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Always Looking,

When **Kevin O'Briant '92** arrived at MICDS, he came from a co-ed public school background and landed in a newly integrated school formed by the merger of an all-girls school and an all-boys school. He watched as his classmates adjusted to having members of the opposite gender in their classes, amused that his peers seemed to struggle with something he had always known. "I just didn't see what the big deal was," he said, "and I wondered why everyone was being so weird about this."

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He was a fly on the wall, content to observe and learn from what he calls "the strange social experiment" going on around him. It was an inkling as to his future career as a professional archaeologist and ethnohistorian, where he specializes in studying relationships. Now, though, his observations have grown well beyond how adolescent boys and girls relate to each other, but how civilizations relate to their environment, and specifically how people relate to plants.

O'Briant has taught archaeological field methods for the University of Chicago, the University of New Mexico, and Wesleyan University; conducted medico-anthropological fieldwork in India; and provided archaeological consultation for documentary films and now makes his own. In addition, he teaches general-interest archaeology courses for adult learners at the University of Montana School of Extended and Lifelong Learning. He also provides interpretive historical tours of the Lewis and Clark Trail in Montana and Idaho and Spanish-Cuban-American War historical tours in Cuba.

His career involves continuous exploration, a medley of different "gigs" that allow him to pursue personal passions such as traveling. He has built a reputation as a fixer and builder of financial databases and business intelligence tools for mid-sized manufacturing companies. He makes enough with this to only take on cultural resource management or archaeology projects that interest him. This way, O'Briant gets to choose his own projects that have, so far, carried him to work in 13 different states and provided a broad picture of the pre-history and unrecorded history of North America that he'd never have learned by staying strictly in academia. He has explored

01. Examining the taphonomic or "site formation" processes at Nicholas Canyon Beach in Malibu, California. In this place a small beach community was razed in the early 1970s to create a park and nature is slowly taking over. Country Day School alumnus Vincent Price had a family beach house here prior to the demolition.

02. A photo from O'Briant's senior page in the 1992 yearbook.

different ecological zones and their history and other archaeologists and their ideas. He's fascinated by "taphonomic processes" or how soils and climate can change preservation, explaining that working in Cahokia, Illinois, is totally different than Mesa Verde, Colorado. "Things get buried in one place, and they don't in another," he said.

Archaeology today isn't anywhere close to what is pictured in the Indiana Jones movies. "When you try to live in the west, you have to wear a bunch of hats and take on a bunch of gigs," O'Briant explained. "Archaeology as a career is a dead end, and it's really hard to make any money. Cultural resource management work means you're relying on contracts to create documents for compliance with federal laws and the Environmental Protection Act. This means following pipelines around and writing reports about what's going to happen to this or that historic site." For O'Briant, this work can be dull and dry. He prefers a mix, seeking out new ideas and projects that suit his whims at any given time.

This nomadic lifestyle is a continuation of his childhood. The O'Briant parents were teachers and his father enjoyed finding schools with deficient or no music programs, fixing them up, then moving on. Kevin and his brother were both born in Sault Ste.

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Always Learning

03. Offloading gear at the site where the Lewis and Clark Expedition camped on May 29, 1805, on the Missouri River in central Montana.

04. Guiding back-country historical tours through the Upper Missouri Breaks National Monument in central Montana in the late spring.


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Marie, Kevin on the Canadian side, and his brother in Michigan. The O'Briants moved to west Texas and western Oklahoma before returning to St. Louis to care for aging grandparents. Once in St. Louis, they settled in St. Charles and eventually moved to Lafayette Square.

His mother called the Country Day Head of School and explained that Kevin was a good student—a national merit scholar—and he was accepted for his senior year. "I transferred in and felt like a foreign exchange student," he said, "which worked out fine since my friends were mostly the actual foreign exchange students." He noted that the divide between where he was living and where he was going to school was jarring, just as he noted that the girls spoke up more when they were in mostly-girls classes on the MI side of campus than when they were in the boy-dominated classes on the CDS campus. The differences didn't phase him—he saw them as interesting cultural contrasts and he enjoyed being in a variety of environments throughout each day.

Mrs. O'Briant taught at Francis Howell High School in St. Charles, so every day she and Kevin would leave their home in Lafayette Square at 6 a.m. and drive to Ladue. Classes didn't start until 8 a.m., so Kevin would find a way to get into the building, locate a couch, and crash. A favorite couch was in the art gallery, and eventually, he befriended an artist in residence who was painting there. "He invited me to join him and I'd watch him paint," O'Briant remembers. After school, he went to his grandparents' house in Kirkwood and waited for the ride back, or he'd take the public bus for an hour and a half to get back to Lafayette Square, which he said was an adventure in itself.


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He remembers learning calculus from Will Hansen, who was "really fabulous with such a dry subject. He was all about data visualization, getting us to see the kinds of shapes and three-dimensional space that calculus formulas described. It was huge to have that understanding." Hansen also occasionally whipped out a guitar and sang songs as Kermit the Frog. An English teacher introduced O'Briant to reading plays, which is something he had never done. In French, he read Molière and learned about things he hadn't known existed. Between French literature and U.S. history, he saw a bigger world.

History runs deep in his family. O'Briant often took his disabled grandfather to monthly Civil War roundtable meetings to listen to different lecturers. His family vacations involved historic and archaeological sites like Mesa Verde, where he climbed ladders to visit cliff


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dwellings. Even with this background, he didn't set out to become an archaeologist. Instead, he planned to study microbiology. "I was a huge nerd in high school," he said. "I went to the Missouri Scholars Academy, the George Engelmann Math and Science Institute which was a camp for nerds, and band camp." He learned about statistics, DNA, and plant physiology, but once he got to college he "found the subject matter interesting but the people weren't." He described science classes full of people studying the material only because it was a prerequisite for medical school. "There was no passion or love for the material," he said. "It was intellectually sterile, and no fun." He took an anthropology class with the encouragement of a friend and learned about the people of the Malaysian peninsula. "It was really fascinating. It had random facts about people who lived someplace I never paid any attention to." This class turned him into a cultural anthropology major with a minor in South Asian studies.

He admits he wasn't built for college, so he signed up for an archaeological field school in the summer to knock out an extra quarter early. What started out as a "just for the credits" class turned into a fascination with a prehistoric archaeological zone in Kampsville, Illinois. He realized that this was where his passion lay, and he was determined to dive in. "I ended up going back to the same field school and teaching at it for five years," he said. "My whole life started turning on archaeology at that point." He paused, reflected on the change from his major to his life's work, chuckled, and said, "I got hung up on the wrong Indians, I guess."

O'Briant firmly believes that the future of archaeology lies in accessibility. Right now, the focus of public archaeology is elementary education. It's oriented to younger children and mostly focused on excavations. "Why are we focused on methodology and not the actual discipline?" he asks. Excavation is simply a data collection tool, and it's often unnecessary given new technology such as ground-penetrating radar. Noninvasive methods allow the gathering of evidence without destroying the archaeological context, and it's how that evidence is used that's important. "We can reconstruct the ecological history of the place and examine the relationships between people and fire, people and plants, plants and fire...which landscapes are being created by people and which are doing their own thing."

He also says that archaeology should be much more visible. Archaeologists today hide the exact locations of key physical discoveries due to a fear of looting and offer academic research loaded with jargon that makes information inaccessible to lay readers. O'Briant believes there's a better way to engage the public. "It's translation work," he said. "How can I communicate my findings in simple language that gives people a better understanding of our world, how things came to be, and how things work? If we don't know how things came to be, how can we undo them?" He dreams of a society that understands the utility of archaeology and creates legislation that supports the field and preserves heritage sites and values.

O'Briant encourages anyone who is interested in the sciences to pay close attention to everything around them. "See how things fit together. Science teaches us to be reductionist and specialize and focus into narrower and narrower places and this is a good methodology, but you have to remember that you're just looking at a part of something and it's connected to everything else." He specialized in human osteology—skeletons—and knows "everything there is to know about a skeleton, but it's still just a data set. I'm interested in human behavior over time and a skeleton can only tell me part of that." His interests have since morphed into plants. "Plants can tell me more about people than their remains can." He posits that education today is often intended to set people up with tools that give them the complete package of what they need to live. Instead, we should always be looking, always be learning. "It's like giving a chef a knife roll. Good tools, but you still have to go buy food."

01. Guiding a canoe trip through the White Cliffs section of the upper Missouri River. Over O'Briant's shoulder is the campsite where the Lewis and Clark Expedition camped on May 31, 1805.

02. Leading a hike through a slot canyon or "coulee" in central Montana.

03. A photo from O'Briant's senior page in the 1992 yearbook.

04. Sifting soil from a public archaeology project involving the excavation of a late 19th century privy (outhouse) associated with an old boarding house in Missoula, Montana.

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