



EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES

INSPIRING

KINDNESS & RESPECT

THROUGH ARTS AND EDUCATION

2026 Annual Report





Embracing Our Differences is a nonprofit organization based in Southwest Florida that celebrates individuality and shared humanity through arts and education.

Our annual juried exhibition features thought-provoking artwork and quotations from around the world, sparking conversations about understanding and acceptance.

Additionally, our comprehensive educational programs engage students of all ages, providing them with the tools to critically examine their own biases and build empathy for others.

Through interactive workshops, teacher training, and curriculum development, we equip educators to create inclusive learning environments where every student can thrive.



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LETTER FROM OUR CEO & BOARD CHAIR

Every year, Embracing Our Differences reminds us that change begins with a single conversation, a shared story, or a work of art that invites us to see the world through someone else's eyes. Thanks to your generosity and belief in our mission, those moments of connection reached more people than ever before through our exhibitions and in classrooms and community programs across three counties.

Nearly 450,000 visitors experienced our outdoor exhibitions in Sarasota and St. Petersburg this year, engaging with powerful messages of kindness, respect, and belonging created by artists and writers from around the world. While these exhibitions remain the centerpiece of our mission, they are only the beginning.

Their messages extend far beyond the exhibitions through year-round educational initiatives that encourage empathy, celebrate individuality, and help build stronger, more inclusive communities.

Our reading days flourished this year, placing thousands of books into the hands of young readers across Sarasota, Manatee, and Pinellas counties.

Meanwhile, our Coexistence Clubs and scholarship program continued to inspire young leaders who are carrying the values of acceptance and respect into their schools, colleges, and communities. Furthermore, our professional development opportunities reached new heights, empowering educators through our dynamic Art Intensive and expanding the impact of our Education Ambassador program.

Thank you for believing in the power of art and education to spark important conversations and deepen understanding. Because of you, thousands of people of every age are discovering that our differences are not barriers; they are opportunities to learn from one another, see one another more clearly, and embrace our shared humanity.

With gratitude,

Sarah Wertheimer
President & CEO

Judge Charles E. Williams
Board Chair



The Power of Love, Eda Uzunoglu, 2026 Best in Show Adult

2026 EXHIBITION



The centerpiece of Embracing Our Differences is a juried, outdoor exhibition featuring 50 billboard-sized images and accompanying quotations created by local, national and international artists, writers, and students reflecting their interpretations of our mission.

The exhibitions welcomed 449,982 visitors this past year, bringing total attendance, since 2004, to more than 5,600,000.

”

I am deeply impressed by not only the artwork but the message behind each display. Just beautiful.

- International Visitor

”

This is the best part of living here. We need this now more than ever.

- Sarasota Visitor



Equal Booths, Siwon Jung, 11th Grade, Seoul, Republic of Korea, 2026 Best in Show, Student



449,982

VISITORS EXPERIENCED THE 2026 EXHIBITIONS
IN SARASOTA AND ST. PETERSBURG

5,600,000

TOTAL VISITORS SINCE 2004

ART & QUOTATION SUBMISSIONS

This year's exhibition had an impressive response to the call for artwork and quotations, with 14,904 entries from 124 countries and 48 states.

Students from 574 schools around the world submitted artwork or quotations, with 65% of this year's submissions coming from students.



14,904

ART AND QUOTATION SUBMISSIONS
WERE RECEIVED IN 2026 FROM:

574
SCHOOLS

124
COUNTRIES

48
STATES

EDUCATION INITIATIVES



Our year-round education initiatives represent the most important aspect of our efforts – reaching and impacting the lives of tens of thousands of students, educators, and adults around the world annually.



Embracing Our Differences Education Initiatives

Field Trips
Bucket Fillers Reading Day
Embracing Reading Day

Coexistence Clubs
Student Docent Program
Unity Day

College Scholarships
Workshops & Lesson Plans
Ambassador Program

49,466

STUDENTS PARTICIPATED IN OUR
EDUCATION INITIATIVES IN THE
2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR

2,030

EDUCATORS PARTICIPATED IN
OUR EDUCATION INITIATIVES



Overall program experience
rated 4.6 out of 5 stars.

600

VOLUNTEERS PARTICIPATED
IN OUR EXHIBITION AND
EDUCATIONAL INITIATIVES



FIELD TRIPS

Tours of our annual exhibitions have become a signature of our education efforts with thousands of students worldwide benefiting from in-person, live-virtual, and on-demand video tours this past school year. Through peer-guided conversations with more than 118 high school docents utilizing Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) pedagogy, exhibition tours embrace kindness and inclusion while providing connections to art education and curriculum engagement through student-driven exploration. All exhibition field trips are FREE, with in-person field trip transportation costs generously covered by our sponsors and donors.



MAKE-A-DAY OF IT!

Educators and students who attend the exhibition are afforded the opportunity, using buses provided by Embracing Our Differences, to participate in inclusive education programming with partner organizations, including Florida Holocaust Museum, Florida Studio Theatre, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, Mote Marine Laboratory, Sarasota Art Museum, Sarasota Film Festival, Patriot Plaza, The Dali Museum, The Ringling Museum, FloridaRAMA, and Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall.

9,237

STUDENTS ACROSS
THE GLOBE EXPERIENCED
THE 2026 EXHIBITIONS
IN-PERSON OR VIRTUALLY

”

“We absolutely loved the field trip, and it is so important for our Title I students to be able to experience something like this that they would probably never do outside of school. Thank you so much for making this free for our school and students!”

- 5th Grade Educator

3,924

STUDENTS PARTICIPATED
IN THE MAKE-A-DAY OF IT!
PROGRAM
IN 2025-2026

BUCKET FILLERS READING DAY



Using the concept of an invisible bucket to encourage positive behavior, the Bucket Fillers' book series teaches children how to "fill buckets" through acts of kindness, love, and appreciation for others. Pre-K through third grade educators have the option of selecting an in-person volunteer reader or a pre-recorded webisode, featuring local arts organizations and author Carol McCloud, for their classroom.

Thank you to our arts partners for creating engaging read along videos for participating classrooms: AsoloRep, St. Petersburg Arts Alliance, Venice Theatre, Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, The Studio@620, and Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe.

EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES READING DAY

In partnership with Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, Embracing Our Differences Reading Day celebrates literacy through books by diverse authors and illustrators for pre-K through third grade students. These age-appropriate stories focus on themes of inclusion, acceptance, and belonging. Educators select either an in-person volunteer reader or an on-demand video read along, and all classes are provided with on-demand activity videos.



11,365

STUDENTS PARTICIPATED IN
BUCKET FILLERS READING DAY
IN THE 2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR



9,016

STUDENTS PARTICIPATED IN
EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES READING DAY
IN THE 2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR



IMPACT: BUCKET FILLERS READING DAY & EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES READING DAY

21,516

BOOKS DONATED TO STUDENTS IN SARASOTA, MANATEE, HILLSBOROUGH, AND PINELLAS COUNTIES IN THE 2025-2026 SCHOOL YEAR



BUCKET FILLERS READING DAY			
11,977	76	617	147
BOOKS DONATED	SCHOOLS	CLASSROOMS	VOLUNTEERS

EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES READING DAY			
9,539	84	523	146
BOOKS DONATED	SCHOOLS	CLASSROOMS	VOLUNTEERS

READING DAY SPONSORS

Thank you to our arts sponsors for creating engaging read along videos for participating classrooms:

COEXISTENCE CLUBS

Coexistence Clubs are student-driven service clubs that have a goal of building safer and more inclusive spaces in schools and the local community. Club members work toward making Embracing Our Differences's vision of creating a world that embraces and respects differences and actively rejects hatred and prejudice a reality.

During the 2025-2026 school year, we maintained active Coexistence Clubs at Booker, North Port, Riverview, Sarasota, Suncoast Polytech, and Venice High Schools, as well as Imagine Schools North Port and Woodland Middle School.



8

COEXISTENCE
CLUBS

251

CLUB
MEMBERS

”

Our docents were engaging my students with open-ended questions, which was very helpful for them to explore the art.

- 5th Grade Educator



STUDENT DOCENT PROGRAM

Under the guidance of Docent Coordinator, Dena Sturm, high school students serve as guides for thousands of local elementary, middle, and high school students who visit the exhibitions each year. Docents use Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to help students analyze and critically think about the artwork and quotations, inspiring them to create their own interpretations of the pieces they discuss.

118

HIGH SCHOOL
DOCENTS

11,680

STUDENTS BENEFITED
FROM DOCENT LED TOURS



UNITY DAY

Embracing Our Differences Unity Day initiative promotes empathy, respect, and resiliency amongst students through a multi-part workshop of team-building activities that encourage cooperation and communication while providing opportunities for students to embrace their similarities and respect their differences.

Under the direction of a trained facilitator and school guidance counselors, the Unity Day initiative was held at Pine View School, Riverview, North Port, Suncoast Polytechnical, Imagine North Port, Sarasota, and Venice High Schools. More than 456 students participated in a powerful day of team-building exercises that encourage compassion and empathy while fostering inclusive school environments.

2026 SCHOLARSHIP RECIPIENTS

In May 2026, three Coexistence Club graduating seniors were selected to receive \$1,000 renewable Coexistence Club Scholarships in recognition and gratitude for dedicated service and commitment to their school club during their high school years. They join seventeen students who have been awarded this special scholarship.

This award is given in the spirit of the mission of the Embracing Our Differences organization with the hope that the recipient's experiences through service to the club and the organization were profound and impressive and shall inspire them to continue this great work into their future.



Madelyn Francolini
Venice High School



Taylor Humphrey
Booker High School



Abigail Lauber
Riverview High School





WORKSHOPS & LESSON PLANS FOR EDUCATORS AND ADULTS

ART INTENSIVE

The 2025 Art Intensive brought together 53 visual arts teachers for an in-person experience at the Sarasota Art Museum. Featuring sessions from local artists and scholars, participants engaged in powerful presentations and interactive lessons geared toward inspiring and reinvigorating teaching practices. Collectively, this year's participants are responsible for more than 13,500 students in Charlotte, Hillsborough, Manatee, Pinellas, and Sarasota counties.

Abstract concepts, like kindness and inclusion, are best delivered to students through interactive participation. Prepared under the supervision of curriculum development specialists from the Manatee and Sarasota County school districts, the age-appropriate lesson plans identify the relevant curriculum standards, educational objectives, instructional strategies, and assessment guidelines.

INCLUSION AND BELONGING ADULT SEMINARS

EOD's vision of a world that embraces and respects differences and actively rejects hatred and prejudice extends beyond pre-K through 12th grade student communities. EOD has provided interactive training sessions for Northwestern Mutual St. Louis, Siemens Mobility, All Star Children's Foundation, Florida Art Education Association, and Florida Alliance for Arts Education, in addition to Sarasota County Schools and School District of Manatee County educators, guidance counselors, and administrators.



38

**SCHOOLS
REPRESENTED**

13,592

**STUDENTS
SUPPORTED**

ART AND QUOTATION CREATION

Thousands of students in our community and around the world spend time creating art and quotations for submission to our annual exhibition. Students have the opportunity to express themselves creatively while interpreting their viewpoints on abstract themes. By engaging in these skills, students develop an enhanced sense of self-esteem, increased social skills, and experience new and different perspectives from their peers.



EDUCATION AMBASSADOR PROGRAM

At the heart of Embracing Our Differences is a belief that inclusive learning environments create stronger, kinder, and more connected communities. The Education Ambassador Program is a year-long, district-supported leadership initiative designed to equip and empower Manatee and Sarasota County educators, administrators, and school-based professionals to become catalysts for inclusion, kindness, and respect in their schools.

The 24 members of the Education Ambassador Program 2025-2026 cohort represent 22 schools plus district administrators and 7,497 students from Manatee and Sarasota counties.

While completing eleven hours of professional development workshops, educators work with students on projects that highlight EOD's core values of inclusion, kindness, and respect.



24

**EDUCATORS
PARTICIPATED**

22

**SCHOOLS
REPRESENTED**

4.7

**OVERALL AMBASSADOR
EXPERIENCE RATING**

7,497

**STUDENTS
SUPPORTED**



COMMUNITY COLLABORATIONS

Embracing Our Differences is proud of its many collaborations throughout the last year. A past recipient of The Patterson Foundation's "Collaborative Innovator Award," Embracing Our Differences partnered with many local organizations and businesses to bring innovative programming to our community this past year.



- 99 Bottles
- ALSO Youth
- Asolo Rep
- American Stage
- Boxser Diversity Initiative
- Bucket Fillers Inc.
- Cardinal Rule Press
- City of Sarasota
- City of St. Petersburg
- Community Foundation of Sarasota County
- Community Tampa Bay
- CreArte Latino Cultural Center
- The Dali Museum
- Early Learning Coalition of Manatee County
- Early Learning Coalition of Sarasota County
- Easterseals of Southwest Florida
- Ed Smith Stadium
- Equality Florida
- Fab Arts Foundation
- The Florida Holocaust Museum

- Florida Studio Theatre
- The Hermitage Artist Retreat
- Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee
- Lyric & Stone Publishing
- Manasota ASALH
- Manatee Arts Education Council
- Manatee Community Foundation
- Manatee Education Foundation
- Marie Selby Botanical Gardens
- Mindful Movement Florida
- Morean Arts Center
- Mote Marine Laboratory
- NewGate School
- The Nonprofit Leadership Center
- Patriot Plaza
- Pinellas Diaspora Arts Project
- Pinellas Campaign for Grade Level Reading
- Project Free
- Project Pride SRQ
- The Patterson Foundation

- Ringling College of Art and Design
- The Ringling Museum
- RacewithoutISM
- Sarasota Art Museum
- Sarasota Opera
- Sarasota Rising
- The Shirley Proctor Puller Foundation
- The Studio@620
- St. Pete Innovation District
- St. Pete Pride
- Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading
- Tampa Bay Rays
- United Way Suncoast
- USF St. Petersburg
- Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall
- Venice Theatre
- Warehouse Arts District Association
- Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe

EMBRACING OUR FUTURE LEGACY SOCIETY



We are very grateful for our Embracing Our Future Legacy Society members. The legacy society ensures that Embracing Our Differences can work toward making the world a kinder, more inclusive place for many years to come.

OUR FOUNDING MEMBERS WHOSE PLANNED GIFTS WILL IMPACT FUTURE GENERATIONS:

Jody Beresford & Robert Mayer
B. Aline Blanchard
Community Foundation of Sarasota County
Claudia Cardillo
Bonny & Bob Israeloff
Joan Lowery
Dennis & Graci McGillicuddy
The Patterson Foundation

Janet Pederson
Tobi Leanna Schneider
Joni Steinberg
The Swart Family Foundation
Sheree Kaz Zaslavsky & Larry Zaslavsky

Learn more about the Embracing Our Differences Legacy Society and our planned giving program by contacting Sarah Wertheimer at 941-404-5710 or sarah@embracingourdifferences.org.

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Culverhouse**



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2027 ANNUAL OUTDOOR EXHIBITION CELEBRATING KINDNESS & RESPECT

BAYFRONT PARK, SARASOTA

JANUARY 16 - APRIL 14, 2027

ST. PETERSBURG, ST. PETE PIER

FEBRUARY 12 - MARCH 14, 2027

Showcased in Sarasota's Bayfront Park since 2004, the annual exhibition is a cornerstone of the arts on Florida's Cultural Coast.

A simultaneous showing of the 2027 exhibition will again call St. Pete home since a successful return to the community in 2024.



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EmbracingOurDifferences.org