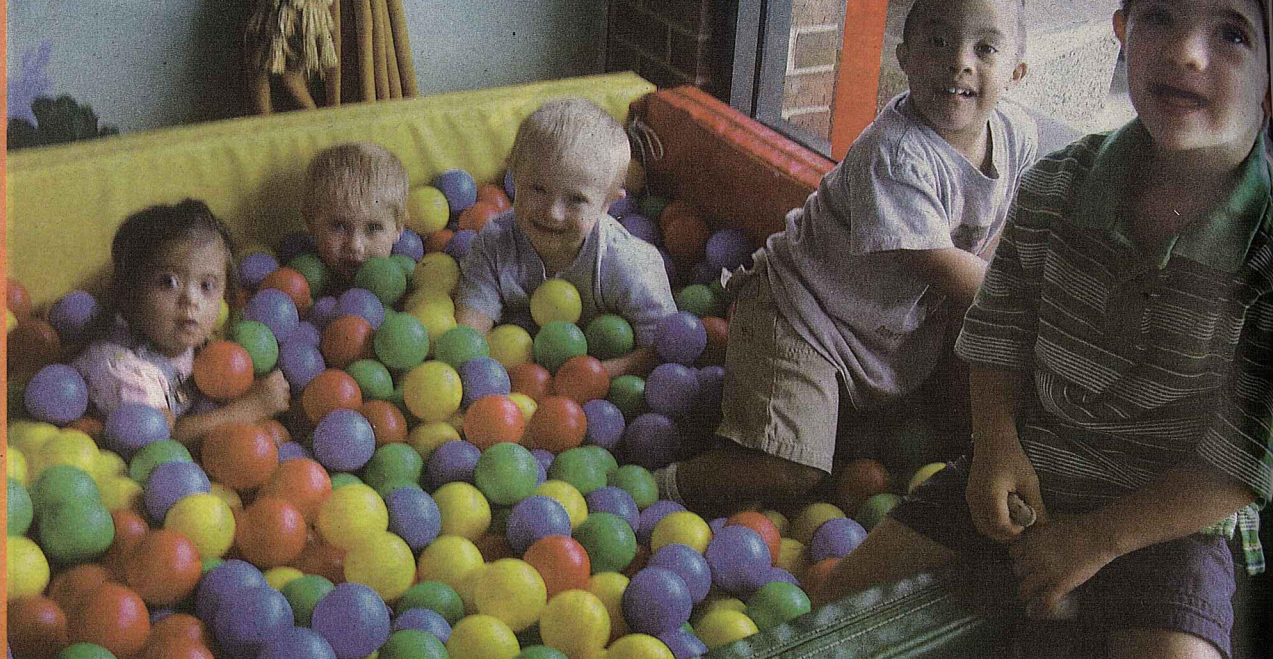


A place to play

GiGi's Playhouse offers kids with Down syndrome the chance to grow



Photos courtesy of GiGi's Playhouse

BY BETHEL SWIFT

Paul and Nancy Gianni celebrated their daughter Gigi's first birthday by raising \$20,000 to open GiGi's Playhouse—a Down syndrome awareness center in Hoffman Estates.

Soon after giving birth, the Giannis learned Giluliana (Gigi) had Down syndrome. "I thought everything was going to be fine," Gianni remembers, "... until I saw other people's reactions. That's when I started to think my life was over."

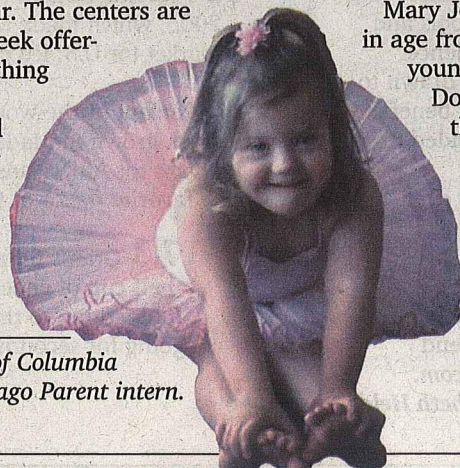
She says many families are flooded with information on potential negatives immediately following diagnosis. "A lot of families then end up believing all of this and staying home with their child," Gianni says. "But that is the worst thing you can do for a child with Down syndrome because they are extremely social.

"I read so many things that she wouldn't be able to do, so many stigmas. I literally thought I would never go on vacation again. I thought we would have to sell the boat, our lake house, everything. But, that's the point of the Playhouse, is to let parents know the truth."

The Giannis started the Playhouse in October 2003. A second center is located in Plainfield and they hope to add a third location in Chicago before the end of the year. The centers are open 80 to 90 hours a week offering free classes on everything from literacy and sign language to crawling and "hop, skip and jumping" activities for ages 2 through adult.

"Our kids do a lot of therapy," says Roberta Costion, presi-

Bethel Swift, a graduate of Columbia College Chicago, is a Chicago Parent intern.



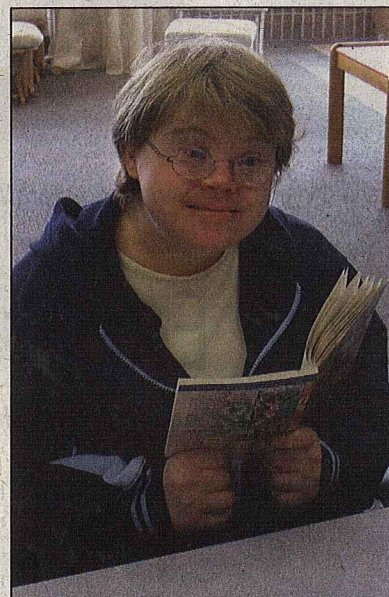
dent of the Hoffman Estates Playhouse. "We try to make it a game, not work." Costion has two sons, Jack, 5, with Down syndrome and Jase, 1½, who she good-humoredly describes as "just a little devil."

Gianni says the groups offered at the Playhouse are just as significant for siblings as for children with Down syndrome. "They see the fear and uncertainty in their parents and they wonder how it will affect their life," she says. "They don't ask mom and dad, they ask other kids: 'What's it like to have a sister with Down syndrome?'"

For the many individuals and families who volunteer and teach classes at the Playhouse, it's not just about educating their kids, it's about educating the world. "Our goal is to celebrate the lives and showcase the talents of children with Down syndrome," says Costion. "We want to make our kids a majority, not a minority."

Mary Jo Shepherd has five children ranging in age from 18 months to 13 years old. Her youngest, Annabelle, was diagnosed with Down syndrome shortly after birth. At the hospital, Shepherd received an informational packet about GiGi's Playhouse and has been attending ever since.

"People are always telling parents what you have to give a child with Down syndrome," Shepherd says. "They never say that a child with Down syndrome gives you more than you could ever imagine."



The GiGi's Playhouse free Learn to Read program has more than 100 participants of various ages.

The organization has also pioneered a literacy program that is enjoying continued success. "This is the one place where they don't have to play catch up," says Jenni Von Tobel, director of the Hoffman Estates Playhouse. "They are the leaders."

Information on the center is spread mostly by word of mouth and the Playhouse has a newsletter circulation of 1,100. "The families here are so proud of their kids," says Gianni. "They want the world to see their potential."

And the world has. The Playhouses receive seven to 10 (national and international) requests weekly for information on how to start programs similar to GiGi's. The centers also send out "Celebration Packs" to hospitals with a calendar (which has sold more than 10,000 copies) and a sheet of

local support groups for new parents.

Volunteer staff say at least once a month, the center welcomes an anxious new mother like Shepherd. "We look outside and we instantly know it's a new mom by the way she carries herself and the fear in her eyes," says Gianni. Shepherd recalls how hearing a simple congratulation made a huge impact on her. "Most people were saying 'I'm sorry.' And I'm like, 'sorry for what?' Here, people actually celebrated Down syndrome."

Shepherd says, "you know in your heart that your child has a future. But other people don't. They have a future and it is a good one."

Learn more about GiGi's Playhouse at its Web sites, gigisplayhouse.org or gigisplayhousetoo.com. 