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# EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

Academy and Studio

For Visual Effects Artists & Animators with Autism

## Exceptional Minds Class of 2019 Begins Careers in Digital Arts



**Sherman Oaks, California – June 10, 2019** – After three years of technical and work readiness training, the [Exceptional Minds](https://www.exceptionalminds.org/) class of 2019 ended their formal education on Friday and began their professional careers in the competitive digital arts fields.

The 2019 graduating class made up of six men and one woman on the autism spectrum is the sixth graduating class for Exceptional Minds, a pioneer in autism employability, self-sufficiency, and inclusion and belonging. “These grads are an example of what the potential and possibilities are for individuals with autism,” said Exceptional Minds Executive Director Jeff Shapiro, who addressed family and friends during Friday’s commencement at the school in Sherman Oaks.

Exceptional Minds is a professional training academy and studio with a mission to prepare individuals on the autism spectrum for careers in the fields of visual effects, animation, titles, and animation and rigging for games. Full-time program graduates Chris Iddamalghoda, Peter Jensen, Jacob Riess, Russell Sayre, Luke Shneour, and Quinn Wright as well as Alex Adlawan join an alumni body of Exceptional Minds graduates who have gone on to work for entertainment companies such as Marvel Studios and Cartoon Network and to complete visual effects for major motion pictures and animations for entertainment organizations such as Sesame Workshop.

“Our ability to interpret the world differently...can have challenges. Despite the impediments that were laid down in front of us... we stayed focused and became an exceptional mind,” said graduate Chris Iddamalghoda, who will begin his career in animation with an emphasis in game rigging as an apprentice in the Exceptional Minds studio.

Exceptional Minds academy opened its doors in 2011 and in 2014, opened a professional studio to bring in contract work for graduates of its three-year program. Since then, Exceptional Minds artists with autism have completed projects for more than 196 movies and television shows, including Oscar nominated movies *Avengers: Infinity War*, *Black Panther*, *First Man*, *Green Book* and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* as well as recent blockbuster *Avengers: Endgame* and for notable TV shows such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Good Doctor* and *Atypical*. Exceptional Minds clients include Sesame Workshop, Disney, HBO, Marvel Studios, Netflix, NBCUniversal, Sony Pictures, and Warner Bros., among others.

During Friday’s graduation, the students and staff awarded Exceptional Minds founding board member Helen Wu with its Exceptional Minds Ed Asner Award. The award is named after the school’s most notable founding advisor and is presented annually to a champion of Exceptional Minds and its cause to transform expectations for autism employability. Wu is the seventh recipient of the award, following Gretchen Libby of Industrial Light & Magic, Robert Sorcher of Cartoon Network, Holly Schiffer of HBO, Victoria Alonso of Marvel Studios, Sam Nicholson of Stargate Studios, and Ed Asner himself.

“The common core believe that brought us all together was that we needed to create a place of belonging. And not just a place of belonging at Exceptional Minds, but the belief that [people with autism] belong and deserve to be in greater society and achieving all the great things that everybody wants in life,” said Wu, who served as Board Chair the first six years of Exceptional Minds’ existence. One of her many achievements was to help create independent housing alternatives for her son on the spectrum as well as the students at Exceptional Minds.

Graduating along with the full-time students on Friday was Alex Adlawan, the first to complete the academy’s Freelance Exceptional Artist Program (FLEAT), which is part of the school’s growing initiative to reach a wider autism population through workshops, private tutoring and virtual online instruction.

The training academy now annually serves an average of 250 full-time, part-time, and privately tutored students (as well as graduate artists), providing technical as well as behavioral training to a population sorely underrepresented in both the labor market and society as a whole.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, 84% of adults with autism are unemployed and many more are underemployed.

The U.S. Center for Disease Control estimates that one in 59 kids is now diagnosed with autism.

**About Exceptional Minds ([www.exceptional-minds.org](http://www.exceptional-minds.org))** Exceptional Minds is a Los Angeles-based nonprofit training academy and professional digital arts studio that trains artists with autism in the technical and work readiness skills required for employment in the entertainment industry. Exceptional Minds' goal is empowering people with autism to achieve their full professional potential, leading in the transformation of global expectations regarding their capabilities.

*Photo caption: Graduates (left to right, front) Luke Shneour, Peter Jensen, Russell Sayre, Alex Adlawan, (back row, left to right) Jacob Riess, Quinn Wright, and Chris Iddamalgoda join an alumni body of Exceptional Minds graduates who have gone on to work on movies and shows such as Avengers: Endgame and Game of Thrones.*

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