

## Islands of Brilliance Origin Story



## It all began in a neurologist's office ...

The story of Islands of Brilliance began in a doctor's office in the Spring of 2001, when program founders Mark and Margaret Fairbanks were given a three word prognosis for their son Harry: "Lower Your Expectations." Harry had recently been diagnosed with autism, but rather than encouraging his parents, neurologists told the couple that their 3 year old son "didn't understand the difference between the beginning and end of a book, would not be ready for 1st grade, and don't plan on him going to college."

Like many parents of children identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), Mark and Margaret refused to give up on Harry, and discovered that by reaching into his world and engaging with his interests, they were able to build a bridge between his world and their own. By focusing on Harry's area of perseverance (a key characteristic of autism, referring to an individual's devotion to a particular subject matter) along with encouraging Harry's growing interest in and skilled use of technology, an idea was born.

Islands of Brilliance was developed as a pilot program in Fall 2012 with a simple yet groundbreaking premise: pair children with autism one-on-one with design professionals who would teach the students valuable software skills. The students would create projects based on their "subject matter expertise" and walk away from the class with new design capabilities, a sense of accomplishment and confidence in presenting their ideas in a group setting, plus a connection to their mentor as well as their fellow students.

Islands of Brilliance has grown considerably since 2012. The Islands of Brilliance team is continually amazed and inspired by the pure unadulterated creativity of their students, as well as the empathy and generosity of the creative community that makes it all possible.

Oh, and Harry Fairbanks? He graduated with honors from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Peck School of the Arts in December 2020, is happily employed, and continues to enjoy his love of trains, traveling to railroad museums in his free time.



[islandsofbrilliance.org](http://islandsofbrilliance.org)



## Major Milestones

**FEBRUARY 2022**

With its return to in-person programming, Islands of Brilliance launches Sandbox@ workshops, traveling throughout Wisconsin and Minnesota to reach more families in the autism community.

**NOVEMBER 2021**

The National Endowment of the Arts (NEA) awards the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee \$150,000 to study IOB's unique intervention model through the newly established Autism Brilliance Lab for Entrepreneurship (ABLE) with research beginning in Summer 2022.

**APRIL 2021**

IOB is awarded the Force for Positive Change award by the Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation and Marquette University for its swift and impactful Covid-19 pivot.

**DECEMBER 2020**

IOB closes out the year with 3,358 student enrollments (more than six times our 2019 enrollment numbers) and 4,481 instructional hours, serving more participants during its first nine months of online workshops than during its first seven years of in-person programming.

**MARCH 2020**

Islands of Brilliance launches online programming in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak.

**DECEMBER 2019**

Enrollment in Milwaukee surpasses 500 registrations in a calendar year.

**SEPTEMBER 2019**

IOB introduces Brilliant Sandbox, a unique partnership with local school districts that pairs neurodiverse students with grade level peers outside of the typical school environment to help create new, positive relationships.

**MAY 2019**

Brilliant Studios, an integrated employment model, hires its first three neurodiverse employees.

**FEBRUARY 2019**

Brilliant Breakfast Club is established to foster pathways toward independence for young adults 18+ by focusing on daily living skills and providing opportunities for socialization.

**OCTOBER 2018**

Digital Academy program launches using product-based learning in virtual reality and video game development.

**JUNE 2017**

Coding workshops are offered for the first time, using Google CS learning modules.

**JUNE 2016**

Brilliant Guest Artist Series begins with workshops led by professional designers, illustrators and educators from area businesses and universities.

**2016**

Workshops are held in Duluth, Minn. and Chicago, Ill. Enrollment in Milwaukee surpasses 100 registrations in a calendar year.

**NOVEMBER 2015**

IOB hosts its first Colors & Chords, a unique fundraising event that combines music and art to celebrate the accomplishments of our neurodiverse community.

**2015**

Workshops are held in Minneapolis, Minn. and Portland, Ore.

**OCTOBER 2012**

IOB holds the first workshop as "minimum viable experience" with seven students at Discovery World in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.