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# EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

Academy and Studio

For Visual Effects Artists & Animators with Autism

## Exceptional Minds Class of 2020 Graduates Friday

**Los Angeles, California** – *June 10, 2020* – Meet the 2020 Graduates of [Exceptional Minds](#). This is no ordinary class, and these are not ordinary times, as you know.

The Exceptional Minds Class of 2020 are young adults with autism, who, against all odds, graduated Friday from the Exceptional Minds school and will go on to careers in visual effects, animation, motion graphics, and other digital arts fields.

The graduation was a Zoom event attended by parents and friends, among them notable guest speaker Rob Paulsen, a self-described “blue collar worker in the dream factory” best known as the voice of Yakko in *Animaniacs* and Pinky from *Pinky and the Brain*. “People will look at Exceptional Minds as pioneers and they will be inspired by it and that inspiration will help them find their own gifts,” he said.

When Covid-19 hit, Exceptional Minds shut down its school and sent its students home. Overnight, its entire training model – the place where students met, the way instructors taught and socialized and interacted with this special population, the very lifeblood of what Exceptional Minds does and how it does it, right down to funding – was gone.

And, no one was entirely sure if they could replicate it in a remote, virtual environment, for a population that was already isolated and challenged in so many other ways.

Remote learning carried Exceptional Minds 2020 graduates through the last critical months of their three-year training, something no one had ever tried with the autism population before.

“From Covid-19 to Protest 2020, we have faced challenges the likes of which most of us have never seen before. But as we are learning, challenges test us in unexpected ways and you all have demonstrated incredible flexibility and resilience, in this new remote learning space, that will serve you so well as you

continue on an amazing journey that has just begun,” said Exceptional Minds Executive Director David Siegel to the class of 12 during Friday’s Zoom graduation.

Exceptional Minds opened its doors in 2011 as a training school for individuals with autism and, in 2014, added a professional studio to bring in contract work for graduates of its three-year program.

Exceptional Minds 2020 graduates join an alumni of Exceptional Minds graduates who have gone on to careers at Marvel Studios and Cartoon Network, worked on Oscar nominated movies and produced animations for Sesame Street, among others. Exceptional Minds academy and working studio continues its mission to create opportunities for individuals with autism with a new [online summer program](#) that will carry forward its mission to families and individuals across geographic and socioeconomic boundaries like never before.

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Photo caption: Michael Cicerelli, Nicholas Dodge, Nicholas Dupree, Craig Hills, Raymond Huang, Dakota La Ness, Tristan Maillet, Kenneth McLeod, Ryan Oldis, Trevor Wallace, Zachary Warren, and Adam Shows

*graduated from Exceptional Minds school for young adults on the autism spectrum Friday, against all odds.*

*“Go out and tell your story,” said Carson Smith, Director of Outreach for Nickelodeon, to the graduating class of Exceptional Minds Friday. During the Zoom graduation, Smith received the Exceptional Minds Ed Asner Award for his ongoing support, including Nickelodeon internships for Exceptional Minds students and grads. The award is named after the school’s most notable founding advisor and is presented annually to a person who has made a lasting impact to Exceptional Minds students and all young people with autism.*



*Photo caption: Exceptional Minds found the perfect voice for its 2020 graduation in guest speaker Rob Paulsen, known as the voice of Yakko in Animaniacs and Pinky from Pinky and the Brain. While waiting in the graduation Zoom greenroom, he came up with his own acronym for autism: Astonishingly Unique Terrifically Irrepressibly Superhuman Magicians.*