



For Immediate Release

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National Endowment for the Arts Awards \$150,000 Research Grant to Islands of Brilliance and UW-Milwaukee

Wisconsin Nonprofit One of the First to Utilize Creative Arts as Autism Intervention Tool

Milwaukee (January 25, 2022) — Since 2012, Islands of Brilliance, a Milwaukee-based non-profit, has been pioneering art and design as an intervention tool for children and young adults on the autism spectrum. This January the non-profit, along with the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee (UWM), received a \$149,487 research grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to study the efficacy of its innovative approach to prepare those on the autism spectrum for future employment. Nationally, unemployment estimates for neurodiverse young adults range from 50% to as high as 85%.

"The grant is significant because academic research that examines the impact of Islands of Brilliance's use of creativity as an intervention for autistic individuals has been a long-term goal for our organization," said Mark Fairbanks, cofounder and executive director of Islands of Brilliance. "Working with Dr. Nathaniel Stern and Dr. Celeste Campos-Castillo at UWM is an incredible opportunity, one that will benefit the community we serve and forever alter the trajectory of our organization."

The NEA grant is renewable for five years and allows Islands of Brilliance to partner with professors and researchers from UWM to create the Autism Brilliance Lab for Entrepreneurship (ABLE). Through ABLE, researchers will study whether teaching children and young adults creative design skills can help prepare them for the workforce. The research team will also investigate how employers can better prepare neurotypical work environments for autistic individuals.

ABLE will be co-directed by Fairbanks and Stern, who is a professor of art and engineering / mechanical engineering at UWM. Associate Professor of Sociology Celeste Campos-Castillo will oversee the research. The ABLE initiative will kick off June 1, 2022, and run through May 31, 2023. Data collection and analysis will occur three times during the 12-month program.

"The National Endowment for the Arts is pleased to welcome Islands of Brilliance into the network of NEA Research Labs that are contributing critical information about the arts' impact on different facets of our lives," said Director of Research & Analysis Sunil Iyengar. "As demonstrated by Islands of Brilliance and others, the arts can be a source of resilience, well-being, and experiential learning. These skills and attributes have become increasingly sought-after in our challenging times."

Islands of Brilliance Background

Islands of Brilliance was founded by Mark and Margaret Fairbanks after their son, Harry, was diagnosed with autism at age three and they were told by the doctor to “lower your expectations.” Mark, who has a background in advertising, noticed Harry had an interest in both trains and technology. That realization led to the formation of Islands of Brilliance.

For the past nine years, Islands of Brilliance has engaged children and young adults with creative software to teach them valuable technical skills while also helping them learn and practice social, emotional and communication skills that are essential for successful employment.

The NEA grant is the first step to actualizing Mark’s vision of establishing Islands of Brilliance as an international incubator for the study, development and scaling of workforce development models for autistic individuals who have an interest in pursuing careers in art, design and production.

To learn more or donate to Islands of Brilliance, visit islandsofbrilliance.org.

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About Islands of Brilliance

Islands of Brilliance (IOB) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides unique learning and social engagement opportunities for neurodiverse students through a person-centered approach that allows individual interests and capabilities to flourish. Our programming, rooted in art, design and STEM-based curriculum, helps children and young adults on the autism spectrum learn valuable technical skills, while practicing critical social and emotional learning competencies in a supported environment. Our education team partners with parents, educators and support agencies to identify the appropriate programming mix to meet each student’s needs and goals. From foundational workshops featuring 1:1 mentorship for students beginning at age eight to our more rigorous Digital Academy program, we offer a robust menu of programs that help build the technical and social skills needed to thrive, whether it be in the workplace or actively engaged in the community. For more information, visit islandsofbrilliance.org.