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Art for Autism and Mercedes-Benz of Tampa Partner to Provide Employment Opportunities for People with Autism

Mayor Iorio to Cut Ribbon at Dealership on Jan. 13

TAMPA, Fla. (Jan. 4, 2011) — When Mayor Pam Iorio cuts the ribbon at Mercedes-Benz of Tampa's new location at 4400 North Mabry Highway at 10 a.m. on Jan. 13, guests will have the opportunity to enjoy "masterpieces" from Artistas Café, a coffee bar in the facility, run by the nonprofit Art for Autism.

Staffed by young adults (known as "Artistas") on the Autism Spectrum, Artistas Café will serve premium gourmet beverages such as coffees, teas and cocoas – bearing names like "The Dalí" and "The Picasso" – to Mercedes-Benz of Tampa guests. Three full-time Artistas, who have previous work and volunteer experience, have been hired so far, ranging in ages from 19 to 22.

"Working in the Artistas Café is a great way for people on the autism spectrum to gain on-the-job training and to learn and practice social skills," said Art for Autism's owner Vicky Westra.

Art for Autism's Coffee Curator Michael Glisson, a former Starbucks district director, will manage Artistas Café, which will be open during the dealership's regular hours.

"We are committed to helping these young people be successful, feel successful, have fun and feel like they have achieved," Glisson said.

Westra and Glisson praised the commitment of Mercedes-Benz of Tampa and its general manager, Frank Cuteri, for supporting and truly embracing the mission of Art for Autism, a nonprofit dedicated to increasing awareness and providing resources for people on the autism spectrum and their families.

"I have to give Frank a lot of credit, for his being a visionary in not only bringing in the Artistas Café, but also for helping further our cause on a larger scale," Westra said.

Cuteri has arranged for the Center for Autism and Related Disorders (CARD) at the University of South Florida to provide on-site training for Mercedes-Benz of Tampa and to become the first car dealership to receive CARD's "autism friendly" designation. Cuteri originally considered setting up a Starbucks bar in the facility, but plans changed when he met Westra and learned about Art for Autism and Javámo Coffees, the organization that helps fund the nonprofit.

"I saw it as a way to give back to the community and to take care of our customers," said Cuteri. "I think it sends a powerful message: we don't know what we can accomplish until we try."

For more information about Art for Autism, please visit www.javamo.com/autism_foundation.shtml.