

MOVIE MAGIC

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.

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a visual effects animation studio serving Hollywood that's also a nonprofit vocational training program for young adults with autism.

A RTISTS IN TRAINING

At Exceptional Minds, located in a nondescript building close to Hollywood's major studios, visual effects artists on the spectrum are hard at



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

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 *Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Road Chip*. On the small screen, their work is seen in Martin Scorsese's new HBO drama, *Vinyl*. In *Game of Thrones*, these talented artists made every fake falling snow-

flake melt on the actors' faces in postproduction.

Upstairs, students in the three-year training program learn the trade. Tiana Fazio, 23, giggles as she shares a picture of herself as a *Simpsons* character. The exaggerated cartoon likeness is spot-on. "My favorite thing is learning all the new computer programs," says Fazio. "I like things that I have to figure out." Fazio worked with classmate Noah Schneider, 21, on an animated short for *Sesame Street* called *Benny'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.

In the downstairs professional studio, seated at rows of computers in a darkened room to reduce monitor glare, graduates of the program—now officially junior artists—are doing

the less creative but necessary work to get films ready for the big screen. They're meticulously removing movie markers—the tiny red dots physically placed on sets to show actors where to move and editors where to trim frames—from an upcoming film. Others are intently creating lengthy credits or doing paint-out—removing unwanted objects and then filling in to seamlessly match the backdrop. All are now paid employees of EM's studio, which wins contracts in the highly competitive post-production bidding business. And most are earning their first-ever paychecks.

It's tedious, repetitive work requiring intense focus, meticulous attention to detail and a masterful, logical mind—unique traits of many people with autism. Matching people who have autism with work that suits their unique talents is key, says nationally renowned autism advocate and animal scientist Temple Grandin, 68 (played by Claire Danes in a 2010 Golden Globe- and Emmy-winning TV biopic).

"There are different types of autistic minds: mathematicians, word thinkers, visual thinkers, pattern thinkers," she explains. "Visual and pattern thinkers are perfect for what EM is doing."

"People with autism are totally underestimated," says Ex-

ceptional Minds co-founder Yudi Bennett. More than 80 percent of people with disabilities, including autism, are un- or underemployed, and iso-

lated with limited opportunities

Hiring Heroes

Autism advocate Temple Grandin (pictured), who is on the autism spectrum herself, believes people of all autistic levels can be matched to suitable jobs.



"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 finance interns.

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

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

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.

"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

► SPECIAL CHARACTERS, SPECIAL MOVIES



Academy Award winners *Rain Man* (1988) and *Forrest Gump* (1994) remain the seminal movies showcasing the realities of autism. Here are a few others.

1. Mozart and the Whale (2005) Josh Hartnett and Radha Mitchell play characters with Asperger's syndrome (a form of autism) working to build a relationship in this drama based on a true love story.

2. I Am Sam (2001) Sean Penn was nominated for an Oscar for his role as an autistic single father struggling to gain custody of his daughter.

3. Little Man Tate (1991) Jodie Foster directed and starred in this feature about a single mom trying to protect her gifted son, who has Asperger's syndrome.

4. What's Eating Gilbert Grape (1993) Leonardo DiCaprio's stellar performance as Johnny Depp's autistic younger brother earned him Oscar and Golden Globe nominations.

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

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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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 Zberman 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.”

Zberman 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.