

Coronavirus Florida: Embracing Our Differences exhibit extended at Bayfront Park



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Elementary School students are led by high school volunteer docents on a field trip to view the Embracing Our Differences exhibit at Bayfront Park in downtown Sarasota on Feb. 25, 2020. [Herald-Tribune staff photo / Mike Lang]



By **Vicki Dean**
Correspondent

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Annual exhibition provides an outdoor outlet during a time of self-quarantine

At a time when Sarasotans are keeping their distance and staying mostly indoors, the annual Embracing Our Differences is providing a rare chance to be outside and appreciate the creativity of the area's young people.

Executive Director Sarah Wertheimer said her nonprofit worked with the city of Sarasota to extend access to the inspirational exhibit at Bayfront Park through the month of April.

"We want to be there as kind of a beacon of light for some moment of hope and inspiration to allow people to have that outlet but also to have some joy during these pretty scary and depressing times," she said.

The exhibit features 50 thought-provoking, billboard-sized works of art measuring 12 1/2 feet by 30 feet. Each piece includes inspirational quotes from children and adults from all over the world. This year, Embracing Our Differences received 16,118 submissions from all 50 states and 127 countries.

Experts have said that a daily dose of sunshine and outdoor exercise is encouraged as Floridians buckle down indoors under a monthlong stay-at-home order. Only essential services remain open, which means Sarasota's ample cultural amenities are shut down. Museums are closed. Theaters are dark.

"We reached out to the city because really what we've been told by so many of our supporters as well as visitors is that this is the only arts and cultural opportunity we really have right now," Wertheimer said. "It's a good opportunity for them to be able to get outdoors, breathe some fresh air but also still have some of that inspiration and positivity and thought-provoking messages that I feel like a lot of people are really craving right now."

Social distancing is required, of course, with visitors adhering to the 6 feet of space mandated by the Centers for Disease Control.

Wertheimer said she expects a total of 300,000 people to visit the exhibit this year, pushing the total to 3.2 million viewers since the project began in 2004. Students from Sarasota and Manatee counties were able to visit the exhibit when school was still in session, but many were unable to visit after schools went on spring break and transitioned to home-based learning.

Educational efforts have transitioned online with lesson plans available for children and parents.

“Art has always been something that can encourage people, that can inspire them and really also make them think, which is why we love using art in any way,” Wertheimer said. “Right now, when you’re feeling a lot of times very isolated and alone, art is something that can make you feel connected to something, to someone.”

While the artwork is stunning, the quotes that accompany them show that the message is being embraced by people of all ages, particularly local students.

– “Destroying someone else’s sparkle doesn’t make you shine brighter.” Maddox Volk, a sixth-grader at Pine View School, Osprey.

– “If you are given the choice of ‘being cool’ or ‘being kind,’ choose kind.” Amanda Long, eighth-grader at Sarasota Middle School.

– “If you stand by, then who will stand up?” Brian Hendricks, sixth-grader at Pine View School, Osprey.

Hendricks’ quote won best in show in the student division.

Other award winners include:

– “Can I Touch Your Hair?” by Habib Hajallie, United Kingdom, Best in Show art winner in the adult division.

– “I Have a Dream” by Shangxi Wu, 11th-grader from Pleasanton, California, Best in Show art winner in the student division.

Vicki Dean is a freelance writer based in Venice.

Interested?

Embracing Our Differences outdoor exhibition is on display at Sarasota Bayfront Park, Ringling Boulevard & Bayfront Drive. Extended through April 30. For more information: <https://www.embracingourdifferences.org/>