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IslandWood Celebrates 20 Years of Providing Environmental Learning for Puget Sound Youth, Educators & Community Members

BAINBRIDGE ISLAND, WA (September 14, 2022) – Twenty years ago IslandWood opened its doors to the public with the mission of creating exceptional learning experiences and inspiring lifelong environmental and community stewardship. Two decades later, IslandWood is a nationally recognized leader in environmental education, running [immersive programs throughout the Puget Sound region for children](#), free and low-cost [community education](#) programs, [a graduate program](#) in partnership with the University of Washington, [teacher professional development courses](#) supported by Washington’s ClimeTime initiative, and advocating at both national and state levels for the resources students and teachers need for climate science and quality outdoor learning.

The 250 forested acres on Bainbridge Island that became IslandWood’s main campus were originally slated for residential development. In 1997, IslandWood founders Debbi and Paul Brainerd heard that the Port Blakely Tree Farm was going to be sold as multiple 20-acre parcels. Debbi’s childhood was strongly influenced by time outdoors and some of her favorite memories are of time spent at her family’s Whidbey Island one-room cabin. Out of curiosity, she and Paul visited the property. “We parked our car at the entrance and walked up an old logging road,” says Debbi.

From there, an idea took shape. Debbi wanted other children to have the same kind of magical experiences with nature that she’d been fortunate enough to have as a child. “I thought we could build a school in the woods where kids could come and learn about the natural and cultural history of Puget Sound,” she says. Debbi spent 6 months researching the feasibility of her idea to support environmental and science education for kids. She spoke to Tony Angell, who was then the Director of Environmental Education for Washington State and learned that for the most part, only children from wealthier schools had access to these kinds of experiences. Environmental education was a state mandate in Washington, but funding had never been allocated to support the mandate. It was then that the Brainerd’s decided to purchase the land and created a non-profit organization to increase access to meaningful outdoor learning experiences for children in the region.

What started as an idea grew from a pilot program serving 700 children in 2002 to now reaching over 30,000 children, educators, and community members in a typical year. With programs all over the region – on Bainbridge Island, at Seattle steams and watersheds, at the Brightwater Education Center in Woodinville, the South Plant in Renton, in Tacoma schoolyards and virtual programs that reach well beyond, the organization has become one of the primary organizations in the region for environmental learning.

IslandWood has also, for many years, been engaged in advocacy work on behalf of students and educators – believing that ALL children and educators deserve to learn about and experience the natural world around them. IslandWood CEO Megan Karch is the Legislative Co-Chair of the [Washington Outdoor School Consortium](#), which was very active in advocating for [House Bill 2078](#) to establish a statewide outdoor school program. In the 2022 legislative session, the bill passed – a historic win on behalf of meaningful outdoor learning for Washington state children.

“In the beginning, I never imagined IslandWood would offer so much, or become so integrated into the fabric of our region,” says Debbi. “Twenty years later, the reach and impact are extraordinary. To hear the stories of children who remember their experience with IslandWood years and years later—of educators who now teach in new ways and with new tools – or of community members who continue to learn and bring their families to experience IslandWood programs. My vision has been more than fulfilled—it’s unbelievable how it continues to find ways to serve more children and teachers every year.”

At its inception, Brainerd wanted to create IslandWood to serve participants at the lowest possible cost to ensure all kids could participate in outdoor learning adventures. Twenty years later, providing access to outdoor learning is still as central as ever to IslandWood’s work. Thanks to generous supporters, foundations, and government grants, IslandWood continues to make sure as many children, educators, and community members as possible have access to our work through free programs or scholarships.

“There has never been a more important time for quality environmental education,” says IslandWood CEO Megan Karch. “If it was ever considered a nice to have, now we know, for the future health of our planet and our communities, it is a must have.”

About IslandWood

Through our experiential environmental education programs for students, teacher professional development series, graduate program, community education programs, and public policy advocacy, IslandWood is inspiring the next generation of environmental stewards. IslandWood impacts over 30,000 students, educators, and community members in a typical year. Since our founding, IslandWood has provided children with almost two million hours spent learning in nature. Learn more at www.islandwood.org.

Learn more about IslandWood’s origin story at <https://islandwood.org/islandwood-20th-anniversary-featuring-debbi-brainerd/>