



Embracing Our Differences: rejecting hatred and prejudice



Student ambassadors for Embracing Our Differences at its 16th annual luncheon.
PHOTO BY WENDY DEWHURST CLARK

By Gayle Guynup
Social editor

Embracing Our Differences

Envisioning a world that embraces diversity, respects differences and actively rejects hatred and prejudice - that is the vision of Embracing Our Differences (EOD), now celebrating its 16th year. Its tools for spreading that message of hope and inclusion are the transformational power of art - and an open-air display of 45 billboard-sized images and inspirational quotes at Bayfront Park (on display through March 15), along with an extensive educational program.

Nearly 400 guests were welcomed to Michael's On East by co-founder and board chair **Dennis McGillicuddy**, who thanked EOD community partners Ringling College of Art + Design, Gulf Coast Community Foundation and The Jewish Federation of Sarasota Manatee. **Charles Williams** led a moving tribute to EOD co-founder Carol Poteat Buchanan, who passed away last year. Her daughter, **Linda Poteat Brown**, accepted a beautiful portrait of her mother, saying, "Mom would love this."

She was followed by **Joanna Fox**, creative writing teacher at Booker Middle School, who introduced guest speaker **Seth Morano**, a senior at Booker High School. Morano, who has cerebral palsy, won best of show for his quotation, “Have the courage to stand up for what’s right, and the wisdom to sit down and talk.”

Fox said that Morano found a special place in the words he wrote. “He learned that words take you places,” she said. “When he wrote, he could walk, he could run, he could even fly,” she said.

Morano delivered a compelling speech, noting the effect EOD had on him over the years. “It made us ask important questions and find our own answers,” he said. “I hope you will join me in spreading kindness and respect in our community and our world.”

Executive Director **Sarah Wertheimer** noted the tremendous impact Embracing Our Differences has had over the years. Indeed, the exhibit has had 2.7 million visitors since its inception in 2004. Submissions of artwork have grown from 124 in 2004 to 11,791 this year, from all over the world. And its educational programs have also had a powerful impact, last year involving 932 teachers and 39,211 students in its many initiatives.

Seen were **Jennifer** and **David Morano**, **Patti** and **David Wertheimer**, **Brenna Wilhm**, **Mark Pritchett**, **Claudia Cardillo**, **Todd Bowden**, **Susan** and **Randy Mallitz**, **Richard Bergman**, **Graci McGillicuddy**, **Joanna Fox**, **Larry Lev**, **Debbie** and **Larry Haspel**, **Ed** and **Mary Lou Winnick**, **Bette Lou Cookson**, **Ginny Garrison**, **Leona Collesano**, **Elaine** and **John Meshad**, **Jane Goodwin**, **Caroline Zucker**, **Larry Thompson**, **Rachel Shelley**, and many more.

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