

Islands of Brilliance: National Endowment for the Arts awards \$150,000 research grant to Islands of Brilliance and UW-Milwaukee

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Milwaukee (February 8, 2022) — Islands of Brilliance and the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee (UWM) have received a \$149,487 research grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to study the efficacy of using art and design 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 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.

Since it was established in 2012, 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 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.”

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 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.

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.