

# CATALYST



## Embracing Our Differences brings annual exhibit to Sarasota's Bayfront Park

[Vianey Jaramillo](#)  
March 26, 2020

Each year people from around the world submit powerful artwork in hopes of having it displayed in the Embracing Our Differences International Art & Quotation Exhibit located in Sarasota's Bayfront Park. This year's exhibition received 11,791 entries from 111 countries and 44 states with more than 70 percent deriving from visionary students.

The exhibition is run by Embracing Our Differences (EOD), a local not-for-profit organization that aims to promote diversity through an annual, large-scale, juried art exhibition and through a comprehensive series of educational initiatives, programs and resources designed for teachers and students.

"Many people don't realize that EOD leads one of the largest education programs in southwest Florida," Executive Director Sarah Wertheimer said.

The organization was founded in 2005 when two married couples—Dennis and Graci McGillicuddy and Carroll and Carol Buchanan—were inspired by a traveling art exhibit, which was brought to Sarasota by the Florida Holocaust Museum in 2004, that came from Museum on the Seam in Jerusalem, Israel. Since then, the art exhibit has been their most well known hosted event which attracted 218,000 in last year’s exhibition with most of the attendees consisting of students from Sarasota County Schools that go as part of field trips.

There are 50 billboard-sized works of art, each complemented by an inspirational quote. The pieces are carefully chosen based on the message crafted within the artistic technique and words displayed on the billboards. From the art entries, three categories for awards are given annually which consist of “Best-in-Show Adult,” “Best-in-Show Student” and “People’s Choice.” Adult winners each receive \$1,000 and students receive \$1,000 toward their school’s art program. The exhibit will run from January 18 through April 5 to showcase global perspectives regarding diversity.

“Embracing Our Differences has partnered with Riverview High School’s Co-Existence Club for the past 11 years,” Wertheimer said. “Under the guidance of EOD’s faculty advisor, Dena Sturm, these high school students are trained to serve as guides for thousands of area elementary, middle and high school students, inspiring these young visitors with the life-changing truths of the art and quotes.”

According to Wertheimer, the exhibit should encourage students to draw their own conclusions regarding diversity in their communities and the possibility of acceptance.

“Their art and words tell us, over and over, that we need to replace hostility and division with a respect for diversity,” Wertheimer wrote. “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.”

Professor of Sociology and Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies Queen Meccasia Zabriskie has incorporated the exhibit into a couple of her past Sociology of the Arts and Performance courses.

“During the 2016 trip, students in my class took a tour facilitated by Sarah Wertheimer where we learned about the history of the exhibit and how it developed over time,” Professor Zabriskie said. “The students and I then talked about what they experienced and the connection of the exhibit to the course material. During the 2017 trip, we went on a tour and I facilitated an embodiment workshop with the students designed to use their experience at the exhibit to generate material for their final class performance.”

When people take the time to look at the billboards for more than its visual presentation, some may be struck by how simple or abstract they are in bringing up the historical topics of race, ethnicity and religion.

“I appreciate the different takes on diversity and inclusion, which means that there are interesting contradictions, points of connection, and tensions between the visual art as well as between the quotes and the visual art,” Zabriskie said. “I also like that as a person viewing the exhibit there are things that I agree with and others that I don’t agree with and this provides a great opportunity for reflection and brings up different emotions for me as I go through the exhibit. I think that this is a great thing.”

The interpretations among visitors definitely vary, and for this reason Zabriskie encourages people to go in groups to acknowledge the contradictions, convergences and tensions around the pieces of art to generate dialogue about very important issues.

“Lastly, I encourage students to think about and reflect on the possibilities and limitations of using curated exhibits like Embracing Our Differences for achieving social justice aims.”