



# Venice Gondolier

## Diversity is not just a slogan along Sarasota's bayfront



"Be Shore of Yourself" by Brooks Tracey of Sarasota.  
"You can be you and I can be me, We'll welcome each other's diversity."

By KIM COOL Our Town Editor

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"Be a wave of acceptance in an ocean of judgment." -Sara Blake, seventh grade, Sarasota Middle School

It's that time of year again when Sarasota's bayfront becomes a catalyst for acceptance.

"Embracing Our Differences," the 17th annual outdoor art exhibit celebrating diversity and inclusion is on display in Bayfront Park in downtown Sarasota.

Nearly 3 million people have been to the annual exhibit since the first one in 2004. There have been a total of 73,777 submissions during all these years.

Last year alone there were 11,791 entries from 239 schools, 44 states and 111 countries.

“This year, entries came from all 50 states for the first time,” said Sarah Wertheimer, executive director of the program which has brought positive change in the thinking of people of all races, ethnicities and more all over the world.

She was speaking to a packed house at Michaels on East where many in the audience have been involved with the program since its inception in 2004. This year, the key speakers, in addition to chairman and vice-chairman, Dennis and Grace McGillicuddy, were students who have directly benefited from the program.

One spoke of being a Hungarian immigrant in middle school at North Port. She said her dress was different and so was the accent as she spoke her new non-native language — English. Now in high school, her accent is that of someone who was born in the United States. There is no trace of an accent. She was totally comfortable in front of the microphone as she uttered words of praise for the co-existence club at her school. She said the club made all the difference.

That message was repeated in various ways by the rest of the student speakers.

Teachers also speak of the change in language but it is not a change in accent so much as a change in attitude — one student to another. Students involved in the clubs and the program in any way, have a change in attitude which both students and teachers say can be felt throughout the various schools.

Education initiatives have been part of the program since the beginning and include a reading day during which as many as 400 volunteers read Dr. Seuss books to students in both Sarasota and Manatee counties. During these years, some 6,300 books have been given to classrooms as well as to students for their home libraries.

Another reading day is referred to as Bucket Filler Reading Day during which students read stories designed to show students how easy it is to “express kindness, appreciation and love by ‘filling buckets’.”

Other students learn to be docents for the exhibit and still others promote coexistence through coexistence clubs in the high schools. Depending on the day one visits the exhibit at Bayfront Park, there is a good chance to meet a student docent and learn about the exhibit from an active participant.

Teachers regularly remark at the change in language and behavior by students who have become involved with the program one way or another. Educational initiatives have always been a big part of the program and include: field trips to the annual exhibit, reading days, coexistence clubs in schools, teacher workshops, lesson plans, community collaborations and more.

This year’s 50 billboard-size images were selected from 16,118 submissions, that represented all 50 states, 127 countries and 398 schools. The most entries came from the U.S. followed this year by entries from Nigeria, India, Russia and Pakistan.

Adults also enter the show The Best in Show Adult artwork award went to Habib Hajallie, from the United Kingdom. Shangxi Wu, an 11th-grade student from Pleasanton, Calif., won the Best-in-Show Student award for his art. Brian Hendricks, a sixth-grade student at Pine View School, won Best-in-Show for his inspirational quote: “If you stand by, then who will stand up?” His teacher at Pine View is Fran Squires.

Each billboard is accompanied by a quote. The quotes and art work combined made up the total entries.

“Yet again, thousands of people from around the world seized the opportunity to celebrate the values of diversity and inclusion,” Wertheimer 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. 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.”

Sponsors support free field trips to take students to the exhibit. Nearly 26,000 students were taken to see last year’s exhibit. More than 43,018 students participated in the education initiatives in 2019.

Gulf Coast Community Foundation has been one of the three top sponsors of the program since the beginning. The other two are Ringling College of Art & Design and The Jewish Federation.

For more information about this exhibit or Embracing Our Differences, call 941-404-5710 or visit [embracingourdifferences.org](http://embracingourdifferences.org).