

EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

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Exceptional Minds Student Graduates to Career at Stargate Studios

Unique digital arts skills training by vocational school prepares student for career in movie production studio, one of a growing number of companies hiring professionals on the autism spectrum.



Sherman Oaks, California – A year ago, autism was all about spotting the signs and early intervention. Today, autism has reached a new level of awareness as people and companies discover untapped potential in this growing, underutilized population. Nowhere is this more evident than at Exceptional Minds digital arts vocational school, where one exceptional individual with autism graduated on June 8 and began his career in movie post-production the next day.

Kevin Titcher, 23, began his duties as a production assistant in the editorial department at Stargate Studios, a global production house that is known for its visual effects and other work for movies such as

Star Trek: The Motion Picture and *The Walking Dead*.

Titcher is the first in his class to reach his employment potential after graduating the Exceptional Minds rigorous three-year digital arts program specifically designed for young adults on the autism spectrum. “When I first learned I would be working at Stargate, I couldn’t believe it. The day I found out it was one of the best days of my life, and when I started here it was way better than I pictured,” says Kevin, who grew up in Calabasas, California, and as a young boy loved to make movies with friends. The summer before high school he was diagnosed with high-functioning autism and he spent his teens and early 20s working in a grocery store before starting at Exceptional Minds, where he developed life skills as well as professional training in visual composition and editing.

Life more than 750,000 young adults with autism expected to reach adulthood in the next decade, Kevin lives with a range of autism symptoms. But unlike many of these individuals, Kevin is fulfilling his dream of a lifelong career in his chosen field – due to skills training and those able to see the potential in him. “One thing that really

impressed us about Kevin when we came out to interview him was how passionate he was about learning. In my 25 years in this business I've seen a lot of talent come and go, and the one thing I always look for is passion. If you can identify someone's passion, and if we can connect them to that passion, that's an electric combination," says Stargate Founder and CEO Sam Nicholson. "Every one of the students here (at Exceptional Minds) has that," he adds.

Exceptional Minds opened its doors in 2011 and is unique in that it prepares students with autism for careers through professional accreditation and real work experience. The school is known for its close working relationship with the visual effects industry, which has provided its students with hands-on experience, including screen credit for student work on Oscar-nominated motion picture *American Hustle* and the 2012 movie *Lawless*. "There is huge demand for programs like ours as more and more young people on the spectrum enter adulthood and seek meaningful employment. Exceptional Minds isn't the answer for everyone on the spectrum, but we're told that we're a pretty good model for what works in teaching and preparing these young adults for careers," says Susan Zwerman, the school's job developer who is able to help students using her skills and industry contacts as a working visual effects producer and the owner of Crystal Rain Media Entertainment.

Now bridging the gap between high school and the working world for young people with autism entering adulthood, Exceptional Minds celebrated its first graduating class on June 8, 2014. Kevin Titcher and six other young men and one young woman, all in their 20s and on the spectrum, make up the Exceptional Minds graduating class of 2014. During the commencement, actor, Ed Asner, who is on the school's advisory board and has known each graduate since he or she began their training at Exceptional Minds, spoke of his "belief in the greatness of these individuals."

Two weeks prior to graduating from Exceptional Minds, Kevin put in his notice at the grocery store that he had been employed at for several years, and the following day he started his new career at Stargate Studios. "He was grinning ear to ear and he couldn't stop talking about how happy he was," says Zwerman, who stopped in to see Kevin and take him to lunch in his first week on the job at Stargate Studios.

Kevin's graduate classmates are currently considering employment opportunities in similar fields, while getting additional experience working full-time at the Exceptional Minds studio (EMS) co-located with the school. EMS operates independently of the vocational school to provide high quality stereo conversion (rotoscoping), visual effects, computer graphics, the work, and animation in demand by the industry.

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. It was chartered in 2011 to provide the training necessary for creatively gifted individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) who may not otherwise be able to make the transition from high school to careers. 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.