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# EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

For Immediate Release

## Exceptional Minds' Ernie Merlán Wins Fast Pitch 2017, Los Angeles, Judges Innovation Award



**Sherman Oaks, California – March 23, 2017** – “If I told you that Exceptional Minds has a program where 80 percent of graduates with moderate to high functioning autism are working, would you help us scale the program to the next level?”

With those words, Ernie Merlán won the Judges Innovation Award at last night’s 2017 Social Innovation Fast Pitch held at the Skirball Cultural Center in Los Angeles. He was one of ten finalists to share his or her organization’s mission in a three-minute pitch that earned up to \$35,000 in prizes and grants.

Merlán is the Executive Director of Exceptional Minds, a nonprofit vocational school and working studio for young adults on the autism spectrum who are pursuing careers in digital animation and visual effects.

During his pitch, he spoke of meeting Patrick, a young man with autism who “wouldn’t look me in the eye.” After graduating Exceptional Minds’ three-year vocational program, Patrick went on to work in the Exceptional Minds Studio doing visual effects for major productions such as *X-Men: Apocalypse*, *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children*, *Galavant* and *Doctor Strange*.

“At the cast and crew screening of *Doctor Strange*, Patrick shook my hand, looked me in the eye and said, ‘That was my name in the credits!’”

“Instead of living at home with his parents, and collecting disability benefits, he lives independently and pays income taxes!” said Merlán, who asked the audience of 500 social entrepreneurs to help him expand opportunities to others like Patrick through online training and curriculum licensing.

Social Innovation Fast Pitch is Social Venture Partners’ signature program held annually to support social change and innovation in the community. As the recipient of the Judges Innovation Award at last night’s

2017 Social Innovation Fast Pitch, Merlán was given a \$5,000 check that will go toward “changing lives one frame at a time.”

More than 3.5 million Americans live with autism, an estimated 90 percent of whom are unemployed or underemployed. Each year, 50,000 children with autism in the U.S. will turn 18 and require public services if they are not employed. Exceptional Minds provides customized education in the digital arts to over 225 teens and young adults and provides ongoing job placement and coaching for 25 graduates.

**About Exceptional Minds (<http://www.exceptionalmindsstudio.org>):** Exceptional Minds is a nonprofit vocational center and working production studio for young adults on the autism spectrum. It was chartered in 2011 to provide the training necessary for creatively gifted individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) who may not otherwise be able to make the transition from high school to a career. Exceptional Minds offers technical proficiency and work-readiness training that prepares students for careers in graphic arts, animation, web design, visual effects and rotoscoping. Located in Sherman Oaks, California, Exceptional Minds is both an instructional learning facility and a working studio with hands-on student involvement in production projects, many for the film industry.

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