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# EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

For Immediate Release

## **Exceptional Minds Receives Prestigious Sesame Street Award** *School and working studio for young adults on the autism spectrum exemplify the individuality and employability of people with autism.*



**New York, NY – June 2, 2016** – Sesame Street guests, friends and Muppets gathered at Sesame Workshop’s annual benefit dinner last night at the Cipriani 42nd Street to celebrate the amazing in all children and to recognize the achievements of a few amazing individuals. Among them were two young adults with autism and their program director from [Exceptional Minds](#), who received the evening’s prestigious Joan Ganz Cooney Award for their animated video demonstrating both the individuality of children with autism as well as the employability of people with autism.

Exceptional Minds, a school and working studio for young men and women on the spectrum pursuing careers in digital animation and visual effects, is the first non-profit to receive the award named after the Children’s Television Workshop co-founder.

“Thank you so much for the incredible honor...For many of us, Big Bird and Snuffleupagus and Oscar were our first friends,” said Michael Yochim who, along with fellow Exceptional Minds visual artist Shane

McKaskle and program director Ernie Merlán, accepted the award on behalf of the other students at Exceptional Minds who contributed to Sesame Workshop's 2015 US social impact initiative, [\*Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children\*](#). "I feel like we are a part of history and most importantly for me, I get to put Sesame Street on my resume!" added McKaskle. Exceptional Minds is the second recipient of the Joan Ganz Cooney Award, joining the prestigious company of Samantha Power, United States Ambassador to the United Nations—last year's honoree.

The animators were recognized for "[\*Benny's Story\*](#)," an animated video of a typical grade-schooler with autism that is part of *Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children*. "Benny's Story" was also nominated for a 2016 Daytime Emmy Award. McKaskle, a 2015 Exceptional Minds graduate, originated the storyline and provided the voiceover for Benny. Yochim, who will be starting as an intern at Nickelodeon following graduation from Exceptional Minds on June 5, was the lead animator for the project.

"Exceptional Minds is the first-ever non-profit digital arts school for young adults on the autism spectrum and we're honored to have them play such a meaningful role in helping us develop content for *Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children*," said Sherrie Westin, Executive Vice President, Global Impact and Philanthropy, Sesame Workshop.

Westin cited examples of the impact "Benny's Story" had on young viewers. "One man wrote to us, 'My son is 10 years old and has autism. When we watched Benny's Story, he yelled, 'See! They're spying on me!' And when Benny's Story was approaching 50,000 views on YouTube, another mom posted: I think 40,000 of those are from my severely autistic 5-year-old!," said Westin during the evening, which was hosted by John Oliver of *Last Week Tonight* and featured musical guest Charlie Puth.

Sesame Workshop's *Sesame Street and Autism: See Amazing in All Children* is a comprehensive online resource for the purpose of educating, instructing and de-stigmatizing autism.

Exceptional Minds 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 fields of visual effects and animation for the entertainment industry.

The Exceptional Minds vision includes a working studio where graduates contract their visual effects skills for movies and series such as *Captain America: Civil War*, *Ant-Man*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay 2*, and *Alvin and the Chipmunks: Road Chip*.

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.

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