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Actress Jane Seymour, Class of 2018 Present Exceptional Minds Open Hearts Award to Outgoing Executive Director



Sherman Oaks, California – June 13, 2018 – Monday marked the end of formal training for eleven Exceptional Minds graduates and the beginning of their professional careers in the competitive fields of animation and/or visual effects.

This is the fifth graduating class for the Exceptional Minds school and working studio for young adults on the autism spectrum, and the last for its Executive Director Ernie Merlán.

“As my last official duty, I am graduating with the class of 2018,” said Ernie Merlán to the friends and family gathered at Monday’s commencement in Sherman Oaks, Calif.

Merlán is stepping down as the Executive Director of the unique school and working studio that he helped build, first as a co-director and then as its Executive Director responsible for helping to grow Exceptional Minds from on a one-room classroom with nine students to a thriving nonprofit with a fulltime three-year program as well as virtual and continuation classes and summer workshops that have served more than 600 individuals with autism in seven years.

He will be leaving Exceptional Minds as of June 29 to pursue his dream of creating murals with disadvantaged artists throughout the Los Angeles area.

Actress Jane Seymour was at Monday's graduation to wish him well and to present an award on behalf of the Exceptional Minds community. "For leading with such heart, and so much more, the Exceptional Minds family thanks you," said Seymour as she handed him the Exceptional Minds Open Hearts plaque – an award designed after Seymour's Open Hearts sculpture she created for her Open Hearts Foundation honoring individuals with open hearts.

"This is actually my first animation," she said to the Exceptional Minds class of animators and artists as she traced the lines of her signature design showing two hearts connecting.

Exceptional Minds was recognized by her Open Hearts Foundation in October 2017 as one of three nonprofits making an impact on society. The Exceptional Minds Animation Studio worked with Jane Seymour and her team to create an animated logo for the organization last summer.

At the graduation Monday, Seymour spoke of Merlán's legacy as a builder of both movie sets and dreams, and his contribution to Exceptional Minds as a co-founder and the organization's first Executive Director. "I bet if we looked under your fingernails there would be some paint!" said the Emmy® and Golden Globe® award winning actress known for her roles in the James Bond film *Live and Let Die* and the television series *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman*, referring to a 1561-square foot addition to the Exceptional Minds working studio that Merlán helped build in the past weeks.

"It's such an honor to receive this from you, Jane. Thank you so much," said Merlán, a former Disney Imagineer, Universal Creative and motion picture art director.

"Watching these young men and women overcome challenges, build self-confidence, and literally type their own names onto big screen credits has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life," he said later.

Exceptional Minds graduates have gone on to work for Cartoon Network and Marvel Studios, and have worked on productions such as *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, *The Good Doctor*, and *Black Panther*, among others.

Exceptional Minds opened its doors in 2011 with a first-year class of nine students and as of June, will have ten graduates working in its in-house studio and at least one employed in studios elsewhere not including summer internships, which has doubled since last year. The school is a nonprofit organization funded privately through tuition, foundations and grants.

More than a half-million individuals with autism will enter adulthood in the next decade, the vast majority of whom are ill prepared for meaningful employment. Exceptional Minds is the first and only school of its kind to prepare young people with autism for careers in visual effects, providing well-rounded instruction in soft skills and technical skills as well as job placement and work environment preparedness.

About Exceptional Minds (www.exceptionalmindsstudio.org): Exceptional Minds is a nonprofit vocational center and working production studio for young adults on the autism spectrum. Exceptional Minds offers technical proficiency and work-readiness training that prepares students for careers in graphic arts, animation, web design and visual effects.

Photo: Shown is the Exceptional Minds graduating class of 2018 with Ernie Merlán and actress Jane Seymour, center.

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