

MOVIES' CAST, CREW IN FOCUS

Film camp provides a summer blockbuster of personal growth for its autistic children from military families

By [Tristan Nichols \(/staff/tristan-nichols/\)](/staff/tristan-nichols/) 12:01 a.m. June 23, 2013

Young people from military families who have autism are getting the chance to appear at this year's San Diego Film Festival.

Fifty budding actors, directors, cameramen, editors, scriptwriters and set designers are taking part in a two-week film camp for autistic children in San Diego. A short film created during the camp, which ends Friday, will premiere at the San Diego Film Festival on Oct. 4.

The Autism Film Program for Military Children event aims to teach people ages 9 to 21 about all aspects of filmmaking, including writing scripts, building sets, operating a camera and editing film.

The theme of this year's event is "The Inclusion Network," and Nancy Alspaugh-Jackson, executive director of the nonprofit support group Autism Care and Treatment Today, believes it's only right to "give something back" to the military.

"Oftentimes, when the parent deploys on military operations, it creates a great deal of stress for autistic children," said Alspaugh-Jackson, whose son has autism.

"Change is very disruptive for a child with autism, as it creates anxiety," she said. "When I met Hollywood filmmaker Joey Travolta and learned about what he does in support of young people, we decided to put together these camps. They give amazing social skills in terms of interaction.

"We have such respect for the military for its role in looking after us. The very least we can do is give something back, especially if servicemen or women have a child with autism."

Travolta, who teaches at the camp, breaks the children up into groups who work with teachers who have filmmaking backgrounds. They work together to write scripts, audition and interview people for posts, create and select props, and film and edit material.

By working together, the autistic children improve their social and communications skills, he said.

"These kids make new friends; they are included in things that they might not have had the opportunity to have experienced before; and ultimately, it gives them a sense of accomplishment," said Travolta, 62, the older brother of Hollywood star John Travolta.

"Filmmaking is a great way to bring people together and, at the end of the camp, the kids are like social butterflies."

Travolta, a former special education teacher who lives in Los Angeles, said his famous brother is a big fan of the initiative.

"I always send him the articles, and he just loves it," he said. "It's a show business family, and, personally, being around all the theatrics taught me social skills. It just works, and the young people taking part in the summer camp will benefit from that experience."

Five Autism Film Program for Military Children camps are being staged across the country, in New Jersey, Detroit, Pittsburgh, San Francisco and San Diego.

Nationally, the camp is now in its eighth year. It has been brought back to San Diego for a second year partnering with Cox Communications, where it is being staged at the company's main campus and call center.

"The camp is more than a story of 50 children with autism who learn the art of filmmaking," said Cami Mattson, Cox's director of community relations. "It is a story about inclusion, friendship and transformation that occurs when children with special needs are placed in the right learning environment to excel and grow."

San Diego military wife Keary Mason is the mother of 15-year-old Mackenzie, who has autism.

Mason was so inspired by the "positive" effect the event had on Mackenzie last year that she has volunteered to become a film camp coordinator this year.

"Mackenzie and my 9-year-old daughter, Kylie, walked away from last year's event so full of confidence," said Mason, whose husband is in the Coast Guard.

"I saw the difference this film camp made on their behavior, and their thinking. Mackenzie is a lot more confident, and Kylie has developed a lot of empathy toward people with autism."

Mackenzie said he has taken a lot away from the event.

"The people here let me know that I can do whatever I want in this world," he said. "I really like my teachers. They are so helpful, and they keep me focused."

Lt. Bryan Martinez has served in the Navy for 12 years and has spent a "number of years" away from home on deployment.

The San Diego-based supply and logistics officer has been attending the film camp with his 9-year-old autistic son, Jake, and his other son, 14-year-old Evan.

"Being on active duty, I have deployed a number of times, so it's great to come home and see the children participate and grow in this kind of environment," said Martinez, who visited last year's event in San Diego with his family.

"It gives our family and my autistic son the opportunity to learn and experience things with other people who share that familiar adversity in life," Martinez said.

"I can absolutely see a difference in Jake, and Evan, not only by the end of the camp — but also by the end of the very first day.

"They are both excited to come here and they're excited to listen and learn. To watch their faces when they see the final product is so great."

The event has been staged in partnership among Inclusion Films, Cox and ACT Today.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 88 children in America is diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder, making it more prevalent than juvenile diabetes, childhood cancer and pediatric AIDS combined.

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