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EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

For Immediate Release

Exceptional Minds, Sesame Street Collaborate on Autism Awareness *Visual artists with autism work on initiative about autism.*



Sherman Oaks, California – October 22, 2015 – “If it’s happening on [Sesame Street](#), we know we can create awareness on every street in America,” says Ernie Merlán, the Program Director for [Exceptional Minds](#), one of 14 collaborating partners for a new *Sesame Street* initiative launched this week called [Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children](#).

The vocational school and studio for young adults with autism was chartered in 2011 with a vision to create a world in which individuals on the spectrum are recognized for their talents and abilities, and are able to achieve their full potential. That vision has since been realized many times over, both in the growth of the school and in the achievements of its graduating artists who now work in the demanding field of visual effects for the entertainment industry.

Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children is the latest in a growing list of impressive projects that the visual effects artists at Exceptional Minds have worked on, among them “Ant-Man,” “Avengers: Age of Ultron,” “Dawn of the Planet of the Apes” and “American Hustle.”

“We are proud to partner with Exceptional Minds to create these critical resources for the community,” says Sherrie Westin, Executive Vice President of Global Impact and Philanthropy for Sesame Workshop. “This collaboration is a perfect example of what this initiative is all about: seeing the amazing in all people. These young men and women at Exceptional Minds are creative, determined and amazing artists.” “We hope to lead by example and help educate the public about autism, and we recognized immediately that *Sesame Street* shared that same goal,” adds Merlán.

For the *Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children* initiative, Exceptional Minds Studio and its artists (who are all in their 20s and on the spectrum) met with Sesame’s creative and production teams at the school’s Sherman Oaks studios to brainstorm ideas and collaborate on the media content. This resulted in the creation of “[Benny’s Story](#),” an animated short of young Benny as a typical grade-schooler with autism—which was originated and created by Shane McKaskle and the other artists at Exceptional Minds.

Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children will provide resources to families, teachers and caregivers around the country to educate them about autism, and tools to help families touched by autism with everyday activities. This initiative was funded with generous support from American Greetings, the Robert R. McCormick Foundation and Kristen Rohr, and aligns with Sesame Workshop’s mission to help all children grow smarter, stronger and kinder.

“I think all of us have felt left out or different when we were younger. I don’t think I ever felt truly accepted until I got here at Exceptional Minds,” says McKaskle, who is part of Exceptional Minds’ graduating class of 2015 and now provides contract services by the project for Exceptional Minds Studio, an approved studio for Paramount, HBO, Disney, Marvel Studios, 20th Century Fox and Lionsgate.

Autism affects one in 68 children. Currently, the majority of the nation’s 3.5 million people with autism are unemployed or underemployed, according to government statistics. More than 500,000 U.S. children impacted by autism will enter adulthood during this decade, with one in 68 children to follow. Exceptional Minds is the only vocational school and working studio to prepare and successfully place young men and women with autism in careers in the fields of animation and visual effects.

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.