

Hello, we are the Gianni family! My husband, Paul, and I (Nancy) have been married for 10 years. We live in here in South Barrington with our son Franco age 9, Isabella age 5 and Giuliana (GiGi) age 3. We are a very active family and we enjoy boating, jet skiing, 4 wheeling, karaoke, fishing, sports and just about anything that involves us all being together!

Three years ago when my daughter Giuliana (GiGi) was born we thought that active life was gone forever. You see about an hour after she was born the doctors came in to the recovery room and said they suspected she had Down syndrome. (I still hear them saying the words as if I was in a cave, Down syndrome...syndrome ...syndrome) Panic was welling up inside me but I was afraid for anyone to see it. I wanted to see my husband, who was standing behind my bed. What did his face look like? Was he mad? Is he blaming me? I had always been strangely drawn to children with Down syndrome. Did I will this on us?? As soon as we finally had eye contact I said "if anyone can handle this we can" and he said "Can you imagine what better kids Franco and Isabella are going to be because of her?" What?? Did he really say that? He's not mad? I looked up at him and knew we were going to get through this together.

Don't get me wrong, we were petrified! I can not even begin to tell you the total fear and devastation I felt. Everything they were telling us about Down syndrome was so negative! Suddenly no one had eye contact with me anymore, they kept the door to my room closed and they even sent in the clergy! Instantly we went from being the cool, fun couple to one of "those" couples. If this was happening to us already what was life going to be like for our kids??

I was so afraid to bring her home and start this "new" life. I remember when people first came to visit. They didn't know what to expect. There were hugs of sympathy not congratulations. They would tip toe towards the bassinet and seemed afraid to look inside to see what she looked like. Then when they finally mustered up the courage to look they saw this beautiful little baby and they were shocked! They always exclaimed "Oh my gosh! She is adorable!" I really don't know what they were expecting to see but people finally started to realize she was just a baby!!

GiGi was also born with 2 holes in her heart. We were told that 40-50% of kids with DS have some heart issues. I asked my husband why it had to be that way. He simply said "maybe God throws in the heart condition to make the Down syndrome seem secondary". I think he is right! (Did I say that??) Most of the heart conditions these days can be repaired but it still scares the heck out of you, and yes... the Down syndrome is secondary. She had open heart surgery at 4 months old and now she is perfect! (See...the DS really does become secondary)

Once we got settled and got back into a routine at home I realized that she was more like my other 2 kids than she was different! I didn't expect that!! Some things took her longer but she always got it and she never gave up! She inspired me everyday and I promised her that I would make the world a more accepting place for her and all of her friends with Down syndrome. That is when I decided to open GiGi's Playhouse, A Down Syndrome Awareness Center, and show the world the tremendous potential that children with Down syndrome have to offer. So with my husband at my side we went out to recruit board members and raise some money! (Actually 4 of our original board members participate here at the South Barrington Park District with their child who has Down syndrome!!) My son Franco drew the GiGi's Playhouse logo and in just 5 months we opened the doors to the first Down Syndrome Awareness Center in the Country!

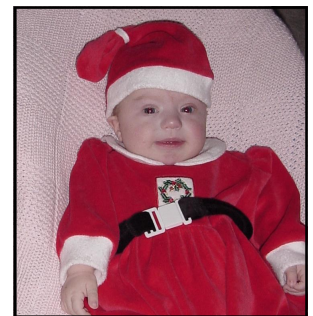
Mom, Dad & GiGi trying to raise funds selling raffle tickets at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange.



Big brother Franco designed the GiGi's Playhouse logo and we were off!!



GiGi was the perfect addition to our lovin' life family!

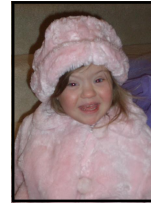


10 days after her open heart surgery!!



All of us want to protect our children. The best way for me to do that is to educate people about the tremendous potential of kids with Down syndrome. Sometimes I just stare at her beautiful face and wonder how I can make people understand how incredible she is.

I have to say having GiGi was like a true love story. It started out with fear and devastation and ended with a love like I have never known. Without living it I would have never understood that. I think that is why 90% of women carrying a child with Down syndrome terminate the pregnancy. It is just total fear and ignorance. I am just glad that GiGi's Playhouse has turned into a place where they can see the other side of Down syndrome and make an educated decision.



She's all smiles!

This is just a small part of what Gigi's Playhouse does. Gigi's Playhouse opened in Hoffman Estates, IL. in October 2003 and our second location in Plainfield opened in April 2005. We also have interest to open other locations across the country. We serve hundreds of families and offer programs for infants through adulthood and raise awareness about Down syndrome to our communities and across the country. We offer programming to Hispanic and Polish families, give presentations to health care professionals, host educational seminars, perform with the kids at various community events and the list goes on and on!

We recently started an incredible literacy program that offers free tutoring to kids with Down syndrome! Research has shown that children with Down syndrome learn to read differently. When you teach them the way "THEY" learn the results are incredible! (and the looks on their faces are priceless!) We have over 50 kids being tutored at the Hoffman Estates location alone! This program is AMAZING! I could go on forever!! But I won't! Please check out our website at www.gigisplayhouse.com.

On June 11th GiGi's Playhouse is having it's 3rd Annual Down Syndrome Awareness 5 k Fun Run / 1 mile Walk at Busse Woods at 9 A.M.. This is a great opportunity for you and your children to "make a difference by not seeing a difference". Our goal is to invite the community in so they can see how beautiful Down syndrome can be. I promise you will not get better high fives at the finish line than at this event!



The high fives at the finish line are priceless!

Today GiGi is going to preschool, she is potty trained and the sky is the limit for her. We learned not to put limitations on her and yet she still surprises us everyday. She is always good for a kiss and a hug and brings a smile to everyone she meets. Sometimes we laugh when we hear people say "She suffers from Down syndrome." Does she look like someone who is suffering???



"Suffering" into the sunset!!

Thank you for taking the time to read this story and for (hopefully) opening your eyes to the tremendous potential that individuals with Down syndrome have to offer!!

Down Syndrome Creed

My face may be different
 But my feelings the same.
 I laugh and I cry
 And take pride in my gains.
 I was sent here among you
 To teach and to love
 As God in the Heavens
 Looks down from above.
 To Him I'm no different,
 His love knows no bounds;
 It's those here among you
 In cities and Towns
 That judge by me by standards
 That man has imparted,
 But this family I've chosen
 Will help me get started
 For I'm one of the children
 So special and few
 That came here to learn
 The same lessons as you.
 That love is acceptance,
 It must come from the heart;
 We all have the same purpose,
 Though not the same start.
 The lord gave me life
 To live and embrace,
 And I'll do it as you do
 But at my own pace.

-Unknown

For Mom & Dad

Dear Parents,

*It's never too soon to teach our children to accept rather than reject someone who may appear to be different. Please contact GiGi's Playhouse with any questions you may have about Down syndrome.
 1-847-885-PLAY or www.gigisplayhouse.com*

Kids with Down syndrome are KIDS first!! They feel, love, play, laugh, learn and have fun just like YOU!!!

Here is simple explanation of Down syndrome taken from our activity books. (These are available for free at the Playhouse and are great for school aged kids.)

Kids with Down syndrome have one extra chromosome in some or all of their cells. Chromosomes tell your body how to grow.

When a person has an extra chromosome it mixes up their bodies directions a little. That is why people with Down syndrome sometimes look a little different and have to try harder to learn. It is no ones fault and YOU can help by being their friend! Be patient and kind and they will give it back to you ten times over!!



A Down Syndrome Awareness Center

www.gigisplayhouse.com

Hoffman Estates 847-885-PLAY

1069 West Golf Road Hoffman Estates IL 60194

Plainfield 630-778-PLAY

GiGi's Playhouse is a not for profit Down Syndrome Awareness Center that offers activities and resources to individuals with Down syndrome their families and the community. We are a recognized 501c3 charitable organization (aka write off!).