. Together, we have pushed through a challenging year to not only continue serving our families, but also grow and diversify our community.

We have so much to celebrate as a community of strength and hope, with a spirit that is contagious and full of optimism. Thank you all for your support, commitment, and compassion. Cheers to our next chapter of unprecedented success!

Fran Fabrizio
Board President
GiGi’s Twin Cities

Tim Hawley
Executive Director
GiGi’s Twin Cities

Jenna Elling — Volunteer of the Year

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Nancy and Aaron Houseman— Volunteer Spotlight

Nancy and Aaron (Big Guy) have been part of the GiGi’s Twin Cities community for years! Nancy and Big Guy are a true beacon within our community. They are not just program volunteers; they are friends, close friends, with so many of our participants, their families and, of course, the many volunteers they partner with to keep it fun! They also have been an integral part of the solution to what we can do right now for our community, during the pandemic. They have found creative ways to incorporate their theater program into our local teen virtual program, Teen Tastic, as well as our local adult virtual program, Fantastic Friends. They have consistently been in the rotation of our leaders for each of these two programs, to bring the joy of theater as well as continue the amazing connections that they have built over all these years with all the participants and their families. They are an important reason that GiGi’s continues to succeed today. This Fall they created a virtual Drama Troupe program, too!

It is an honor to have Nancy and Big Guy as leaders in our community, and we continue to be inspired by their endless work through volunteering at GiGi’s Playhouse Twin Cities.
2020 Major Accomplishments

**Gala**
This past year we gathered with 700 of our friends and family members from the community for our biggest and most successful Gala to date. Our 22% increase in revenue stream from our previous year's Gala is a tribute to our incredibly generous community. Our theme this past year highlighted the unconditional, joyful, celebratory, and unbiased love that those with Down syndrome bring to their loved ones. One of the highlights of this past year’s Gala was that we were able to empower our self-advocates to play very prominent and important ambassador roles throughout the evening.

The energy brought on by our programming and memorable tributes led to our most successful paddle raise ever, helping us exceed our paddle raise goal and raise $149,150 (a 56% increase over the previous year’s $95,505.)

**Step To Accept**
As COVID-19 impacted our annual spring Cody’s Dash fundraiser, we were fortunate to have the opportunity to have the opportunity to participate in the first ever Step To Accept national fundraiser along with all 60 GiGi’s Playhouses across the country. Together on June 6th, all of our locations together took over ONE BILLION steps towards Global Acceptance for all and collectively fundraised almost $1.4 million dollars.

**Community Partners**
As we continue to grow as a Playhouse with our three locations, we continuously work to strengthen our relationships with like-minded non-profits to better serve the Down syndrome community. Along with the Down Syndrome Association of MN, Best Buddies, Special Olympics and Jack’s Basket, we have evolved to effectively work to complement each other and provide more purposeful and progressive opportunities to those with Down syndrome and their families.

**Facility Enhancements**
This past year we took the opportunity to make some updates to our spaces including:
- Freshly painted gym and themed tutoring rooms
- Enrichment Zone sponsored by the Mooty Family Foundation
- New donor Giving Tree

**Windows** — Last year, Shari Fleming Photography generously donated her time and talent to capture the true and authentic personalities of many of our participants and these portraits are now proudly displayed in the windows of our Playhouse.

**Racial Equity Advisory Team**
The murder of George Floyd and the pain and destruction felt by so many in the spring of 2020 were horrifying and devastating to witness. It highlighted the continued racial inequities, abuse of power, and blatant disregard for human life that led to these events, and the trauma that has been inflicted on the Black community for far too long.

For GiGi’s, it compelled us to ask ourselves what we can do to better serve and support Black — and more widely, BIPOC — individuals and families in the Twin Cities Down syndrome community, and make sure we are doing all that we can to address racial inequities in our own work. Our goal is a Playhouse that fully reflects the diversity of the Twin Cities Down syndrome community.

This summer we formed the Racial Equity Advisory Team — a group of individuals that truly embody this diversity and are committed to helping us reach every corner of the Twin Cities Down syndrome community. Racial equity must be woven into everything that we do, and this team is examining every aspect of our operations, advising us on how we can be more effective and equitable with our programming, outreach, events and fundraising.

As the GiGi’s Twin Cities community, let’s ALL ask ourselves, “What can I do to help make GiGi’s more diverse, inclusive, and representative? What new families can I reach out to? How can I engage and listen to those who aren’t yet participating and learn how we could better serve them?” Who do you know at school, work, or your house of worship that could connect you to a family that may need or want GiGi’s?”

Our vision at GiGi’s is “global acceptance for all,” and that starts by ensuring we broaden our reach to everyone who needs us in the Twin Cities. We ask for your action and ideas so that we can keep making GiGi’s more accessible and welcoming for all. When we tap into the collective talent, creativity and reach of the entire GiGi’s family, there is no limit to what we can do! Please share your thoughts by reaching out to Tim Hawley, Executive Director and Advisory Team member (thawley@gigisplayhouse.org).

**Volunteers Are the Lifeline of GiGi’s**

**Todd Cogan**
Board Member GiGi’s Twin Cities member Racial Equity Advisory Team
Playhouse Reflections: A Proud Founding Mom

GiGi’s Playhouse Twin Cities is very special to me and our family. I can say I was at the first meeting when six moms of young children with Down syndrome (many were infants) met at a coffee shop and decided to join together to raise funds for a Playhouse. Hard to believe that it’s been nine years since that first meeting in the fall of 2011. My daughter, Violet, was just a little over 2 years old. I had no idea what the future would be for her and her Down syndrome diagnosis, and I was driven to do all I could for her.

As a Founding Mom, I feel as if in some small way the Playhouse is one of my children. It took a lot of work and energy to raise funds at our various events to get the Playhouse built and opened – with only our small board and a single full-time employee. We had lots of late nights and long meetings, felt growing pains as our volunteer ranks and participant rolls grew quickly, and worked very hard as a “working board” for many years. As this Playhouse matures into adulthood, I’m proud of what “our baby” has become.

I am proud to see the Playhouse grow. It has doubled in physical size and now includes two satellite locations (South Metro & Hudson, WI). This is in addition to an exponential growth in number of participants served and how we have built our fundraising discipline. I’m delighted with the incredible increased involvement among the adult Down syndrome community. It’s wonderful to see adults enjoying cooking classes and the EPIC program (when in session, pre-COVID). Early on, our founding moms all had children in elementary school or younger. Some of these founding moms will now soon have their own children in EPIC and it is an awesome example of how our Playhouse has continued to evolve to serve the needs of this amazing Twin Cities community.

I am joyful to see how quickly our community pivoted to virtual programming to keep our community as unified as possible during this pandemic. I’ve served many roles since our Playhouse opened in early 2013: Board Member, Gala Co-Chair, Playhouse Expansion committee member, Young Athletes Coach, EPIC volunteer…and, most importantly, mom of a participant! What keeps me engaged? Seeing the joy the Playhouse brings to our participants and their families. Feeling the true sense of community and friendship our families and volunteers bring to every moment in the Playhouse. The way Violet’s eyes light up when she is at the Playhouse. It reminds me upon reflection that our work to build this special place was worth it.

As our Playhouse approaches the 10th anniversary of our first Gala, and the impending return to in-person programming at our locations, I can’t wait to see what happens next with this amazing gem in our community! Thanks to everyone in our community – we can be so proud of what we’ve built.

Newly formed Outreach Committee chairman perspective by Paul Kapsner

Our world has changed significantly due to COVID 19. GiGi’s has had to adapt and provide new and creative ways to continue to support the “2 C’s:” Community and Connections. The GiGi’s Twin Cities Outreach Committee was formed to help build and drive awareness of GiGi’s in the Metro Area. Our simple mission is to increase the awareness of the AWESOME impact GiGi’s can have on the lives of many with Down syndrome.

Increased awareness will positively impact and increase participation and support of GiGi’s through three key areas:
• More individuals taking advantage of our programming
• More volunteers supporting programming and efforts
• Increased financial support and community awareness supporting GiGi’s mission of inclusion for all

Our four pillars of focus for the Outreach Committee to drive awareness and participation/support are:
• Education Community – Recruiting volunteers and broadening participation
• Business Community – Building awareness among companies to become volunteers and sponsors of GiGi’s Twin Cities
• Non-Profit Community – Building organizational alliances with NP’s to strengthen impact and outreach
• Media Community – Building awareness and maximizing digital footprint to illustrate the awesome impact GiGi’s can make for individuals and families with Down syndrome.

Brian Hanrahan, a GiGi’s participant, recently joined the Outreach Committee as the committee’s ambassador. He will play a critical role as a self-advocate presenting and sharing the GiGi’s Twin Cities story across our community. We are excited for him to pave the path for many other self-advocates to become future ambassadors, too.

Brian is a kind, warm, thoughtful, outgoing, and energetic 41-year-old self-advocate that has been part of our GiGi’s community since 2017. In that short time, Brian has been involved with Speech and Social Skills, Fantastic Friends, and EPIC, among many other programs and events.

“Many hands make light work,” and all of us can help meet the goal of spreading the word and expanding our reach and impact of GiGi’s. We are excited about the future and our ability to bring lasting and broader impact to our community, increase awareness of GiGi’s, and make a difference for those with Down syndrome and inclusion for all.
Tutoring Rooms
Kitchen
Full Gym
Sea Life Sensory Room
Classroom
Play Areas
Social Areas
Stage

St. Louis Park Center
10,000 Square Foot
Inclusive Experience

4740 Park Glen Road, St. Louis Park

GiGi’s Twin Cities
St. Louis Park
South Metro

GiGi’s
Twin Cities

GiGi’s PlayHouse

St. Louis Hudson Park South Metro
Programming Innovation, Expansion, and Growth

Since fall of 2019, we experienced an unbelievable year of innovation, expansion, and growth! We had hundreds of volunteers engaged in record breaking work in over 25 programs offered each quarter.

At our St. Louis Park location, we saw growth through:
- Increased weekly adult programming opportunities
- Increased cooking classes expanding to adults, teens, and kids
- Offering a GiGi’s Family Choir for teens, adults, and family members

In both our South Metro and Hudson satellites, we:
- Increased number of age groups being served, through an increase in programs being offered
- Increased numbers of families engaged in programming
- Increased numbers of volunteers

The moment that we closed our three playhouse locations on March 13th, due to COVID 19, we immediately served our community virtually and digitally by:
- Creating a local resource page and YouTube channel that provided content and activities
- Offering national GiGis At Home, which created a way for us to offer virtual programming to our entire community, all over the world
- Offering local GiGi's At Home, across age groups, as we received more volunteers, this spring and summer (directly serving St. Louis Park, Hudson, and South Metro)

We also made progress in our outreach with Somali families. We received a grant from the Walser Foundation, and a portion of it was used to build Somali outreach and participation in our programming. We grew from one Somali family engaged with our programming to many Somali families being involved over this past year. This was all made possible through our partnership with Sahra Ali, our new Somali Outreach Coordinator.

Looking ahead to this upcoming year, we are excited for even more possibilities in innovation, expansion, and growth:
- Diversifying our programs to be more culturally relevant including content, program leads, volunteers, and families.
- Expanding math and literacy tutoring program
- Expanding GiGiFIT with the leadership of a Physical Therapist
- Expanding additional programming with PhD students in physical therapy
- When we can safely resume in-person programming, finding ways to pilot virtual options so we can continue to reach the broader community

Nearly 3,000 hours of math and literacy tutoring to date
GiGi’s Twin Cities
2021 Programming Priorities

1. Expanding programing access across all three locations: As we continue to grow across our locations in St. Louis Park, South Metro and Hudson, WI, we plan to expand programs including GiGiFIT and GiGi’s Kitchen for all ages, led by specialists in these areas. Additionally, at our St. Louis Park location, based on participant interest, we want to enhance our stage with cordless microphones, a sound system, teleprompter for sing-a-longs, a projection screen for movie nights, and more.

2. Connecting our community through outreach to build a more vibrant and diverse community: Our goal for all GiGi’s Playhouse Twin Cities locations is to build a community that fully reflects the diversity of the Twin Cities Down syndrome community. Working for racial equity must be woven into everything that we do, and we have recently formed the Racial Equity Advisory Team. This team is examining every aspect of our operations, advising us on how we can be more effective and equitable with our programming, outreach, events, and fundraising.

3. Expanding Mobility: We hope to activate playhouse mobility with the purchase of a 15-passenger van to help transport participants on field trips as well as for those who need help to get to and from the Playhouse. Longer term (beyond 2021), we hope to investigate opportunities which will allow us to use pop-up spaces in communities where our families live but do not have easy access to a GiGi’s physical location. With funding support, with each mobile stop we would provide a kit for participants to help them continue to enjoy the program at home, as well as information about when it is offered virtually. For example, a kit could include a GiGiFIT gym bag with yoga mat and stretching ropes/blocks, or kitchen recipes and meal prep cards.

Together, we have pushed through a challenging year in 2020 to be able to provide families with continued programming. We are excited for continued participation growth and engagement, for virtual programming that reaches and impacts more families across the state, for our diversity, equity and inclusion outreach; for the feeling of pride, excitement, and joy GiGi’s fosters every day. We hope to continue to build our community’s phenomenal momentum to ensure 2021 is our best year yet in reaching and impacting more families than ever!

Providing programs from INFANCY through ADULTHOOD
ALL PROGRAMMING IS FREE
Offering More Than 100 Sessions Annually
On our cover: Mustaf, 17, is kind, positive, and very outgoing. When you meet Mustaf, expect to be surrounded by his bear hug and warm spirit. Mustaf has been involved with GiGi’s for the past four years. He participates in our FREE programming including: Speech, Social Skills, Literacy Tutoring, Dance, and Teen Tastic. Outside of GiGi’s, he loves his family and friends, school, playing guitar, and participating in karate. Cheers to Mustaf for being a community beacon!