

Contact: Dee McVicker  
Grassroots Communications  
Gilbert, Arizona  
480.545.7363  
[deemcv@grassrootsco.com](mailto:deemcv@grassrootsco.com)

# EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

For Immediate Release

## Exceptional Minds Gets the Job Done

*School for young adults with autism is focused on abilities, not disabilities, to create jobs.*



**Sherman Oaks, California** –September 25, 2015 – Exceptional Minds isn't counting on disability initiatives to employ its skilled visual effects artists who happen to be on the autism spectrum.

It doesn't have to.

The thriving vocational school for young adults with autism is not only preparing its students on the spectrum for the competitive fields of visual effects and digital animation, its graduates are being sought after by all walks of the industry.

"We're a small, boutique studio. Every person here counts," says Mike Pryor, the Executive Producer for Mr. Wolf in Culver City, Calif., which added Exceptional Minds graduate Nicky Benoist to its three-man operation after a brief internship.

So while larger companies like Microsoft, Vodafone and SAP are seeking out autistic workers to round out a large workforce, smaller firms like Mr. Wolf are hiring skilled workers on the spectrum to fill key roles because it makes good business sense.

The visual effects studio for television and film hired Nicky Benoist as its assistant to the creative director in June, a day after the 26-year-old graduated from Exceptional Minds' comprehensive three-year vocational program. He provides green screen comps, cleanup and graphic additions on visual effects shots. His most recent project is Nickelodeon's TV series, "100 Things to Do Before High School."

"We saw what Nicky could do and, in fact, we are looking into expanding our business because of his skillset," comments Pryor.

Exceptional Minds vocational school and working studio provides young men and women on the spectrum with training and experience in the visual arts, including live-action CG integration, 3D animation, story development, and marker tracking removal and compositing. The school and working studio has a close working relationship with the visual effects industry. Its graduate artists have contributed visual effects and title work on movies such as "Ant-Man," "Avengers: Age of Ultron," "Dawn of the Planet of the Apes," and "Game of Thrones."

"Rather than focus on perceived disabilities, we're bringing out the abilities in these individuals. That is what studios of all sizes are drawn to, the ability of our graduates to produce exceptional work," says Susan Zwerman, Visual Effects Executive Producer and Job Developer for Exceptional Minds.

Unique to the school is its job development program that provides its graduates with the additional support needed to attain and sustain employment, as well as ongoing support to the companies that hire them. "I finally feel like I'm starting my life," says Nicky, who had received his associate's degree in Computer Drafting and Design from ITT Technical Institute prior to enrolling in Exceptional Minds, but was unable to take the next step into employment due to a lack of self-confidence and interviewing skills. "He has been contributing since Day One. We have yet to throw him something he can't handle," says Pryor of Nicky's capabilities today.

More than 3.5 million Americans are living with an autism spectrum disorder, with one in 68 children now being affected (up from one in 88 just two years ago). Some 500,000 children with autism will enter adulthood during the next decade. Currently, an estimated 90 percent of adults with autism are unemployed or underemployed; autism services cost U.S. citizens over \$200 billion each year.

Exceptional Minds is a pioneer in providing vocational training in the fields of animation and visual effects and a model for other vocational programs.

**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 Disorders (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.

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