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EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

Exceptional Minds Video Tribute Captures Life Story of Author's Journey into the World of Walt Disney to Reach Son with Autism *Animators on the spectrum present **Life, Animated** author Ron Suskind with inspiring video during UCLA's Open Mind Lecture Tuesday.*



Life, Animated author Ron Suskind, left, talks with young animators Arielle Guthrie and Michael Yochim as well as instructor Jessica Jerome from Exceptional Minds about Disney, animation and life on the spectrum during the Semel Institute's Open Mind lecture on Tuesday. Photo courtesy of Thomas Neerken.

Sherman Oaks, Calif. – February 6, 2015 – It's a familiar story for so many families living on the autism spectrum. A young boy is growing up strong and healthy until the age of three, when a storm appears. He becomes afraid, runs out into the night and crosses a bridge that collapses behind him, unable to make his way back home.

At the Semel Institute's Open Mind lecture at UCLA Tuesday, a team of animators at [Exceptional Minds](#)

vocational school for young adults with autism presented a [short video](#) based on the life story of bestselling author and guest speaker Ron Suskind, whose autistic son Owen found his way back home through a most unusual mediator: Disney movies.

Suskind is a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist whose latest book *Life, Animated* chronicles his family's journey into the world of Walt Disney in order to communicate with his son who has autism. During Tuesday's Open Mind lecture series sponsored by UCLA's Friends of the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior, he spoke of his life as a journalist who interviewed U.S. Presidents by day. By night, he was a father who tried to reach his non-verbal autistic son whose singular interest in Disney eventually provided a bridge between the two.

The Suskinds' story was captured in a video tribute set to the music and theme of *Lion King* with original animation drawings arranged by a team of Exceptional Minds animators, led by program graduate Arielle Guthrie. The team included students Matthew De Lorimier, Mason Earwood, Syd Fox, Michael Yochim, Ezra Fields-Meyer and Andrew Turney, who are themselves on the autism spectrum and also hold a special affinity for animation in their own struggles with autism.

Minutes after viewing the short for the first time, Mr. Suskind spoke of his now-adult son Owen's passion to bring back the art of original animation drawings similar to that used in the Disney movies of his youth, such as *The Little Mermaid*. "I want to thank these Exceptional Minds for that original animation," said Suskind. "Owen will love it," he added.

Exceptional Minds is the only vocational school of its kind preparing young men and women with autism for careers in digital animation, visual effects and similar careers in the movie industry. The school is known for its close working relationship with the movie industry. Exceptional Minds graduates and students have worked on major motion films such as *Dawn of the Planet of the Apes*, *American Hustle* and *Lawless*.

During Tuesday's Open Mind lecture, Mr. Suskind was joined by UCLA Semel Institute scientists Dr. Daniel Geshwind and Dr. Shafuli Jeste. This presentation is part of The Friends of Semel's Open Mind community lecture and film series that is open to the public at no charge on the UCLA campus. The programs bring together renowned authors, filmmakers, and scientists to present programs about mental health issues.

About Exceptional Minds (<http://www.exceptionalmindsstudio.org>): Exceptional Minds is a non-profit vocational center and working production studio for young adults on the autism spectrum. 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 the working world, Exceptional Minds offers technical proficiency and work readiness skills that prepare 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.

About Friends of Semel Institute: (www.friendsofthesemel institute.org): The Friends of the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA is a volunteer organization dedicated to supporting and enhancing state of the art research and treatment for illnesses of the mind and brain. The Friends sponsor the *Open Mind*, a community lecture and film series that brings together renowned authors, filmmakers, and Semel Institute scientists to present programs about mental health issues. These programs are offered free to the public on the UCLA campus.

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