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Photo exhibition gives Down syndrome awareness a voice

By: Bridget Doyle/triblocal.com staff reporter

11/04/09 11:13 AM 1077 hits



Gigi Gianni, 7, of Barrington. Photo by Thomas Balsamo.

She knows every word to a Taylor Swift song on the radio, will only wear her backpack on one shoulder because "it's cool" and her favorite pair of shoes are black patent leather boots. Gigi Gianni is just like your average 7-year-old with an attitude, but she also has Down syndrome.

"She loves like everyone else, gets angry like everyone else and hurts like everyone else," said Gigi Gianni's mother Nancy Gianni of Barrington. "We need to replace the textbook image of Down syndrome with these photographs."

The photographs Nancy Gianni refers to are from the "I Have a Voice" project, a traveling photo exhibition featuring portraits of children and adults with Down syndrome. The exhibition attempts to capture the souls of the subjects, said the project's photographer Thomas Balsamo. The gallery is currently on display at the Des Plaines Public Library, 1501 Ellinwood St., and will be open to the public through the end of November.

The project, which began in the fall of 2007, is the product of a collaboration of forces, all of which strove to spread awareness about Down syndrome. Since its creation, the display has traveled all over

Chicagoland as well as to Denver, Colo. and Bloomington, Ind.

Nancy Gianni, founder of [Gigi's Playhouse](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to Down syndrome awareness, said that her push to get the project going came one day when she was called in to Gigi's school by her teacher. Though her daughter was doing well in school, the teacher told her that some of her classmates' parents had called in because they were uncomfortable with "having a kid like her" in the class.

"Gigi was being judged because she wears her diagnosis on her face," Nancy Gianni said. "I just want these parents to see her and other kids with Down syndrome for the beautiful people they are. That's what we're trying to do with this gallery. Instead of a 1950's textbook sketch, they will see this smart, sophisticated image."

Balsamo, owner of Portraits by Thomas in Barrington, said he hoped the project would create an emotional response from the people who view it. Through his work, he said, he hoped to give back and make the world a better place. And Balsamo's not all hot air; he is also the co-creator and photographer of "Souls: Beneath and Beyond Autism," which was awarded The Autism Society of America's "Literary Work of the Year" in 2003.

When referring to the subjects of his work, Balsamo seemed in awe at the relationships between the family members and the children. He was lucky, he said, to be a part of the project.

"It's just incredible to see the parents of these children rise to the occasion and become great parents," he said. "They deal with challenges every day, but they are so positive about life. Gigi's is so special because it teaches people to celebrate uniqueness. So many people have been touched by Gigi's-I'm happy I could contribute to their effort."

After Nancy Gianni and Balsamo came together to work on the project, the final piece came from Lisa Schuh whose 4-year-old daughter, Teagan Schuh, has Down syndrome and was featured in a past Gigi's Playhouse calendar. When Lisa Schuh's father, Steve Bagby, heard about the project, he decided to work with his daughter to take the project to a whole new level. The two have now helped turn "I Have a Voice" into a national campaign.

The next portion of the project is a coffee table book waiting to be published, Schuh said. She and members of Gigi's playhouse are raising money to get the book published, and will a reception Nov. 14 at the Des Plaines Library to raise awareness about the project.

"The photos are a great way to open up dialogue about Down syndrome," Nancy Gianni said. "We want kids to walk by and ask their

parents 'What's that?' Let's read about [Down syndrome], talk about it and help people not to be afraid of it."

GiGi's Playhouse currently has locations in Hoffman Estates, Aurora, Chicago, McHenry and Sioux City, Iowa. In 2010, Nancy Gianni said Gigi's will open two more playhouses in Iowa, one in San Diego and one in New York. For more information about Gigi's Playhouse, go to www.gigisplayhouse.com.

To see a video of some of the images from I Have a Voice, [click here](#).

To see a photo gallery featuring images from the exhibition, [click here](#).

-By [Bridget Doyle](#), Triblocal.com reporter

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