

Transcription

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Terry: Hello and welcome to *Unrestrained*, the CPI podcast series. This is your host, Terry Vittone. Today I'm joined by Mark and Margaret Fairbanks, co-founders of Islands of Brilliance, their son Harry, and Matt Juzenas, creative director at the Crisis Prevention Institute and one of the first visual artists to volunteer as a mentor at Islands of Brilliance. Hello and welcome, Margaret, Mark, Harry, and Matt.

Margaret, Mark, Harry, and Matt: Thank you.

Terry: Mark Fairbanks has over 25 years of experience working in advertising, design, and digital agencies and is the co-founder of Translator, a design firm he co-founded with Cindi Thomas in 2010. He brings his background in visual and user-centered design to develop curriculum as well as the overall experience of Islands of Brilliance.

Mark's standing in the creative community is a great draw in recruiting both professionals and college students interested in volunteering at Islands of Brilliance. When not occupied with Islands of Brilliance or Translator, he finds meaning and art spending time on the flower gardens that surround the Fairbanks family home. His most cherished moments are around the dinner table with Margaret and their two boys, Charlie and Harry.

Margaret Fairbanks has been a special education teacher for the past six years after earning her Master's in Special Education from the University of Minnesota. She is currently at Whitefish Bay High School, where she works in a classroom with students who have the most severe needs. She also wears the hat of transition coordinator with the focus on life after high school for students with special needs.

In her role of lead teacher at Islands of Brilliance, Margaret goes to great lengths to ensure that students have a successful classroom

experience. After reading through all applications, Margaret contacts parents and talks through the format of the class to make sure that any additional supports, such as providing a written or visual schedule, are in place for every class. She also discusses areas of sensory sensitivity so that students can focus on their projects and not on sensory challenges.

Harry Fairbanks is a senior at Whitefish Bay High School.

Matt Juzenas took a bit of an unconventional path leading to his current role as the creative director of CPI. After high school, he studied elementary education with a focus on special ed. Just before completing his degree, he left the University of Iowa to switch careers, starting all over again studying graphic design at the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design. Little did he know, after 12 years of working in digital agencies, his path would come full circle when special education and design would mash up together as a mentor and creative lead at Islands of Brilliance.

Outside of work, Matt is the favorite uncle and big friendly giant of nine nieces and nephews. He enjoys photography and preparing delicious meals for friends and family.

So then everybody, thank you and let's begin. Our first question, I think a good way to begin our interview, is to tell our listeners about how a physician's three-word prognosis for your son Harry back in 2001 became the inspiration for Islands of Brilliance.

Margaret: You want to take this one?

Mark: I will take this one.

Margaret: Okay.

Mark: We sat in the neurologist's office when we were given the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder, which we never really argued with. But it was more the prognosis, and the verbatim words the neurologist said were "Harry won't be ready for first grade, and don't plan on him going to college, so, basically, **lower your expectations.**" Which, since he was not even three years old, was more than a bit shocking. And actually I think as a parent you're already going through, you know, fear and heartbreak, and this added to the emotions. And it was more of anger because how could they predict what our son was going to be capable of? And I remember looking at them and telling

them, "Well, he *will* be ready for first grade, and we'll be the ones who determine what he's capable of," which is what we went on to do.

Terry: All right, and how about the breakthrough moment with the train? Can we talk about that?

Margaret: You know, it's funny because we look at it as one moment, but it was one moment that led to another moment that led to another moment. So here he [Harry] cringes when we tell this story, but it's true. For many years he lived in the world of trains. And all of our teachers and the support staff that kept saying, "You have to connect with him." And so often with kids with autism, when you see extreme behaviors, it's because they can't communicate.

And that's what we were struggling with, is how do we communicate with him, but he was clearly communicating with trains. He was back and forth, and he would look at their faces and he would have conversations with them. And finally one day I just pretended / was a train, I mean . . .

[To Harry] You remember that, right? You were pretty little. I literally got on the floor and crawled around and went "Beep beep! Hello, Thomas!" And for the first time in I couldn't even tell you Harry actually looked at me. He looked at me, and we connected for that moment, and I realized that that was a way to reach him, was to go into his world. So we did that often.

I mean, again, that's the one moment and that's the one moment of clarity for us. It's like we have to reach him where he's at, which is sort of again moment after moment, dot after dot that we kept connecting eventually led us to Islands because we have to connect with the kids with what their interests are. And we did it so often with Harry. Getting him to draw, we found the old fashioned fax paper that rolls and looks like a wheel. So it became a wheel that he could draw on.

Stories were always Thomas stories. Everything was train-related because it's what he connected with. And that's how, you know, we were able to reach him and he was able to communicate with us because he wanted to, because we were talking about things that were interesting for him. And then eventually he just came, you know. Now it's HO trains and creating model railroads and making movies. And he taught us as much as we taught him.

Terry: Excellent. Now I love how you say in your TED talk, you said that Islands of Brilliance is a design experience that delivered on focused socialization and a sense of accomplishment. And on your website you write it was developed as a pilot program in the fall of 2012. How did you get to that breakthrough where you said, "Here's a premise that I can . . . that we can make a program with that will celebrate special gifts rather than special needs"?

Mark: It was . . . you know, by the time Harry was eight years old we were comfortable enrolling him in activities, and one of the programs he was enrolled in was special needs Little League. So I remember going to the game, and there were about 30 kids between the two teams, but none of them really seemed interested. And I realized that these were really kind of "guard rail" programs for kids with disabilities, and wouldn't it be nice if there was a program that actually captured what their interests and abilities were?

So I kind of filed that away and around the same time I noticed that Harry was spending a lot of time with technology. And he was online watching YouTube videos of stop-action animation kind of stuff. And he would post in the comment threads, which I thought was pretty cool, because he was able to carry on a conversation online that he might be . . . he might not be comfortable with his peers in person. And that was really interesting how technology was this safe place and level setter for him, that some of the things he wouldn't ordinarily be comfortable with he could do there.

Then kind of the real key was he was with me; I was getting my oil changed. I had my laptop with me, and I'm working in Adobe Illustrator, you know, on a Saturday morning, and he's like, "Dad, that looks interesting. Can I try that?" So I said, "Well, when we get home I'll let you play around with it." So I showed him how to use some tools and things and just kind of left him alone to create. And I'll never forget about a half hour later he says, "Dad, come look what I did." And he shows me this drawing he's done using professional grade software of a Thomas character. And the cool thing is he's figured out how to use tools in there that I hadn't shown him how to use yet. So I showed him how to download pictures, and he starts making little stories and suddenly I can't get him off my computer, right?

He's crossed over into my world. So he's creative, he's using technology, you know, professional-level software, and I don't know how ideas come about, but then all of a sudden it just like clicked. It's like

area perseverance, then subject matter expertise, one-on-one mentoring, technology, software: Here's a program that captures what these kids are really capable of. So it was Islands of Brilliance.

It took a few years to do the pilot, but when we tested it and Matt was one of the first brave souls as a mentor. Because we talked the week before we launched it. It's like, you know, this worked great with my son and I, but I don't . . . we don't really know how it's going to work with a complete stranger. And . . . but we're going to, you know, we're going to test it on a small basis.

The first class all the kids arrived. I think the mentors were blown away by the creativity of them, of how they connected dots and just their sheer creativity. And then the following week they all showed up early and went and found their mentors. So they made the social connection. They sat down, and they were working before class even started. Now you juxtapose that with the Little League game where none of the kids were really interested. *Here* they're interested. They're engaged. They're showing focus. They'll work through the whole class. It was like, "Wow, this thing really works!" So it was a hypothesis that we had to prove worked, and that was just the beginning, and the classes have kind of grown and grown since then.

Terry: I was struck by what a stark contrast it was in the baseball game where you said the ball stopped and the teams just looked at it. And in Islands of Brilliance they're working before you can even, I mean as soon as they got in they went right to task.

Mark: Yeah.

Terry: What a dramatic difference.

Mark: Three years later we still get kids there early who'll just work through the entire class.

Margaret: One of my favorites . . . it sounds funny, but it actually speaks to the program. We had some parents come and say, "Yeah, we're sorry we're here so early, but he just wouldn't shut up about it, so we brought him early." And that, I mean it sounds funny, but that just speaks to how the kids can't wait to get there. And you know—

Matt: And how many times have we heard parents say, "We can never get them to be anywhere on time; we can never get them going"?

Margaret: Right.

Matt: And all of a sudden they're waiting at the door, waiting for them to come to the car to take them. So, yeah.

Terry: That's the best testament you can have for that. Now I'm going to repeat this idea. On your website you write, "The classes are designed to provide students the focused socialization and sense of accomplishment often lacking in traditional educational settings. We achieve this by teaching in a vertical manner using each child's area of perseverance." Maybe you could explain that for a lot of our listeners maybe who don't understand the concept of perseverance in autism.

Margaret: Well again, Mark had mentioned subject matter expertise. Again the clinical term is perseverance. Most students, and again I have to say "most students" because every student with autism is different. But for instance, Harry loved trains, and we were able to connect with him through trains. Now he has grown in his interests, but we typically find most students have, whether it's Super Mario or Minecraft, a lot of Minecraft lately—

Mark: A lot of Pixar movies—

Margaret: Pixar movies, Frozen, the newest one was Inside Out. There's something that you know once you let the kids be the expert; it takes away that "you're acting funny, you need to sit still, you need to do this" and all of a sudden frees them up to communicate in a way [they don't when] they're so uncomfortable in an environment where they feel like they have to.

They're so different than everybody else so that just the environment itself is—everybody there is on spectrum, so they're not going to stand out. They might have kids who are, you know, a little higher needs or a little higher functioning. That doesn't really matter. They're accepted, and guess what? They're sitting next to a person who's a professional, but they're the expert.

Terry: Yeah, I think the groundbreaking idea is that—

Margaret: Yeah.

Terry: —is that a person of that age is considered a subject matter expert because of their special gift. I mean that's truly remarkable.

Margaret: And we talk about like as parents sometimes you get tired—no offense, honey—but sometimes you get tired of hearing about trains all the time. But in the program, that's your job. I mean Matt can speak to this. You get to be the one saying, "Tell me more; tell me more. That's so great. I didn't know that." And it's not that we don't love hearing about trains. It's just that we get to hear it a lot more often than the mentors do. So when you're there for your hour and a half, you can let . . . it's a joy to hear how knowledgeable these kids are and just their excitement and their energy and their enthusiasm for what they know and what they want to share. And then what they can create visually, and that's where the vertical. It's not this so methodical the way a lot of curriculum is. This is just allowing them to just explode in ways that they don't even know yet.

Terry: That speaks to my next point in the question. Explain how teaching in a vertical manner can be a conduit, as you write, to horizontal learning.

Mark: I think it's, you know, if you start from that area of strength and self-confidence that then that kind of flows horizontally. So we hear it back from a lot of parents that because of the experience within our classroom they're . . . they see their child's growth in things like self-advocacy, self-confidence in the classroom, and being given credit for what they're capable of just kind of flows out into other subjects and just into their overall life outside our class. And what they're doing, you know, with Tommy too is, after he took Islands and was going into cross-country and things like that [the cross-country reference is to Mark's son, Harry], you see growth in the kids because I think we start from a place of comfort with them, right? If we start with what they know, and they're strong, and when they're given credit for that, that only can bring about positive things.

Terry: Kind of "If I can make it here I can kind of make it anywhere" kind of deal. A beautiful horizontal message that gets extrapolated to all aspects of other interests.

Margaret: Well, and then I don't mean to interrupt . . . one thing that I hear sometimes is . . . I mean I was hired at one of my first placements because I was considered an expert in autism, and I'm not sure that you can be an expert in autism, but I know a lot about it. But there's a certain

fear that people "I don't know how to communicate with them. I don't know what to expect." In this program that's not the, that's not . . . we don't know what to expect because guess what? These kids are capable of so much more than anybody ever gives them credit for. And I think that speaks to that vertical piece too.

It's like we do have expectations that they're going to create things that they're going to take ownership of—their project and they're going to guide us, and they're going to collaborate. Whereas in some school settings, and it's just because of the environment, it's just so hard when you've got such a plethora of kids. You've got typically functioning, you've got high functioning, you've got gifted and talented, and you've got a couple kids in the spectrum. And there you've got to kind of plug them into holes, whereas here we've created the environment for them. So—

Terry: That speaks to my next question, Margaret. As a special education teacher, you designed the Islands of Brilliance curriculum. How did that process work? And what were your instructional design decisions?

Margaret: Well, there's so much research around the one-on-one format. Every teacher would say, "I'd love to work one-on-one. That would be ideal. Then I know I could really connect with that child." Well, we designed it to be one-on-one. Then you have the kind of wraparound special ed support, which is me. So I'm really good at watching for behaviors. So what I typically do is I just circulate. I have my radar on the entire class.

And then also you know as we've developed the program we've incorporated art therapy; we have project managers who just keep doing more wraparound support. So there is so much there—it's not the school's fault—it's just because we've got this wonderful volunteer base. We have such support there that most programs can't get, and the kids just know that they're going to be protected and supported and, you know, provided for, and that we're going to meet their needs. And then being able to focus on their area of interest—computer-based, that's huge. We know from Harry it's like he's more comfortable on a computer than he is sitting in this room right now, right?

Harry: This is a blooper. [Laughter]

Margaret: He can cut this part out.

Matt: I think one of the really interesting things about the curriculum and the . . . the recipe in the room as Margaret was saying. You know it is one-on-one, but it's actually more than that one-on-one. It's one-on-one with a creative mentor and student, and then we have the paraprofessionals, we have the art therapists, we have Mark and Cindi who are circulating around as well. So it's actually more than one-on-one, but I think one of the interesting things about this program that's probably very unusual is that the one-on-one partnership is not with an expert in the autism world, that it is an expert in the creative world.

And so that matchup actually creates a lot of interesting opportunities because we as mentors don't necessarily know what is right or wrong to do. And so we might push these students a little further than we would see in a lot of special ed classrooms or the traditional settings. And we have so much else to learn. So there's so much just going back and forth between the students that is probably different than what they normally experience and certainly different than what we experience in the agency and creative world. So we're kind of all on this island together. It's very, you know, unexpected and you never really know what's going to come out of it. And I think that's where this is truly really a unique situation.

Terry: Well said. So that leads me to how does someone who wants to become, like Matt who we just heard from, become a mentor at Islands of Brilliance begin? How do they start? What did . . . I heard you guys have a waiting list now. Is that true?

Mark: We have been very successful in recruiting. We have made that a priority this past year in 2015 because we really can't increase the capacity of the program for students unless we increase the volunteer base. So we've gone out to any number of ad agencies, we've gone out to the design schools, we've gone to corporate design departments, and I'm just kind of blown away. And I think it's probably because of the increasing awareness and reputation of the program that we can go and do a talk and have four, five, six people immediately sign up for a class and then get another 10, 15 to register. So our ability to go out and really get people engaged and involved in the program never ceases to amaze me.

I think a lot of it gets back to—and I think Matt can talk about this a lot—is what do the creatives actually get out of that experience. And you know you're always looking for, or at least part of the population is

looking for some type of volunteer experience to give back. But what I think our creative volunteers get back from that experience goes beyond just that great feeling, which is really important, but it's a new lens on their own process. It's exposure to, you know, divergent and creative thinking through a child on the spectrum who experiences the world in a different way. You know, I've mentored kids, and the best word I can use is "rejuvenation." That working with these kids makes you realize what you love about what you do. And that's a really cool thing.

Terry: All right, and that leads to this question for Matt. I want you to talk a little about your history with Islands of Brilliance, how you became aware of the organization. And I understand that you recently had a breakthrough moment just this month, so we'd love to hear that story.

Margaret: It was awesome!

Terry: This is great.

Matt: Well, I learned about Islands of Brilliance. I had worked with both Mark and Cindi at Full House, which was the agency where we all worked together, and when Mark and Cindi went off to form Translator, I think it was about a year or two after that, they contacted me about Islands of Brilliance and asked if I would be interested in being a mentor. I don't even think at that time you guys knew I had done special ed in the past—

Mark: No!

Matt: —or anything like that, so it was something that as soon as I heard about it I was like, "Oh my gosh, how do I get in?"

So we were I think a team of . . . I think we had seven or eight—

Margaret: Seven.

Matt: —students, seven students that first session. And my student that I was paired with that first class was Tommy, and we have actually worked together every class since. So we're going three years later. And there's one other mentor, Nate, who was working with his student, Gabe, as well from the beginning, so there's two of us. And there's a couple other mentors who've had the experience of being able to be paired with the same students for multiple classes. So with Tommy it's been pretty great.

At times, especially at the beginning, it was challenging figuring out how to communicate together. Tommy is not highly verbal, and so it was figuring out how do I communicate. Do I write things down? Do I point? Do I just give him more time to process almost to the point, I always say, until I'm uncomfortable and I feel I need to interject? Take one more breath, one more beat. And that's usually right about when all of a sudden he's like, "Okay." You know, and it goes on. For three years we've been working together, and it's always been a challenge to get Tommy to just continue to grow and go to that next level.

And just last week, two weeks ago, we were working and I showed him something. We had to place 14 pictures from his cross country team into his poster. And the first one I showed him, the second one I showed him again, the third time we kind of did it together, and then 4 through 14 he did by himself. And also in the last couple of weeks we've been noticing he has been becoming more and more verbal. And so we were actually having some conversations, albeit small ones. We were . . . we were talking, which three years later was a first. And so—

Margaret: He was answering questions—

Matt: It really . . . it was an amazing day, so . . . which happened to be on our third anniversary from the very first day of that class. So that was pretty amazing.

Terry: Yeah, I mean even—

Margaret: We're so fortunate so many mentors come back again and again and again. And that just has . . . you just feel—

Mark: It's a 70% return rate, with the growth in the program. I think that speaks to, you know, the impact of that one-on-one, you know, mentorship.

Terry: What a breakthrough. Quantity doesn't matter in that instance, right? It's that the conversation happened at all. That's tremendous. And that leads into some questions. Harry, would you like to join the conversation with us?

Harry: I thought you'd never ask. [Laughter]

Terry: Well, it seemed like a long time, didn't it? [Laughter] Well, the first question I have here is what do you like about the Island classes?

Harry: I just think it's pretty neat how like mentors or people mentoring their student . . . the new students get to like take their interests and make it into something that they could get a career for. Giving them a, I don't want to be vulgar by saying this, but it gives them a hope of having a career, having a future because they're learning how to do these technological programs, which helps them to have more knowledge.

Terry: And what parts of the work at Islands of Brilliance that you did on your project did you enjoy the most?

Harry: Because I actually had them a lot, the classes, I'm trying to think of some of my favorite projects. I guess though, let's start with the one I'm doing in the advanced curriculum class, which is a fantasy account that my brother Charlie and I, who is unfortunately not here, called *Cartoon World*. Which is like, I would probably compare it to *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* because it's a similar universe of cartoon characters living together with us real people. And also, also with my mentor designing . . . trying to see if we can come up with a new flag for Milwaukee.

Terry: Excellent.

Harry: Another project that I did in the summer, which I actually have hanging up in my bedroom, is a poster based off a TV show, which actually I think is amazing, called *The Legend of Korra*. It's based off the first season, of course my favorite character in the show, Korra herself, and her friends and her enemies too.

And I think it's honorable to mention the one that kind of started it all, which is a photo-shopped photo picture of a *Cartoon World* comic. I'm not sure where it went, but it was actually hanging up in my room before. And now the *Legend of Korra* poster takes its place.

Terry: Is that part of the advanced program?

Harry: Which one?

Terry: Well, I'm not sure. The question I have here is what interests you most about the work you're doing in the advanced program? How has it changed from the . . . ?

Margaret: Remember what you said to Dad this weekend about the advanced curriculum? What's different about the advanced curriculum than the core curriculum?

Harry: It feels like you get a lot more freedom, essentially, because it feels almost like your mentor's getting you to really think deep into that project, those kind of projects or programs that you feel like you've got a lot more choices in what you can do than in the normal class. Because most students I've seen have just designed posters. It's like don't they want to do something else? Because they could also design a comic; they could design a movie; they could design a logo; they could design a flag like I am doing. That's why I feel like the advanced curriculum is pretty good because it expands the things you can create with technology.

Terry: And if a student was maybe reluctant to try Islands of Brilliance, what would you say to convince them to join? Any ideas?

Harry: What do you like the most? Do you like Super Mario, do you like G Force 2, do you like Sonic the Hedgehog, do you like Frozen, or any of those things? You can use one of your favorite things of all time and make something at Islands of Brilliance based off that thing.

Terry: All right. Thank you, Harry.

Harry: You're welcome.

Terry: On your website, co-founder Cindi Thomas writes about her favorite moment during an Islands of Brilliance session. Would you guys share a favorite moment? Matt, I think we may have yours or maybe not. You're certainly free to answer again. Would you guys each give one, starting with you, Margaret?

Margaret: I, you know . . . you mentioned that this might be one of the questions, and my problem is that there are so many. For me, it's just literally the kids running in the door and knowing that I have to greet them all, you know. And they're just so happy to be there and can't wait for the class to start, and how many more classes do we have. And Jared at one point in time said something about next week is the last week, and he went "aww."

And just knowing that the kids love it, the thank-yous we get from the families, the thank-yous we get from the mentors, like "thank you," and we keep saying, "No, no thank you!" I mean there's so many. It's hard work, but just the joy and the energy and the love and the empathy and, I don't know, there's just so much good that happens that it's hard to find one. It really is.

Terry: That's a great answer. Matt?

Matt: There's been so many connections made, both between mentors and students. Between mentors, I mean that really everybody always says things like they're a family, but it's unbelievable the families that are impacted both in and out of the program and the friendships that have been made. So I don't know, I mean there are so many. I remember at one point in the very first session with Tommy. A lot of kids on the spectrum also have sensory issues, so touch sometimes can be very comforting but also can be, you know, very upsetting. And Tommy, you know, always had his hood up on his sweatshirt to kind of help isolate himself and didn't want to be touched, and I remember it was the third or fourth week, and we're sitting and we're working side by side on the computer, and all of a sudden I just felt his little hand on top of my hand.

Margaret: It's not little anymore! He's gotten so big!

Matt: It's so big now. But he sat the rest of the class like that. And it was just a beautiful, simple little moment.

Margaret: He took his hat, took his hood down, too.

Matt: Yeah, and then the next time his hood was down. And so those little things have been things that have stuck with me throughout this whole time.

Terry: Excellent.

Margaret: I think we hear from parents—we've heard it for several different students, but what's so great is you hear it again and again. "My kid doesn't do that in the classroom. My kid won't speak. My kid won't raise their hand. I've never seen them stand up in front of people and talk." They'll do it for us because they're just so excited and so proud and that, you know, that self-confidence that we speak to, it's there because it builds every class. And by the time that the session is

over they cannot wait to talk about what they created with their mentor because they're a team.

Terry: Mark?

Mark: I do have one favorite.

Margaret: Just one? Come on!

Mark: So our oldest son Charlie was home for the summer, and he was home from Madison and so he helped us out with the summer program and actually mentored. And he was paired with a student, Adam, who was in the spring session and his project was on *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. So we prepped Charlie with we were going to watch *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*, all this stuff.

And so the first day in, Charlie's apprehensive about this and, you know, as I think a lot of mentors are because you don't know what to expect. And Adam shows up, and he's got this hat he's made himself, this paper hat on, yellow hat. And it says, "Jason Mraz." And I'm like, "Who's Jason Mraz?"

Margaret: Neither one of us knew.

Mark: We were about to find out who Jason Mraz was. So Adam is like, "I'm Jason Mraz." So Charlie is with him, so Charlie did one of the most wonderful mentoring jobs, made two guitars out of foam core for him, made a concert poster, and at the final presentation we played Jason Mraz's song "I'm Yours," and he sang for—there were 50 people I think at this presentation. And there were a lot of tears.

Terry: That's remarkable.

Mark: So Charlie's back at Madison this fall and Adam's mom Michelle is like, "Is Charlie going to come back? You know, Adam had such a great time." And it's like he's got a job out there, so I'm mentoring Adam right now. So now it's this family connection.

Terry: Excellent.

Matt: I think there's one other one that really came to mind that was special was the year that we had I think it was Noah and Miguel—

Margaret: Oh.

Matt: —these two students that were very different. And Miguel especially has had a hard time connecting with kids at school and everything. We saw it over the course of six weeks, this friendship form, that after class was done they'd be sitting over on the couches talking about—

Margaret: Pokémon, wasn't it?

Matt: Pokémon, I think, yeah. And this connection was just made that we just kind of all sat back and watched. And I remember both of the parents too, just saying, you know, "This just doesn't happen." And I think there were some play dates afterwards, so, and it really was an amazing thing to watch completely outside of the mentors, paraprofessionals. It was two students that, you know, just made a connection.

Terry: And a couple of amazed sets of parents saying, "Look what's happening!" So speaking to parents, what do they need to know about approaching Islands of Brilliance to get in? What are the requirements, or the . . . ?

Margaret: Well, I mean the one thing that I will say is that this program is not for all students; it's not. Number one, if your kid is not into computers, don't force them. If you know, a lot of this is for kids who—I mean what you've found, what we've all found is these kids pick it up amazingly quickly, so one of the skill sets we say is they have to be able to be comfortable on the computer like clicking and dragging and using a browser window. Because that, a lot of that is the research. Oh, I don't know that, for instance, I don't know what that Pokémon looks like; can you show me? So that creates that visual and then you can say, "Oh, well, the Pokémon's wrong. We're going to use the shape tools and create the Pokémon." You know, so it kind of opens up the door so you can get those visuals. So that's the biggest thing. You've got to be comfortable, fairly comfortable on the computer. Not with the software. Just on a computer.

Then you have to be able to sit for about 10 minutes, a minimum of about 10 minutes. If you can't, if you've got a kid who can't sit and focus for 10 minutes, it's going to be a really tough class. Not that we don't have kids who are movers and need to bounce. I mean we do a lot of accommodations, but it's not . . . they're not going to get as much out of

it as a student who can sit for about 10, 15 minutes at a time. The ideal thing is sit for 10, 15 minutes at a time, take a break, and then come back and be able to focus again. If you can only do 10 minutes in a 75-minute class, the other time is lost learning because it is so, it is, you know, it's collaborative.

It really helps if they can respond to verbal directives because the mentors as mentioned are not special ed trained. So these are not people that will sign or necessarily know how to use PECS [Picture Exchange Communication System] symbols or all the stuff that I know how to use, but that's the beauty of it because they're also there to listen. But it does challenge the student to try to communicate even more. So it . . . so those are pretty much the three things. You know, be able to have some comfortable ability on the computer, click and drag, browser windows; to be able to sit and hopefully be attentive or—now we've got lots of kids who are nonverbal—but they can attend to verbal directives.

Terry: Now you go as young as seven, I think—

Margaret: We have.

Terry: I saw you have somebody here that's seven working.

Margaret: We have. We do encourage our typical range is 9 to 18—

Terry: Okay.

Margaret: —but you know if a parent thinks this is going to be a good fit for them, and if their student can sit—I mean, you know, you saw the seven-year-old. He was sitting there. And he goes back and forth between art therapy and the computer. We had a seven-year-old in Portland who never moved the entire class. He was probably more focused than the older kids in the class because that's what he wanted to do. So it all depends on the student.

Terry: So parents with a child on the spectrum will probably be able to judge based on what you've said here if it's going to be a fit or not. I imagine there'd be a lot more fits than not, though.

Margaret: It is because again it's not . . . we kind of like what was said about the “I do, we do, you do.” It's sort of, “I'm going to show this together, we're going to practice it together, then you do” so it's very

much modeling, which a lot of these kids, you know, that's a format that works for them. It's one-on-one. It's their own area of interest. So all the things that we know work best for students on the spectrum, well, that's what this class does. It's got one-on-one; it's got a lot of wraparound support; it's very visual; it's computer based. I mean it's everything that research says works for these kids.

Terry: Excellent. Is your summer, is the summer camp pilot program in the Twin Cities, did that happen this year?

Margaret: Oh yeah, it was awesome.

Mark: It was the best.

Terry: How'd that work out?

Mark: It was amazing. You know what we were trying to see is would that experience, you know, quote-unquote "travel." And we spent a lot of time in the upfront preparation as far as going and talking to the creative community. We made a wonderful connection with the Autism Society of Minnesota, who we partnered with, and they handled all the outreach to families and kind of took a lot of things off our plate that we wouldn't have to worry about in a new market. We had volunteer participation in the Twin Cities from all the major agencies from, including the design department at Target.

We had a wonderful relationship with Leslie Sweetland, who herself is a mom of a daughter on the spectrum. She works at an agency there called Haberman. That's where we hosted it. We did two classes and it went about as smoothly as you could imagine. It was just an amazing success, and so I'm actually leaving to go up there Wednesday to talk about 2016. So we have classes coming up in February, so we'll do a full year up there. We'll do February, summer, and then fall.

Margaret: I think my favorite moment up there was 15 minutes into the first noon class. Literally, it felt like Milwaukee.

Terry: Wow.

Margaret: There was that same focus. I mean there was that sort of that like little tingling, "Oh my gosh, is it going to work?" And all of a sudden 15 minutes into class everybody was—we call it the "lean in." Everybody's leaning into their computer, collaborating, drawing,

creating, and it was just like [sigh] I mean it was a relief, but it was also joy because it can travel. It can work in other places.

Terry: That's great. So this could really branch out into many different markets. I mean, Minneapolis is a very progressive town, so I can see why that one would be a great place to start, but are you planning to go to Chicago? [Laughter]

Mark: Yeah, we're, actually tomorrow we'll be down in Chicago. And we'll be . . . we're looking at launching the program there in April, so you know we've established that yes, it works on the markets. Now we have to figure out the whole scaling model so that . . . Once it goes into Chicago, we'll be getting requests for it to go to cities that we may not be able to be in all at once, so we'll have to figure out, not how to clone ourselves, but have to figure out how we get it started and then how it becomes sustaining.

Margaret: We know what works. It's got to be a small class; it's got to be one-on-one. You've got to have the support we have here. You've got to have the empathy and the love and the passion that everybody has shown us here. How do you teach that, and then how do you implement that?

Mark: Right.

Matt: It was a big summer, not only Minneapolis but Portland as well.

Mark: Portland, Oregon too, yeah. We had one of our great mentors. Brian Matzat had moved out there to take a job with the Trailblazers and he wanted to get the program out there because he loved it so much. So we did a, we did a summer camp in Portland, Oregon as well. So we've been testing a lot of different things.

Matt: It's been the interesting evolution over the three years. It's, you know . . . Harry mentioned before, you know, most kids do a poster. That was the first project.

Margaret: Right.

Matt: But you know over three years it really has evolved, and that's kind of that steadfast project that most kids do. But we've had books and trading cards—

Margaret: DVD covers—

Matt: DVDs—

Margaret: Box covers, yeah.

Matt: We've tried movies. And so each time it seems we're tweaking and tuning a little bit, and it has been an evolution. So I think it really was not a surprise that three years later we were able to take it to other markets.

Terry: At the session I attended at Translator, I saw the art therapy room. I also, working for CPI, saw a beautiful piece of art that we were lucky to acquire.

Margaret: Oh, yay. Thank you!

Terry: And so I wondered if you could talk about the art therapy room and the kind of work that goes on there.

Margaret: Well, we've developed a really beautiful relationship with some of the local colleges, particularly Alverno and Mount Mary, especially Alverno because some of their students that are going through getting their field experience, actually we call them leads. So they're leading art therapy. So they get their field time, and then I am technically their site supervisor because you know I am the special ed teacher on-site. Then their teachers, professors come out and visit them, and it's a slightly different situation than some other placements in that they're actually working through the program as opposed to exclusively just art therapy.

But the beautiful thing is they don't often get a chance to work with that many kids on the spectrum. So I had Jess the other day just say, "You know, it's so funny; I've always heard what a range the kids are," but she said, "Now I'm seeing it. They're all so different and they all have such different needs" And she's like it's . . . even with only eight kids you can see such a range, so it's a really good learning opportunity for them. And it's also a very supported opportunity for them, so they know that they're never going to be stuck in a room with a bunch of kids and not know how to handle it.

Terry: That's great.

Margaret: So it's, you know it's just . . . and we look to them. I mean I love our Christmas [cards], you know the holiday cards that they've created. Because you get these beautiful, creative, young college kids who come in and are like, "Hey, put something together for us." And all of a sudden we get these great ideas. So it's a really collaborative effort. And it's good for them; it's good for us.

We're actually looking at one of our board members, Liz Drame, we're looking to have some of her students who are studying autism kind of step into my role. So what we're really trying to do is find those connections for, you know, how can this be a learning opportunity other than just the students and the mentors. Can we have this be a way for the whole community to grow? (43:32) But the art therapy is great. Some of the kids really need the sensory break. So whether it's model magic or painting or the dropper thing that we did this week.

Matt: Yeah, with markers and alcohol—

Margaret: Lots of alcohol.

Matt: It goes out like a tie dye. I think, you know, the interesting thing about art therapy is that is one of the evolutions that happened.

Margaret: Yep, thank you.

Matt: In our first pilot session we actually didn't have art therapy. It was sitting at the computer.

The program pilot . . . pilot program was hosted at Discovery World, one of the children's museums here in Milwaukee, and talk about sensory overload.

Margaret: Yeah.

Matt: When you walk in we were in the labs that you had to walk through the entire museum. Things were being bombarded at the kids, so when they came into the classroom, they were already pretty wound up and heightened a lot of the time. And we knew that they would need a break.

As Margaret had said, one of the big things is can you work for 10, 15 minutes, take a five-minute break, and then come back and focus? Well, there wasn't really much to do for the breaks. The students, we would walk them around maybe in that environment, which was again, sensory

overload. So in that second session was when art therapy was introduced by one of our mentors' now wife, who was an art therapist at Alverno College. So that's kind of how that came through. And so all of this has been again, trial and error, and—

Mark: Sometimes luck.

Margaret: Yeah, luck.

Mark: Lots of luck.

Margaret: I mean that just happened, and it was great because each time we have another—you know, sometimes it's weaving, sometimes it's painting, sometimes I think they were talking about doing just like a sensory table for the last class. I'm like bring your ideas! Try it. Let's see what works. Because some kids, like you said, will work throughout the entire class and some kids might need five breaks in a class. And that's okay.

Mark: And it'll depend on the class. One, you know one day they'll be able to focus and work, and another day, you know, just like anybody else that some days are—

Margaret: Harder to focus.

Mark: You need a little bit more time to get going.

Matt: It's a different energy in the room.

Mark: Last year I—

Margaret: Were they at a sleepover or they had donuts or it was Halloween—

Mark: Yes.

Terry: Last year I bought some beautiful note cards, which I, well, people I sent it to were like, "Where did this come from? This is tremendous." So not to move into too much of the shameless commerce department here, but there are things available that people can get as the art. What kinds of things are there?

Mark: Yeah, it's . . . that's another area we're going to be placing more, you know, attention to in 2016, is some of the artwork that comes out of the art therapy program, these collaborative paintings and things. We're applying them to greeting cards and, you know, holiday cards and different things like the prints.

And we just see that there are, you know, different ways. We have to create different revenue streams to fund the program. You know, it's . . . there's tuition, there's revenue from possible product sales, there's our fundraiser that we think is going to be a very unique experience, and then just typical, you know, personal and foundation-type corporate support.

So we're just looking for this to be a completely different model and looking for ways that not only, you know, is that a product thing, but it's also an awareness piece for the program as well. Because as you said when you send that out it's like, "Wow this is really unique. Where did it come from?" And those all come with a, you know, a little bit of the story on the back, and actually last year Matt designed those, put those together.

Terry: Is there something available this year?

Margaret: Oh yeah.

Matt: There will be.

Terry: Is that going to be up on the site, or how can people if they're interested get ahold of something?

Margaret: Well, you talked a little bit . . . I mean right now we're focusing on our big yearly year-end fundraiser, which is the 24th—

Mark: Which will be over by the time your listeners—

Terry: It's too bad. I'm sorry. I wish we could get it in.

Mark: It's all right.

Margaret: But once we get . . . because so everything will be printed, but we are going to have it available on the website. So there's going to be a pack of holiday cards. And they're so cute this year; I just love them. There's a snowman, there's trees, and then there's—

Mark: Strings of lights.

Margaret: Strings of lights! And then we also have a thank . . . just a generic thank-you note. And again all the painting is done, and I mean it's collaborative, so some of it is the kids, some of it [the canvas] is taped off so when you take the tape off it reveals a different picture, so it's just . . . They're just—

Mark: There are prints too. So there's the prints of the collaborative paintings and then there's one of the student pieces from this year that's called "Lego Zombie Warhol."

Terry: Right on!

Mark: But you can get a visual from that. Everybody that sees that says, "I want to buy it." So that's going to be available as well.

Terry: Is that life size?

Matt: It's scale.

Mark: A tasteful—

Matt: We'll make sure to include also—

Terry: The wig? [Laughter]

Matt: We'll make sure to include images of what we're talking about also.

Margaret: Yeah.

Terry: That's tremendous. That's funny. Well, I . . . thank you, guys. To wrap, I have this question. You say on your website that at Islands of Brilliance we focus on our students' interests and abilities and not on their autism. I'd like you guys to talk about your hopes for the future of those in the spectrum and the neurodiversity movement as it's happening now.

Margaret: You know, I mean I guess I can speak to that just as a special ed teacher because so often in a typical school environment you want to quell those behaviors. You want to quell the stimming; you want to quell

the, you know, "We're not going to talk about that right now. We're going to talk about social studies. We're not going to talk about that. We're going to do our reading." But in this environment, you know, it's okay because we're all quirky. You know, I mean it's . . . there's . . . I think there's . . . I probably have a million ticks, and if people pointed them out to me every single day I would just go further and further and further into my shell.

So our whole goal is to get these kids to be proud of themselves and to be creative and to be confident, and in an environment where you tell them, "Don't clap your hands" and "Sit still" and "Do this" you can't . . . that nothing blossoms that way. And when it doesn't matter, you can blossom. And I think what's really cool for me is how often the mentors and the families have said, "My gosh, these kids are blowing us away. I can't believe how . . . I can't believe what they retained last week" and "Isn't that great how they thought of that" and "Where did they come up with that?" and it's just it's so beautiful to see them as an inspiration and not—

Terry: Well said.

Margaret: —you know, not a challenge.

Mark: I think there are kind of four stages to the program. We've developed the first stage, which we call this core curriculum, so that's what has been going on for the last three years, which is really . . . we see this as almost a net to identify students who are capable of moving on to the advanced curriculum that Harry was talking about. And in that advanced curriculum what we want to see is can we transfer that subject matter expertise or the focus on that onto other subjects? So can the students work on projects besides the ones that they're only interested in? And if they can, then the next step would be an apprenticeship program where we give them more and more training and more skills. So we're developing an actual career path.

At the end of this I think what we see is more of a creative service model that employs, you know, our students or adults on the spectrum because if you look at it, you've got a population that they're digital natives, they are fluent in software, and if we are able to transfer that subject matter expertise into other things, you have a worker with incredible focus. And what is a worker with incredible focus worth, you know, worth to an employer these days? So that's kind of the long-term goal of the program. You know, and that end stage of the creative

services model actually generates the revenue that funds the whole thing, so that's a social enterprise.

Now right now we've done the design curriculum. This summer we're going to launch a coding curriculum. We were talking to a couple of partners on that. And then there's possibilities of, you know, doing a robotics summer camp, things like that. So the framework itself works, you know, building it out through this whole thing as far as a job skill training program and then branching out into kind of other curriculum besides design, going into coding, and into engineering and things like that. So that's a lot of stuff, but that's kind of the vision for it.

Terry: You can see how that productive focus could really bring the concept of neurodiversity—

Margaret: Yes.

Mark: Exactly.

Terry: —to make it more real to people.

Mark: Exactly.

Margaret: Well, and the other thing is I mean I keep saying when you've got people that create, you know, like Matt, who this is their job and they're working side-by-side with these kids on the spectrum, what's the difference between doing the class and working side-by-side with them in a job, you know? So it sort of opens the door for the idea that these kids are capable of work and they are capable of doing the same quality work that other people are instead of the . . . you know, I keep saying instead of the smoking break, maybe it's a sensory break, or you know . . . it's just changing that perception.

Terry: It's real progress, truly. Matt, final thought?

Matt: I think just feeding off of what Margaret said earlier, you know, we seem to be in a time where people are celebrating diversity more than ever before, and I think all of us feel in some ways outcasts or that we don't fit in. And to see everybody have a program, that if everybody could find a program like this in some way in their life where they could be celebrated rather than outcast, how beautiful that is.

Terry: Right on.

Matt: And to get to see that all the time, week after week, in this program is just, it's a really beautiful thing that has enriched my life more than I could ever express.

Terry: Well, great. Let's make quirkiness virtue one, kind of, right?

Margaret: We're all unique.

Terry: Yeah. Thank you, guys. Harry? You have a last thought you want to say to people listening . . . about Islands of Brilliance or . . . ?

Harry: Well, hopefully if you or your student or somebody is coming to this class, make sure you enjoy it. I'm sure in some way you will.

Terry: Thank you very much. This is Terry Vittone for *Unrestrained*, the CPI podcast. My guests have been Mark and Margaret Fairbanks and Harry Fairbanks and Matt Juzenas from the Crisis Prevention Institute. Thank you.

Mark, Margaret, Harry, and Matt: Thank you.