BY LISA STAMOS • PHOTOS COURTESY OF GIGI'S PLAYHOUSE

GiGi's Playhouse Down Syndrome Achievement Centers provide free therapeutic and educational programming to individuals with Down syndrome and their families. This location in Hoffman Estates also serves as the headquarters for the entire organization.

Catching Up with Nancy Gianni

Quintessential Barrington last visited with Nancy Gianni three years ago, when she shared the growth of GiGi's Playhouse with QB readers. She said, "Never did I dream that in just eight years we would be opening our 14th location across the country and our first international Playhouse in Mexico. Gigi speaks at the opening of all locations, so it looks like we'll brush up on her Spanish for that one!" Nearly three years and 16 more locations later, we caught up with Gianni, a South Barrington resident and the founder of GiGi's Playhouse, which is named after her daughter, Gigi.

QB: ***How did your amazing journey with your daughter Gigi begin?***

NG: Eleven years ago, when my daughter Gigi was born, I had no idea she was going to change the world. Well, that's not entirely true. In retrospect, there were many enlightening signs. Before I found out I was pregnant with Gigi, I became extremely outspoken. I wondered why I was on this moral "high horse" and then I found out I was pregnant.

Excited, I remember thinking, "Wow! This child has a voice!" Who is she going to be? The President? She is already morally sound and making me stand up for what is right. I should not have been surprised when she was born with Down syndrome.

QB: ***Were you always so confident about having a child with Down syndrome?***

NG: Eleven years ago, I did not see Gigi's birth as the miracle I know it is today. I was blindsided by her Down syndrome diagnosis and petrified for the whole family. I knew I was going to get through the experience, but I was afraid of the life my kids would now have. I had always wanted to help people, especially those with Down syndrome. Secretly, I felt as if I had willed this child upon my family.

QB: ***At what point did GiGi's Playhouse become a reality?***

NG: I opened the first GiGi's Playhouse immediately after Gigi's first birthday. GiGi's was created by a series of little miracles that continue to happen to this day. The first week that the idea for GiGi's Playhouse popped (or was placed!) into my head the miracles began. Every time I was discouraged something else would happen, encouraging me—no compelling me—to keep moving forward.

QB: ***What was your first step to build GiGi's Playhouse?***

NG: When the idea of GiGi's Playhouse came to me, the first thing my husband said was "you better check the insurance liability." I called my insurance man, who happened to be out of town. I said I have a quick question, and so spoke with someone else. I tried to be vague (sometimes when people hear Down syndrome it complicates things). I explained that I was opening a learning center for children with special needs. He was silent for a moment, and then said "May I ask what type of special needs?"I cautiously replied "Down syndrome." He excitedly responded, "I have a 16-year-old with Down syndrome. Will there be something for him?" Securing insurance was no longer an issue!

Gigi Gianni and Nancy Gianni, her mom, are busy with travel to open and support new locations of GiGi's playhouse.

QB: ***What other ideas came forward for the project?***

NG: Near the time GiGi's Playhouse opened, I spoke with a friend who also has a child with Down syndrome. I told her that I had always wanted to create a calendar showing the beauty of our children. She had researched the idea too, but said that the production costs were simply too expensive. A few days later, I picked up personal pictures and I mentioned the calendar concept to the photographer. She blurted out, "I have always wanted to do that! My husband and I looked into it, but didn't know where to find the kids or how to get started!"

QB: ***How did the calendar project succeed?***

NG: The photographer asked if I would consider submitting her work for review by our board! She said she was looking for a project like this and would be honored to do it pro bono. I calmly told her that I would submit her work to the "board" (which at the time, was only me) and get back to her! It is with wonder and amazement that I reflect on this story that launched a yearly calendar tradition at GiGi's Playhouse.

QB: ***What is your advice for others in a similar situation?***

NG: Miracles are not always pretty, or easily seen, and sometimes you must search for them. A miracle may even be disguised in pain or tragedy. It is what you do with that experience that brings your miracle to the forefront. It is finding inner strength to propel you to action. Do not think you don't have it! You are born with it. You just have to find it.

QB: ***How do you reconcile having a child with special needs today?***

NG: I did not know that the birth of Gigi and the shocking diagnosis of Down syndrome would be a miracle, but let me tell you, it has triggered a series of miracles that are changing the world.

QB: ***Your vision to support your daughter and the families of children with Down syndrome has grown far and wide. What is happening today?***

NG: Those miracles that are GiGi's Playhouse continue to happen every day—here at the National Achievement Center in Hoffman Estates, and across the country (and in Mexico)! Every time a new baby and family are welcomed into the Playhouse and celebrated, hope is present. During open gym, when children with Down syndrome romp, run, and laugh with their peers demonstrating that children naturally embrace the possibilities existing in each of us, love is present. When the therapies provided during purposeful play activities impart the additional boost for a young boy to take his first steps, joy is present. And, at GiGi's Playhouse, when we move forward with anticipation, embracing all the work that remains to demonstrate to the world the amazing capabilities and gifts of individuals with Down syndrome, faith abounds.

QB: ***Nancy, you have been on a mission since Gigi's birth. What's next?***

NG: When people ask me when I am going to slow down I always say, "I will slow down when the miracles slow down". Well it does not appear that the miracles will end anytime soon! A higher power is navigating this wild ride. Gigi and I just happen to be sitting in the driver's seat. Gigi continues to travel and speak at every opening. It is such a gift to see her using her own voice—one that originated within in me just 12 years ago.

With that, our mission to change the world will continue—one child, one diagnosis, one community (and, one miracle) at a time!

About GiGi's Playhouse

GiGi's Playhouse Down Syndrome Achievement Centers provide free therapeutic and educational programming to individuals with Down syndrome and their families. From prenatal diagnosis to career skills, GiGi's make a lifetime commitment to the families. What began as a mothers dream has turned into a global movement of acceptance and accomplishments. A single Playhouse in Hoffman Estates, Ill., has grown into a series of international, inspirational Achievement Centers where thousands of individuals and families participate in no-fee education, health and wellness, and therapeutic programs. Currently, there are 21 Playhouses throughout the United States and Mexico. The achievement and celebration continue—by 2015, there will be 30 established Playhouses. To learn more, visit www.gigisplayhouse.org.