



# CREATIVE FIX

BY ANGI BRUSS

## Video Project Making a D

**A**s Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, “Life is a journey, not a destination.” This saying may be true for some situations, but for young adults with autism working on the animated short film “Even in Death,” life is both the journey and the destination.

The young adults, all of whom are served through AutismOklahoma’s program Invisible Layers Productions, have been working on the film since last summer. The

completion date is set for April 1. For these young adults, the journey, so far, has been a fantastic one.

“It’s an amazing experience and very fun team,” said Vanessa Grayson, a student illustrator on the project. “It’s wonderful working with others with autism.”

Invisible Layers is a pre-employment club for young adults with autism who are interested in filmmaking. It is one of 70 programs that AutismOklahoma offers its members.

The intriguing and haunting trailer, which is available to watch at [www.evenindeathmovie.org](http://www.evenindeathmovie.org), initially evokes feelings of fear and mystery. Then, toward the end of the trailer,

words come on the screen that read “An unexpected story about true love.”

“‘Even in Death’ is a whimsical story about love, loss and life,” said Zac Davis, Invisible Layers productions director. “It chronicles a day in the life of Jonah, a young boy living in New Orleans who is about to experience a loss in his family. Faced with grief, Jonah is visited by the Grim Reaper (Death) and is taken on a charming adventure through New Orleans that ends with Jonah learning a lesson in life and the true depth of love.”

Four professional artists are working with 13 students on the film. The trailer is full of vivid colors and amazing artwork.



STUDENTS WORK ON THE "EVEN IN DEATH" FILM PROJECT.

# ifference for Autistic Kids

“This wordless film highlights the power of communication through a visual experience,” Davis continued. “The idea of making it wordless just kind of made sense for this project. It was a way of making it more of an experience for the viewer and to allow them to see the world through visual cues just as some people with autism do.”

AutismOklahoma believes in finding a way to see the world differently. The organization aims to encourage others to think differently about people with autism. “Even in Death” and the organization’s previous film project, “Swanky, the Movie” both try to cause the viewers to see things in a new light.

“The members of Invisible Layers don’t

really want to spend their time talking about their disability,” Davis said. “What they want is to create art just like any other artist. They want to make films like the ones they see at the theater or on TV. So when I began writing the script for this I knew it wasn’t going to be driven by a character with a disability. What I was after was something more universal, something that anyone could connect with.”

Vanessa Grayson is a college student and fine artist and said this is the first time she’s worked in digital art.

“I’ve learned a lot from this experience,” she said. “I love being a part of a community and being in this program.”

Grayson was diagnosed with Aspergers in

2013 and her younger brother has autism. She’s been involved with AutismOklahoma for years and loves that she’s now able to participate in one of the programs herself.

“This is important to be involved in because I’m meeting others (with Aspergers) who are interested in the same thing.”

She said it’s painstaking to work on the film, which should be about five to seven minutes long.

“It can take a few hours to finish one scene, but it depends on the length of the scene and the different angles and vantage points. I do the coloring and shading, which has to match every scene. I have to pay attention to lighting within the scene as well.”





JONATHAN KOELSCH AND VANESSA GRAYSON WORK ON "EVEN IN DEATH"

This is Grayson's first time to work with Invisible Layers. She said this experience will look great on her resume because of the skills she's learned.

"The members are getting a massive amount of training," Davis said. "They are learning crazy complicated programs like Adobe Photoshop, Adobe After Effects and Logic Pro X. These are programs

used in Hollywood and on major motion pictures. This is essentially a crash course in computer animation and sound. What is even more crazy is how fast they learned these programs!"

The lead artists on the project are Jonathan Koelsch and Jerry Bennett. Sound design is by Justin Rice and Davis is the writer, director and lead animator."

This isn't the first project Invisible Layers has completed. Davis said the group works together weekly to collaborate on high-quality films for their customers, which include AutismOklahoma.org, Youth and Family Services and other non-profit organizations.

"The students started out not wanting to really go out and leave the house, to (now)





working downtown, going out to lunch and being in charge of their own video shoots,” Davis said. “They are out interviewing Energy soccer players and making their own podcasts, Youtube shows and writing their own film scripts. It’s incredible. This is life changing stuff.”

“We are so excited for the opportunity to make an animated film with a very talented group of young adults with autism,” said AutismOklahoma Founder and Executive Director Melinda Lauffenburger. “Their efforts inspire all of us!”

AutismOklahoma helped raise money for the film and provided volunteers to help get it produced. The film received two grants and crowdfunded \$10,000 through indiegogo.com. It’s partly supported by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, Oklahoma Arts Council and Mid-America Arts Alliance which includes foundations, corporations and individuals throughout Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Texas.

Mike Cross has seen the benefits from all of the support. His 25-year-old daughter, Michelle Cross, who was diagnosed with Aspergers when she was 6-years-old, is an illustrator on the film.

“I’m so proud of my daughter,” he said. “I’ve seen a brightness in her through this experience. She has more self-confidence and is interacting with people a lot more.”

Michelle Cross also is a college student and fine artist. Mike Cross hopes this experience will help his daughter with future job opportunities. But mostly he’s excited that his daughter has had a chance to gain better social skills and make friends with people who understand her. Something, he said, that wouldn’t be possible without AutismOklahoma.

“I think one of the biggest impacts I have seen from this is that of the parents and the community,” Davis said. “The perspective about what autism is and about what people with autism can do is changing, and that goes for the parents as well. I see hope now in the eyes of people where a sense of despair once was. Everyone is seeing that there is life after the diagnosis and that it can be one of joy. I think the community is realizing that we can grow together and that people with autism in no way have to end up marginalized. I have to say that I am encouraged and proud with how people are coming together to support people with autism.”

The public can help support the film and see the final product. “Even in Death” will premiere June 24 at the Oklahoma City

Community College Visual and Performing Arts Center. The students working on the film have a project they can truly be proud of. Davis said the film touches on a level familiar to almost everyone.

“I think the story is significant to our students because it’s universal,” Davis said. “Everyone experiences the loss of a family member. But I think also because it has an air of fantastical innocence. It runs the viewer through a lot of emotions. It’s sad, then fun, then thrilling, then heart warming, and I think that appeals to the students. It’s the idea that it’s just not one thing.”

The journey of life and death is something everyone can relate to. The students working on “Even in Death” will be wrapping up their journey on this film soon, and the destination will be a world of possibilities.

*Angi Bruss is a Telly award-winning Video Host/Anchor/Reporter/Voice Talent/Producer/Editor in Oklahoma City. She received her Bachelor’s degree in Broadcasting and Communications from the University of Central Oklahoma. Angi is a wife and a mother to two young daughters.*



ZAC DAVIS, INVISIBLE LAYERS PRODUCTION DIRECTOR