

EXCEPTIONAL  
**IMPACT**  
EXCEPTIONAL  
**PEOPLE**  
EXCEPTIONAL  
**CREATIVE**

# EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

EXCEPTIONAL  
**OPPORTUNITY**  
EXCEPTIONAL  
**OUTCOMES**  
EXCEPTIONAL  
**GRATITUDE**

IMPACT REPORT  
**2023**



# HELLO & THANK YOU

I am thrilled to share highlights from our exciting and productive year. In 2023, we grew enrollment and placement, deepened our creativity, and expanded the community with new relationships.

When our students succeed, we succeed. In this regard, we have much to celebrate. For example, after an impressive path at Nickelodeon, we welcomed back Kate Jorgensen as production manager supporting fellow graduate students in our Animation studio. Our artists launched new careers while we continued to cheer on past graduates as they positively impacted the work of Netflix, Marvel, CBS Sports, and many others.

We believe in a world where neurodiversity is embraced as part of a truly inclusive culture. I am honored to lead this community and so grateful to you for playing a part in giving hope to young adults on the autism spectrum as they navigate a productive place and purpose in their bright futures.



*David Siegel*

CEO, EXCEPTIONAL MINDS

**2023**

od Concept Artist - Katherine  
Design - Mama

## THE ACADEMY

With our hands-on experience emphasis, students in both the full-time program and workshops participate in state-of-the-art training with a path to finding their creative voice and mastering their technical skills. Highlighting employability as a crucial measure of success, our priority is to assist students in paving the way for fulfilling careers.



## THE STUDIO

Our full-service studio offers real-world experience to graduates of the Academy and is proof of the exceptional training the Academy provides – preparing our artists for the work they do with many of the most creative and successful entertainment companies in the world.



339

ENROLLMENTS

70%

POSTGRAD PLACEMENT

\$221,590

IN TUTION ASSISTANCE



RED PANDA  
TURNAROUND

| DESCRIPTION                                | ARTIST               | PROD. DATE |
|--|----------------------|------------|
| Red Panda 3 point turn around on hind legs | M. Aquilino Carrelli | 4/13/22    |



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## GROWING TO MEET THE NEED

Exceptional Minds (EM) is a pathway to employability and independence for young adult artists on the autism spectrum. In 2023, more people than ever – hundreds of students in full-time and part-time workshops – trained to reach their potential. We deepened our impact with more classes and virtual opportunities so students from all over could access programs. We also expanded extracurricular programming to include EMBARK for video game development.

We hosted our first-ever AniJam and challenged artists to make a short in 48 hours. Our award-winning Animation Club is in post-production on *Secret of the Hunter*, our most ambitious student-produced short to date. In 2023, we granted \$221,590 in scholarships to expand access to students in need. Through innovation and collaboration, we are developing the next generation of artists and storytellers.



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## WORKSHOPS THAT WORK

Our Part-Time, and Seasonal Workshops – including our popular Summer Sessions – created learning opportunities for students aged 14 and up, paving a path to our full-time programs.

There is nothing more satisfying than when our students and their families are satisfied. This year, our surveys told us that they want more training and learning – proof that our programs are having the intended impact.

**91.3%**

*Intend to participate in future programming*

**91.2%**

*Parents believe students showed improvement*

**86.9%**

*Believe the value of the workshop was equal to cost*



*"I am thankful for the friends I have made here that I can just be nerdy about animation and games with." AJ Visola ('25)*

## **CELEBRATED, ELEVATED, EMPLOYED**

EM is reshaping the narrative of how people look at those on the spectrum and how those on the spectrum look at themselves. Our artists are proving that autistic talent is invaluable to the workforce. From admission to our academy to internships and jobs, EM helps them be seen, heard, and hired.



*"I'm grateful for all of the amazing artists, students, and teachers at Exceptional Minds who push and help further improve our skills to make it in a competitive field."*

*Kyle Cronan ('25)*





## Kate Jorgensen ('20)

After rising to production coordinator on *Santiago of the Seas* during her four years at Nickelodeon (and writing an episode of the series), Kate made her return to EM as a Production Manager. She is supporting more than 20 fellow graduate artists in our Animation Studio. Kate credits *Exceptional Minds* with changing her life.

***"I was so used to doors being slammed in my face. At Exceptional Minds, they open a door and say, 'Come on in! We want you. We value you!' That's what Exceptional Minds is - a door to more."***

*- Kate Jorgensen*

## Thomas Harmonson ('18)

Thomas is the Jr. Lead Titles Artist in our VFX Studio. He has worked on more than 60 projects! When asked what he likes best about working at EM, Thomas said, *"The community!"*





### **Naph Despres ('22)**

Naph works as an Associate Brand Designer at Mattel Creations. Naph's training at EM prepared them for the fast-paced, creative work at Mattel.

***"Mattel encourages me to push creative boundaries. I'm working on something different and exciting every day. Being able to collaborate with diverse, innovative minds who care about the work we do, makes waking up for work a true joy."***

*- Naph Despres*

### **Matthew Rohde ('25)**

Rising third-year VFX student Matthew pursued and was offered multiple internships in the summer of 2023. *"Because of my training at EM, I had the opportunity to intern at SDFX Studios. Seeing my work appear in a major motion picture was so gratifying. I'm grateful to the EM staff and anyone who supports autistic artists like me."*







***“Exceptional Minds is a place where storytellers from diverse backgrounds come together to help each other achieve their full potential. Our students invest in us, and we in turn, invest in them.”***

*Jermane Anyoha, Instructor*

## EXCEPTIONAL TEACHERS

In 2023, our Academy welcomed two new instructors. **Jermane Anyoha** is a graduate of Emerson College with a background in 2D and 3D animation, motion graphics, and editing. He is a video game music composer and self-published novelist. **Marc Sanchez** is a National Hispanic Foundations for the Arts Grant recipient, with a Master's degree in Animation from UCLA where he also is a LatinX Animation History instructor.

***“Observing such talented people who just need some guidance to truly unleash their artistic potential, has been an amazing experience.”***

*Marc Sanchez, Digital Arts Generalist*





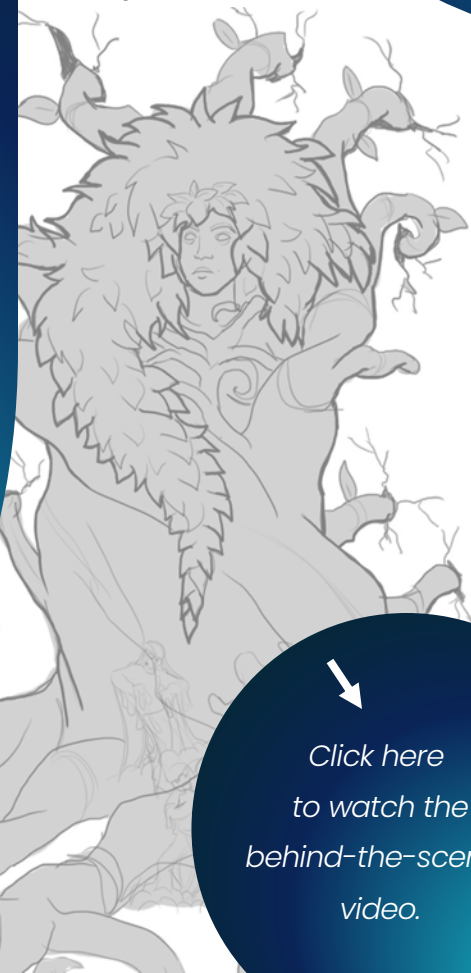
Blood  
Concept Artist - Katherine McSpadden  
Design - Manna  
McSpadden

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## TREE'S BLOOD, SWEAT & PREMIERES

Talent and dedication have led our artists to creative breakthroughs. In 2023, EM's graduates worked on some of the most ambitious projects in our history, including *Tree's Blood*, an animated short made in partnership with Paramount and Nickelodeon Animation.

The production, a collaboration with Reel Start, a nonprofit founded by producer Evan Goldberg (*Superbad*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles: Mutant Mayhem*, *The Boys*), premiered at Nickelodeon Studios in December 2023. It was an exciting night for the EM artists and the whole EM family.



*Click here  
to watch the  
behind-the-scenes  
video.*



Jorge Gutierrez

## CREATIVITY IS A SPECTRUM TOO

Celebrating the message and artistry of people on the spectrum, the team in our Animation Studio created the award-winning Documentary Short, *Grief is a Spectrum Too*. Narrated by the renowned Jorge Gutierrez, this project was made in collaboration with the Hospice Foundation of America.

The animated film by and for adults on the autism spectrum received the Marvels of Media award for Best Documentary Short presented by the Museum of the Moving Image.

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[Click here to watch the Award-winning short, \*Grief is a Spectrum Too\*.](#)

## BREAKTHROUGH VFX



Despite the two major strikes, our EM graduate-led VFX studio secured post-production work on a variety of high-profile projects including Michael Mann's *Ferrari* and the Marvel blockbuster *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* (Oscar-nominated for Best Visual Effects).

EM compositing artists went to the next level with their cutting-edge work on Netflix's *Bodies*, which broke new ground for our VFX studio, its capabilities, and its leadership from Jr. Lead VFX Artist *Isaiah Strum* ('18).

## ORIGINAL CREATIONS



In the fall, work began in our animation studio on original content for Cartoon Network. This groundbreaking initiative was designed to enhance our artists' understanding of the business and their craft while giving them ownership in their creation and content. Each creator assembled a team of graduate artists to help them produce their short. Congratulations to *Charlotte Snare*, *Eli Gross* ('22), *Dustin Noriyuki* ('21), and *Craig Hills* ('20) for kicking off production on their originals.

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### DID YOU KNOW?

Our Academy also made breakthrough content.

Our first **AniJam** sponsored three student-led teams competing for best short.

Click here to watch the winner.



Before starting at Exceptional Minds, I never would have seen myself working at Disney and Marvel or being able to work full time. There have certainly been challenging moments, but now, 5 years down the line, I could not be happier to be part of my team and doing our part to create these shows and movies.

- *Xavier Romo ('18) Plates Lab Wrangler, The Walt Disney Studios*

## DIVERSITY, INCLUSION (AND REALLY GOOD STORYTELLING)

Exceptional Minds artists are proof that inclusion creates real value. Their diversity of thought and execution enriches the workplace, expands the kind of stories that get told, and contributes to the bottom line of the entertainment industry. Inclusion is no longer just a good idea, it's good business - and good for the future of creative industries.

In 2023, the EM Studio worked with Disney, Marvel, Warner Bros., Netflix, Paramount, Sony and many others. Previous graduates are currently employed full-time at companies including Disney, Warner Bros. Discovery, Mattel, and CBS Sports. An opportunity for our graduates is an opportunity for the companies that employ them.

### 27

*The number of EM graduates working in our Studio in 2023.*

#### PARTNER HIGHLIGHT:

### **CBS SPORTS**

*In 2023, CBS Sports employed four Academy graduates full-time and hired our Studio to create broadcast content.*

## ATTENTION, ACCOLADES & OSCARS

We are humbled and inspired by the recognition we have received this year. While our success can be measured by the joy and accomplishments of our artists - accolades and recognition are appreciated and help spread the word.

Media coverage, including a wonderful story from [Apple Newsroom](#), helped share the magic. Our studio was excited to learn that *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* received an Academy Award nomination for Best Visual Effects, adding to the number of nominated films on which our graduates have worked.

We were pleased and honored to be voted **Nonprofit of the Year** by the LA Business Journal, a recognition that values the contributions Exceptional Minds and its creatives continue to make in the community.



18

Academy Award-nominated films our studio and graduates have worked on, including 2023's *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*.



## AND WE'RE JUST GETTING STARTED

We are proud of our progress and thank you for championing our movement. As we navigate our second decade, we see so many milestones ahead. Too many young adults on the autism spectrum remain unemployed and we remain committed to bucking that trend.

Together, we will continue to amplify unique underrepresented talent who prove that innovation comes from the most unexpected places. And for young adults on the autism spectrum, it starts here at Exceptional Minds. Thank you for your generous and continued support.

# MORE THAN A VILLAGE

Special thanks to the many individuals who guide and advise Exceptional Minds.

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# THANK YOU

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*Supporting original content creation  
 and funding the development of  
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[exceptional-minds.org](https://exceptional-minds.org)

