Christopher Chapman, 27, walks down a hallway past historic Disney memorabilia encased in glass at Marvel Studios in Burbank, Calif. He looks like any other young talent, in a gray sweater and jeans with a backpack slung over his shoulder. Chapman comes across as a quiet soul, someone colleagues might easily label the “office loner.” His conversation—typically one to three-word answers—is tortuously slow and delivered without expression.

Has he seen Ant-Man, the hit for which he created the credits—in nearly eight minutes of scrolling names? He shakes his head. Then, very quietly, “Nope, some of my friends have,” Do they think what he does is cool? Another awkward silence. “Yep.” Ask him what the best part of his job is and finally Chapman cracks a tiny smile. “It’s when I walk home and see the Disney Tower and see the Disney Tower with a tiny smile. “It’s when I walk home and see the Disney Tower encased in glass at Marvel Studios, visual effects artists work in a darkened room, seated at rows of computers in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building in a nondescript building.

At Exceptional Minds, located in a nondescript building close to Hollywood’s major studios, visual effects artists on the spectrum are hard at work. Ant-Man: And Avengers: Age of Ultron feature their talents, as do The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 2, Dawn of the Planet of the Apes, The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water and Alice in Wonderland.

Chapman is part of a new wave of digital artists and visual effects directors who have autism. Next to him, Schneider, who is learning how to do animation sculpting in 3-D, shows off a bird flying through frames of changing backgrounds and textures. The bird seamlessly transforms from cartoonish to wood with leafy feathers. The precision work is perfect.

Noah Schneider, 21, on an animated short called Benji’s Story, about a boy with autism. Next to her, Schneider, who is learning how to do animation sculpting in 3-D, shows off a bird flying through frames of changing backgrounds and textures. The bird seamlessly transforms from cartoonish to wood with leafy feathers. The precision work is perfect.

Exceptional Minds students learn visual effects in the vacation training program’s studio in Hollywood (above). Director Peyton Reed looks on as artists help bring his sci-fi adventure Ant-Man to life.

Recruiting artists on the spectrum is hard at work. Ant-Man: And Avengers: Age of Ultron feature their talents, as do The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Part 2, Dawn of the Planet of the Apes, The SpongeBob Movie: Sponge Out of Water and Alice in Wonderland. These visual effects artists have worked on blockbusters, from Ant-Man and the Avengers to Game of Thrones and Vinyl. The Twist? They are all on the autism spectrum, tapping their creative potential thanks to a unique program called Exceptional Minds.

There’s a national shortage of mechanics, welders, electricians, plumbers—all highly skilled jobs that autistic people can be trained to do,” says Grandin. “Even lower-functioning people can do jobs like folding towels in a hotel or assembling lamps.” She says employers’ don’t need training to hire them. “It’s simple: Give clear tasks and outcomes and don’t give them long strings of verbal instructions.”

In addition to Exceptional Minds, companies in other industries are hiring workers with special needs.

• In 2007, Walgreens opened a distribution center staffed nearly 40 percent by disabled employees. The program has been a model for others, including Procter & Gamble, Best Buy and Lowe’s.

• Through a partnership with the Autism Self Advocacy Network, the mortgage company Freddie Mac has been hiring paid intern programs.

• Microsoft has a pilot program that hires autistic adults for coding, software programming and math jobs.

• Washington Consultants and Autism Speaks teamed up to create Spectrum Careers, a program that matches employers with workers on the autism spectrum.

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“When Noah was 5, my husband Bob [Schneider] was diagnosed with cancer. He died when Noah was 8, leaving me as a single mother with an autistic only child,” Bennett recalls. “I had to decide, do I stay in my career or make my son’s life my focus?” She chose the latter. Schneider’s progress plateaued in high school (“I cried for weeks,” Bennett recalls), until a friend encouraged her to enroll him in a digital after-school program. “Within a month, Noah learned animation coding, started speaking and won age-appropriate awards for his work,” Bennett says. Propelled by his success and her late husband’s dedication to answering the “What’s next?” question for autistic young adults after they leave school, Bennett got together with other families, pooled resources, formed the nonprofit in 2009 and in 2011 opened Exceptional Minds. And now her son is thriving.

The vibrant red and black walls at Exceptional Minds are adorned with movie posters, and state-of-the-art after-effects technology takes center stage in the classrooms and studio. But a set of fake life-size elevator doors stuck to a wall hints at other important skills students doing unskilled, low-paying work that leaves many suffering from chronic depression. “What we’re doing here is groundbreaking,” she says. “We’re creating a model to apply to other vocations, from manufacturing and retail to music, to train and nurture young autistic adults into America’s workforce.” It’s a win for students and the industry.

A PASSION PROJECT

Bennett comes from a successful career as an assistant director of such hits as Pleasantville and Honeymoon in Vegas. Third-year student Schneider is her son. He was diagnosed with autism at age 3 and was mostly nonverbal as a child.
learn at EM. It’s a reminder that a concise “elevator pitch” can be the step toward stardom. If an A-list actor on the ride to the lobby asks EM grads what they do, they need to be ready to articulate it quickly. That’s challenging for anyone, but for autistic people, who vary from painfully shy to overly talkative, it’s a particularly puzzling skill.

That kind of interpersonal know-how is just as important as the technical expertise students learn, says program director Ernie Merlan, who brought 20 years of experience to Exceptional Minds, including 12 as an Imagineer at Disney. “We teach them how to introduce themselves, conduct themselves in an interview, even how to dress and hygiene habits, which many autistic people just don’t get,” he explains.

Fazio reels off the skills she’s mastered: “I’ve learned that it’s important to be on time, dress professionally, do the project they ask me to do, be patient when

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Visit Parade.com/numbrix for more Marilyn vos Savant Numbrix puzzles and today’s solution.
someone is critical and let them know where I am at all times.”

Schneider has also picked up lessons that would be helpful for any young adult entering the workforce. “I learned about advocating for myself and being responsible,” he says. “I also learned about accepting feedback and applying it.”

Acquiring those kinds of basic skills was life-changing for EM studio artist David Miles, 26, an exuberant fast-talker. “My story’s like a movie when a protagonist is trying to figure out what to do and I was having a quarter-life crisis and I saw a segment on the news about Exceptional Minds and animation appeals to me so”—he takes a big breath—“I talked to my parents and came on a tour and it felt like a place where I would click and I moved out of my parents’ house, which has challenges, like figuring out plumbing problems and changing my own light bulbs but”—another inhale—“I’m now more confident and optimistic.”

The program earns another thumbs-up from grads and their families for how it helps students and EM graduates progress toward independent living, make friends and socialize. “It’s beyond most parents of ASD kids’ wildest dreams,” says Bennett.

MAKING THE DREAMS COME TRUE

Exceptional Minds studio visual FX executive producer Susan Zwerman has arguably the hardest job: getting incoming bids and pounding movie-lot pavement to convince industry bigwigs to hire her qualified-yet-quirky artists. The courting starts every Thursday, when she invites studio production execs to tour EM.

“The minute we got to EM I knew I wanted Marvel to be a part of this,” says Victoria Alonso, Marvel Studios’ executive vice president of physical production. “People with autism have a remarkable talent we need. They need a place where they can have a future. And we [as society] need to make change. It was a perfect symbiosis. I was 100 percent in.”

Zwerman was ecstatic when Marvel called with an opening she felt suited EM graduate Chapman—and anxious when he started his job. Though extremely talented at his craft, Chapman is excruciatingly quiet and shy. She needn’t have worried. He’s excelling at his job and has been able to deal with typical workplace distractions.

“I knew when I committed to Chris that I’d be holding the banner,” says Alonso. “He’s relentlessly efficient. It’s a privilege to have him on the team.” Chapman’s managers strategically structure his workload to avoid abrupt change. “We give Chris work that is steady, and if there’s a change midstream we let him finish,” she explains. “We want him to succeed.”

Her message to other employers? “People with autism are smart, detail oriented and dedicated. They show up. They don’t quit. That’s what we need. From the bottom of my heart, it’s a no-brainer.”

Visit Parade.com/effects to see some of the amazing work done by Exceptional Minds students.