

# Observer

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## Embracing Our Differences exhibit opens students minds

by: [Niki Kottmann](#) Managing Editor of Arts and Entertainment

For some, picking up a paintbrush is a political statement. For others, it's a form of self-expression. For Embracing Our Differences student artists, it's a chance to show what they've learned — and what they want to teach others.

“When I first started doing the project six years ago, I was really intimidated and unsure of what kind of products I'd be getting,” says Sarasota Middle School art teacher Brooks Tracey. “But the students have shocked me more than anything else.”

EOD is an annual, juried outdoor art exhibit featuring 45 billboard-sized works of art produced by both student and adult artists. Every work is accompanied by an inspirational quote, and the goal is to inspire others to celebrate the differences between them and those around them.

**IF YOU GO**

## Embracing Our Differences 2019 Exhibit

**When:** Through March 15

**Where:** Bayfront Park, 2 Marina Plaza

**Tickets:** Free admission

**Info:** Click [here](#).

Artists from all over the world submit works — this year the number was a record-breaking 11,791 entries from 111 countries and 44 states — but every year the nonprofit also receives several submissions from talented Sarasota students and adult artists.

Tracey, who first got involved with EOD when he was a student at Sarasota Middle, thought his students might turn in a bunch of peace signs painted atop globes the first time he assigned them the task of creating a submission to the exhibit. Instead, he was pleasantly surprised to find a slew of inspiring pieces celebrating diversity.

He's since integrated EOD into his curriculum, having his students submit a piece to the outdoor art exhibit every year.

This semester, after three years of submitting through Tracey's class, eighth-grader Marysa Martel's work was chosen for the exhibit.

## GETTING STARTED

Martel's piece, "Overcome," came from the idea to represent a different kind of diversity — diversity of ability.

One of her friends from school injured his leg so severely that he ended up having to repeat seventh grade, but now he's back and playing baseball like nothing happened, she says.



Sarasota Middle School Eighth Grader Marysa Martel's "Overcome" is one of 45 exhibit pieces from around the world on display at Bayfront Park. Photo by Niki Kottmann

Martel's friend didn't lose his leg, but watching him push past the barriers of his disability gave her the idea to create a piece depicting a boy with a prosthetic leg striding past his competitors in a track race.

"He (the subject) is doing even better than people who didn't have a disadvantage," she says of the work. "He overcame his disability."

In Tracey's class, the students write an artist statement before and after they complete their EOD piece. It's a way to set a goal for the type of message they want to send viewers, and in the end they edit it if they feel their message changed during the creative process.

Martel's remained the same: "I wanted to create a powerful image about how someone could take their extreme disadvantage and embrace it and face it."

One of the first steps in Tracey's EOD curriculum is having the students look at photos of pieces chosen for previous EOD exhibits. Flipping through book after book, Martel says she noticed that only a few contained images of people living with disabilities, which was one reason she felt it was a strong topic to depict.

## Changing Times

Every year is a little different for Embracing Our Differences, and 2019 is one of the most monumental yet. Not only did the exhibit receive a record number of submissions, but it changed its display time from April-June to January-March. Wertheimer says this change was made for one main reason — and has a couple added bonuses.

- **Main reason:** To make it easier on the schools to have more students participate. Sarasota County schools do required testing in the spring, so now that the exhibit is earlier in the school year, it'll be easier for students to focus on submissions and for teachers to plan field trips to see the display.
- **Bonus:** It will create a more pleasant viewing experience. Having an outdoor exhibit run until June in a tropical climate wasn't ideal, so now Wertheimer looks forward to offering the exhibit during some of Sarasota's most pleasant months, weather-wise.
- **Bonus:** To increase the number of people viewing the exhibit. Peak Sarasota tourism season is in the winter and spring months, and several residents have told her they're excited to be able to take several of their seasonal guests to see the display

"When you look at the show (submissions), they embrace differences from many standpoints," Tracey says of the students. "Many go to racial differences, some get into religion, some get into mental illness ... it becomes not only embracing differences but how people overcome them. It was really neat to see her approach it from that standpoint."

To get to that point, Martel and her classmates followed a packet Tracey created after attending several EOD professional development sessions. There, he learned how to integrate the nonprofit's curriculum into pre-existing school curriculum.

The directions begin with the task of defining the words “embrace” and “differences,” making a list of various symbols, themes and subject matters found in previous years' pieces and then coming up with four original concepts for their own piece.

## PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

As Tracey's students progress through the packet, they're faced with questions that artists don't often have to answer before they can submit a work. What does your artwork depict? What did you use to create it? What does Embracing Our Differences mean to you? How does your artwork depict the EOD mission?

They're also told to follow specific parameters that are more restricted than those for submitting outside the classroom. Tracey believes photography is a great medium, but for the purposes of the school project, his rules state that all students must submit an original, horizontal, asymmetrical work created by hand using materials such as paint and colored pencils.



Anna Wright, a seventh-grade student from Johnson Middle School in Bradenton, won the Best in Show Student Award for her painting “United in a Quest for Knowledge.” Photo by Niki Kottmann

“It gets students out of their comfort zones,” he says of the limitations. “But it’s a product they’ve got to be happy with. It’s their project, I’m not telling them what to make. I’m here to give them a little guidance on what’s been done in the past, some tips ... but overall it’s their decision. I just ask if they can defend why they’re making those choices.”

One way he guides them is by sharing tips he's learned from submitting his own work to the exhibit. This year, his cartoon-like piece featuring a touristy flamingo and alligator atop the John Ringling Causeway, "The Odd Couple," was accepted.

Martel says she's learned many lessons from Tracey, but the one that's helped her the most is in the area of idea generation.

"Even if we don't have an idea, (he says to) just start off with something basic like two birds going opposite ways," she says. "The packet then breaks everything down and gives you more time to think."



The Best-in-Show Adult-winning piece on the left is "One World, One Heart" by Anna Zigel of Boyarka, Ukraine. The piece on the right is pointillism-style painting "Bullies" by Vince Gray of Cincinnati, Ohio. Photo by Niki Kottmann

Conceptual fine-tuning has always been one of the biggest challenges when she does this project, but this year Martel's tablemates gave her feedback during their peer evaluation that helped her realize the power of altering something as seemingly simple as the placement of the finish line ribbon.

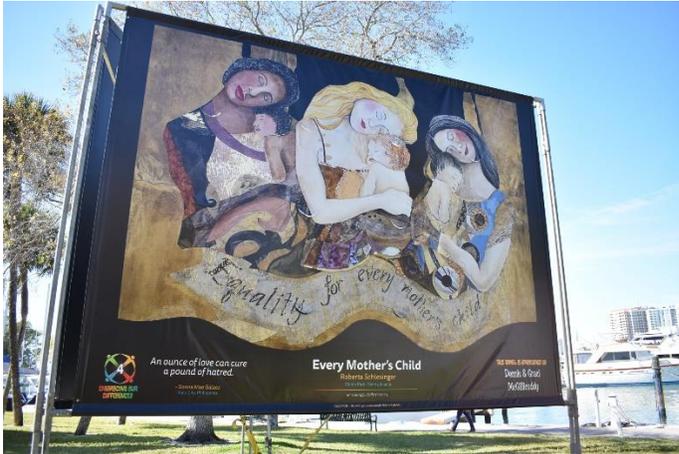
By making the ribbon thicker and more centrally located in the scene, Martel says her classmates helped her make the artwork more impactful overall.

"You'll get a little tiny change — maybe having the ribbon little and far off to the right isn't best, it should be front and center," Tracey says. "It's the exact same message, but it's just a change of placement and it shows them how placement can play a strong role."

## **RIGHT TIME, RIGHT AUDIENCE**

Tracey says middle school is an exciting time for students to be assigned this project because they're just starting to realize the power of self-expression.

“I’ve taught all levels before, but I think when students get into middle school they’ve hit a maturation rate where they are starting to think very independently and they’re hungry for growth,” he says. “It blends in perfectly in the realm of art, what they want to express.”



"Every Mother's Child" by Roberta Schlesinger of Elkin Park, Pennsylvania is another of the 45 pieces on display at Bayfront Park. Photo by Niki Kottmann

Although Martel was the only Sarasota Middle student to have a piece selected this year (though there are several from SMS who have quotes in the exhibit), EOD Executive Director Sarah Wertheimer says the school typically has at least one student in the show every year — most likely due to dedicated teachers like Tracey.

Wertheimer adds that many residents think EOD is just an outdoor exhibit that shows up for a few months out of the year. Few understand the educational side of the program and its effect on the growth of local students — especially the field trips to the exhibit the nonprofit supports with free busing.

“So many students have never seen an exhibit before,” Wertheimer says. “But art speaks to so many people.” Tracey agrees.

“It’s awesome to see it come full circle,” he says. “Not only doing it in the classroom but being able to teach it, go to professional developments for it and see how it’s grown. A lot of people think it’s just an exhibit by the bay, but it’s a lot more than an art show for just two months out of the year.”



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