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DREXEL AUTISM INSTITUTE GOING MOBILE

Written by **Angela Haskell** | Wednesday, 08 August 2012 04:33 | font size | Print | Be the first to comment!

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From left, Yoshie Takeo, Grace Lam and Alexis Siriani pose in front of their winning design concept for Drexel University's new mobile autism assessment vehicle. — SUBMITTED PHOTO

The newly established A.J. Drexel Autism Institute at Drexel University is hitting the road with design assistance from students in the Antoinette Westphal College of Media Arts and Design.

Yoshie Takeo, Grace Lam and Alexis Siriani designed the winning concept for Drexel University's new mobile autism assessment vehicle, the first mobile unit for autism in the Philadelphia region.

Researchers and outreach staff from the Institute will use the vehicle to conduct clinical testing as part of autism research studies. It will also support community-level interventions that promote early diagnosis and effective interventions, especially in underserved communities.

"With the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute's particular focus on public health, we wanted to be able to bring the best ideas from research to diverse communities — rolling out these vehicles will help promote engagement with diverse communities," said Craig Newschaffer, director of the Institute and a professor in Drexel's School of Public Health.

The mobile clinic will be used by clinical assessment teams making site visits to evaluate children taking part in research studies and participating in model programs. Visits will happen both at families' homes and on-site at community service providers such as schools and health centers.

"My team and I wanted to create a van that was approachable, relevant, engaging, functional, efficient and sensitive to the needs of many," said Sirian. "'Life Journey' was the underlying concept that drove our design decisions."

The team's design is based on the belief that no matter what a person's unique strengths and weaknesses are, they must walk the road of life, striving to create a life of personal fulfillment and meaning.

The vehicle's exterior design requirements presented different challenges for the students. For research, a

flexible design is essential.

Any mention of "autism" on the exterior of the vehicle must be removable to protect the privacy of families and individuals involved in research studies.

However, on other occasions when the vehicle is used for outreach and awareness at community and public events, recognizing the connection to the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute is a desirable factor.

The designs were judged by a panel of local community members with autism expertise. The best aspects of all the designs will be incorporated into the custom-outfitted vehicle that will be ordered this fall.

Autism is believed to affect one in 88 children and perhaps up to 4 million adults in the United States. The mission of the A. J. Drexel Autism Institute is to discover, develop and disseminate population-level and community-based approaches that will prevent morbidity and disability associated with autism; and to address the needs of, and improve the quality of life for, individuals with autism of all ages and their families.

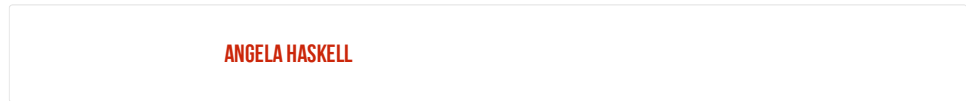
"When picking a palette for our van, we turned to nature for our inspiration," said Siriani. "The proposed exterior and interior designs emphasize streamlined simplicity. The interior layout and selection of materials was influenced by my experiences as a pediatric physical therapist. We hope the mobile unit will foster a sense of trust in the community, provide valuable resources, create a sense of hope, and serve as stepping stone towards a road of enhanced opportunities for children with autism."

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