

# The World Needs More Places Like Gigi's Playhouse

Before the introduction of one of the nation's leading centers for Down syndrome support, there were few places for families to go; now, for families navigating a Down syndrome diagnosis, Gigi's offers support in ways once unheard-of.

When Michelle Pfeiffer welcomed a beautiful baby girl on June 13, 2001, she anticipated her life would change.

Already raising young son, Andrew, Pfeiffer had an idea of what it would take to raise a second child.

However, little could prepare her for the shock of what was to follow, as daughter Anna was diagnosed with Down syndrome shortly after birth and, months later, leukemia.

A newcomer to the Down syndrome community, Pfeiffer sought out support from anyone and everyone who would offer it.

At times feeling alone in her efforts to navigate an unfamiliar diagnosis, Pfeiffer had a realization.

"There really wasn't somewhere to go for programs for the families or even when they're little outside of school," Pfeiffer said. "Support came from connections with other families who had kids with Down syndrome. That was it"

Pfeiffer counts herself lucky. She established a steady support system early-on, but, for those without connections, the challenge was harder, Pfeiffer said.

For those families unable to build connections, an answer would surface with the opening of what was to become the nation's first Gigi's Playhouse in 2003.

According to its website, Gigi's now operates with over 57 locations across the U.S. and has rapidly expanded, offering free-of-charge services to all families in need of aid.

Now the president of Gigi's Playhouse and having navigated raising a young child with Down syndrome, Pfeiffer understands how critical the early support and care Gigi's can provide is.

While it may be true that those with Down syndrome can learn and master the same skills as any other, however, it is hard to ignore the overarching stigma of "incapability" that is associated with the disorder.

"For those with Down syndrome, they wear their diagnosis," Pfeiffer explained. "So, if somebody sees them and instantly recognizes that they have Down syndrome, they might not know what they are or aren't capable of."

Those with the genetic predisposition desire the same respect and recognition intrinsic to being human, and Pfeiffer's daughter, Anna, is a stark example of how far the confidence and skills instilled in her have carried her.

A passionate individual, Anna is employed at a local coffee shop, 321 Coffee, with plans to work at another local business and Gigi's partner, Howdy Homemade Ice Cream.

And Anna is far from the only Gigi's participant who has found the workplace to be a meaningful addition to their life.

A local Dairy Queen has relied on the help of talented ice-cream-cake-connoisseur, Paul, whose dedication and devotion in the workplace have made him an MVP.

"It was a serious need they had," Pfeiffer explained. "He would go in there twice a week and make up to 12 cakes in a day. And they love Paul there."

Additionally, Ruckus Pizza and Bar in Raleigh has praised the efforts of employee Matthew, an individual that has given his all to the job, with longtime Gigi's employee Cindy Riley having described Matthew as a "one-of-a-kind" individual.

"His way with words would surpass that of even the most well-versed individual," she said.

While some businesses are averse to hiring those with intellectual disabilities, like Down syndrome, the select few that offer employment to individuals like Paul and Matthew never look back, but they must take the initiative, first.

"You get to see this relationship that we might never have been able to see because no one ever took that step- that step to see, 'are they capable?'" Pfeiffer commented on the importance of businesses giving individuals with Down syndrome a chance.

While the examples of Matthew, Paul, and Anna are some of the very few that exist among a plethora of individuals, they display examples of the undeniable impact opportunities in the workplace can provide.

The "incapable" misconception is far from the most significant and harmful stigma associated with those with Down syndrome.

The "positivity" misconception that those with Down syndrome are "happy" all of the time is a "huge" misconception, Riley noted.

"People with Down syndrome are people. They have all of the same emotions as anyone else and good and bad days," she said.

Thus, if society is to ever begin viewing those with Down syndrome as equal, then they must first erase the seemingly innocent "positivity" misconception, an issue that tireless Gigi's employees, like Cindy Riley, have been combatting daily.

There's still much work to be done, however, all perceptions aside.

Rising healthcare costs following the emergence of COVID-19 has resulted in an ever-heightened need for the services and treatments organizations like Gigi's can provide to families free-of-cost.

"Sometimes I forget to say programs are free," Pfeiffer said, reminiscing on one particular instance when she neglected to mention Gigi's' free-of-charge guarantee to one grateful mother.

"She just started crying," she said. "That's what this means to families."

Free services are undoubtedly an intrinsic aspect of Gigi's that makes it so valuable to families.

However, it is, perhaps, the community that Gigi's provides that truly sets it apart.

While she may not have a child with Down syndrome, herself, Riley recalled how she was welcomed into the Gigi's community with open arms.

"I came in one day to volunteer, and I never looked back," she explained of the instant impact the community had on her.

It wasn't the money, the prestige, or the pride associated with a position at Gigi's that offered its allure to the longtime employee but, rather, the place.

Reminiscing on what stood out to her about Gigi's, site manager Tara Stoll commented on the ways she saw the organization impact her own daughter, 14-year-old Olivia.

"What she struggles with, she more than makes up for in other ways, but we still have to be intentional with building her strengths," she said

And Gigi's has been there along the way, gently guiding Olivia and Stoll, too, through their journey attempting to navigate the diagnosis.

Compassionate guidance and support have allowed Olivia to build on her strengths without forcing those skills that have proven harder to master, and, for Stoll, watching her own daughter grow along the way has been an entirely rewarding process.

"It's a beautiful thing when your kids can teach you something," Stoll said.

In a society where most would rather be influencers, rather than influenced, maybe Gigi's has a lesson from which all could stand to learn: a lesson in passion, the value of community and the fundamental importance of acceptance.

To today's 30-something-year-old "Michelle Pfeiffers" navigating an unfamiliar diagnosis, Gigi's stands at the ready, lending a compassionate hand and the love of an entire community at a moment's notice.

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