



Venice Gondolier

Embracing Our Differences opens Jan. 18



EOD 2020: Best in Show, Student: "I Have A Dream" by Shangxi Wu, 11th grade student at Amador Valley High School, Pleasanton, California
PHOTO PROVIDED

SARASOTA — A sixth-grader from Pine View is one of the winners of an art competition for a quote in the Embracing Our Differences exhibition.

Since 2004, Embracing Our Differences has used the power of art and prose to promote diversity.

One way it accomplishes this is through its annual, juried international outdoor art exhibition consisting of 50 billboard-sized works of art, each accompanied by an inspirational quote.

The response to the call for artwork and inspirational quotes was record-breaking this year, with 16,118 entries pouring in from 127 countries and 50 states.

Students from 398 schools around the world submitted artwork or quotes to the juried exhibit.

The winning quotes and art will be showcased in the 17th annual exhibit, Jan. 18 through April 5, in Sarasota's Bayfront Park.

Sarah Wertheimer, Embracing Our Differences' executive director, is thrilled at the global response to this year's call for submissions.

"Yet again, thousands of people from around the world seized the opportunity to celebrate the values of diversity and inclusion," she said. "Our art selection jury was truly moved by the heartfelt honesty and level of artistic excellence.

"It boils down to respecting every individual for who they are," Wertheimer said. "Human identity is a complex intersection of race, culture, sexual orientation and so much more. That incredible diversity is a beautiful thing. Embracing Our Differences honors that beauty, and we select the quotes and artwork that best express it."

According to Wertheimer, only a fraction of the powerful artworks and statements are selected for each year's outdoor exhibit.

"Even so, we were deeply touched to see how many people share our core philosophy," she said.

The selection criteria boil down to medium and message. What is the core idea of each submission? How well is it expressed? "We try to imagine the impact when the artwork is blown up to the size of a billboard. Will it stop me in my tracks? Will it move me and make me think? That's what we're going for."

Awards are given for "Best-in-Show Adult," "Best-in-Show Student," and "People's Choice" categories, with the last chosen by visitors to the exhibit. Adult art winners each receive \$1,000; students receive \$1,000, which they split with their school's art program. The person who pens the winning quote is awarded \$1,000 to be split evenly with their school's language arts program.

For more information about this exhibit or Embracing Our Differences, call 941-404-5710 or visit embracingourdifferences.org.

The Best-in-Show Adult winner for art is for “Can I Touch Your Hair?” by Habib Hajallie, from Dartford, United Kingdom.

The work shows a black man looking askew at a white man’s hand reaching out to touch his Afro. According to the artist’s statement, “Nuanced prejudices in society serve to constantly remind you that, if you are not white, you are different. This notion seems to be perpetually present in social situations when people attempt to touch my hair. This may seem perfectly innocuous to be intrigued by hair that is different than the norm but looking below that veneer of innocent curiosity you will find the root of racial prejudice. For a Caucasian person to ask to touch Afro hair without asking, is a demeaning act with connotations of petting an animal.”

Hajallie will receive \$1,000 for his award-winning work.

Shangxi Wu, an 11th-grade student from Amador Valley High School in Pleasanton, California, won Best in Show Student for his painting, “I Have a Dream,” which depicts a disabled street person sitting in an alleyway.

The portrait is black and white, except for the man’s rainbow wings extending and a box of colored pencils. Wu notes that, “Despite being disabled and having little wealth, with limited art materials and colors, this man shows healing and a vigorous desire to extend his world by using imagination and embracing his dreams with angel wings. Everyone has the right to dream.” Wu will receive \$1,000 for his work.

2020 QUOTE WINNER

The award for the Best-in-Show inspirational quote was given to Brian Hendricks, a sixth-grade student at Pine View School in Osprey, for his quote, “If you stand by, then who will stand up?” His teacher is Fran Squires. Hendricks will receive \$1,000 to be split evenly with Pine View.

Wertheimer stresses the importance of the statements accompanying each artwork. “Every quote opens a window into our common humanity,” she says. “They touch us with their wit, insight, and empathy.”

Embracing Our Differences' annual outdoor exhibits are the heart of a year-round program of activities designed to use art as a catalyst to create awareness and promote diversity.

For more information about Embracing Our Differences, call 941-404-5710 or visit www.embracingourdifferences.org.