



Embracing Our Differences



SARAH WERTHEIMER, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES

What is the mission of Embracing Our Differences?

Through the transformative power of the arts, we educate and inspire to create a better world. We envision a world that embraces diversity, respects differences, and actively rejects hatred and prejudice. Our message of diversity and inclusion extends well beyond correcting historical inequities of race, ethnicity and religion; it embraces a celebration of all the characteristics that make us unique individuals.

When did the program begin and how has it grown over the years?

Embracing Our Differences was founded in 2004. The first year, we received 124 submissions in response to our call to artists for our first outdoor exhibition. This year, we've received 16,118 submissions from 127 countries and 398 schools. Since 2004, our annual exhibition has attracted more than 2.9 million visitors.

What is something that people may not know about Embracing Our Differences?

Our annual outdoor exhibit is the just the cornerstone of a year-round program of activities using art and words to promote diversity. Also crucial to our mission are ongoing education initiatives. Presented in partnership with the regional school districts and nationally recognized educators, these programs positively impact the lives of thousands of area teachers and students every year. I'm happy to say, we've made an impact. We're constantly responding to letters from students and teachers who tell us how life-changing the experience has been.

Do you feel, with hate crimes on the rise, that the EOD message is more important than ever?

Absolutely. The news is filled with sad stories of intolerance and hatred. But the human family isn't entirely dysfunctional. Millions of people around the world are talking about creating a sense of unity. Millions of people are rejecting hate and seeking common ground. For the past 17 years, tens of thousands of these people have shared this message of hope with us. Their art and words tell us, over and over, that we need to replace hostility and division with a respect for diversity. We need to honor the things that make us different. We need to celebrate the things we have in common. Their words and artwork affirm in such a powerful way that EOD is not a voice crying in the wilderness. Thousands of people from a complex diversity of places, backgrounds and walks of life share our deepest convictions.

Briefly tell me about the educational programs that go along with the amazing art display.

Embracing Our Differences continues to lead as one of the largest education programs in southwest Florida. Our year-round education initiatives represent the most important aspect of our efforts – reaching and impacting the lives of thousands of area students and teachers. These include annual workshops and retreats that provide arts and diversity curricula for area educators, bi-county reading initiatives, free bus transportation for students and teachers to visit area cultural venues, and student docent programs in high schools. Since 2004, more than 361,000 students have participated, including 43,018 students in 2019 alone.

We recently welcomed two staff members to coordinate these initiatives. As education director, Ben Jewell-Plocher is responsible for creating, developing, evaluating and implementing all of our education programs. And Brian Hersh recently joined us as our liaison with the Sarasota County School District. Brian is responsible for ensuring that all EOD programming and professional learning is aligned with the goals and priorities of the educators and students of the school district.

What are the dates of this year's art display on the Bayfront?

January 18 – April 5, 2020.

What is the best way for people to get involved?

We welcome anyone who is passionate about promoting the values of inclusion and diversity and making our little corner of the world a kinder, gentler, and more inclusive community. This includes people who can volunteer to serve as docents at the outdoor exhibit, to read to students during our reading initiatives, and to share their heartfelt words and art with us. Since we don't offer any ticketed events, we are always grateful to those who can help fund our programs. Changing the whole world is impossible. But we can change people's minds—one mind at a time. It takes a small army of dedicated people to do it! We invite ambassadors, sponsors and volunteers to join us in honoring the rainbow of the human family.

About Me



Hi, I'm Gayle Guynup and I am a writer, and I have been one for as long as I can remember. I began writing short stories when I was 7 or 8 years old, when I was still reading Nancy Drew mysteries on Bradenton's beautiful beaches.

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