

Embracing Our Differences focuses on the big picture



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Organization known for its outdoor exhibit prioritizes education

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After 17 years, the Embracing Our Differences installation in downtown's Bayfront Park is a familiar part of the seasonal landscape — a cool art thing in a city that cherishes its cool art things. The installation and the organization behind it go by the same name, and with a name like that and the messaging on the billboards, Embracing Our Differences' identity seems obvious. What more do people need to know?

That depends on what more there is to know.

Surely, there must be more to this organization than this one exhibition.

Embracing Our Differences Executive Director Sarah Wertheimer smiles at the question. She's aware that for many people, those 12.5-by-16-foot images in the park are the length and breadth and scope of Embracing Our Differences. But there's more behind the images.



While the 12.5-by-16-foot images don't blend into the Bayfront Park landscape, they also fit in during their stay.

“Our main focus is education,” Wertheimer says. The exhibition is one form of public education, but the organization is an education program throughout the rest of the year too.

Embracing Our Differences is a perfect example of the “think globally, act locally” philosophy. The exhibition reaches out to and gets attention from around the world, while most of the organization’s educational efforts are aimed at school children in Sarasota and Manatee counties.

“We work a lot with the teachers, administrators and guidance counselors and make sure that they’re all aware of the free field trip opportunities that we pay for them, so that the kids can come in and have that full experience,” Wertheimer says.

The work with schools extends well beyond the exhibition, she adds, but there’s no denying that the exhibition is the tentpole for the organization.

Embracing Our Differences started when The Florida Holocaust Museum brought a traveling exhibit from Jerusalem to town 17 years ago, Wertheimer says. “It was a traveling art exhibit that was supposed to just be a one-time thing.”

When local organizers saw the public’s reaction, Wertheimer says: “They just said, ‘This is amazing. We have to keep doing this.’” So they incorporated Embracing Our Differences and issued their first call to artists.

No translation needed

“That first year, we had 124 submissions,” Wertheimer says.

The theme of the exhibition, then as now, was, “enriching lives through diversity and inclusion.” Wertheimer explains that they keep the creative parameters of the call to artists intentionally broad.



Shangxi Wu, an 11th-grader from Pleasanton, Cal., submitted "I Have a Dream," chosen Best in Show in the children's division. (Courtesy Embrace Our Differences)

Thanks in part to existing in the age of connectivity, Embracing Our Difference’s call to artists can be heard practically everywhere. This year, there were 16,118 submissions from all 50 states (a first) and from 127 countries.

Wertheimer says the response demonstrates the human desire for self-expression.

“So it’s really nice to have that,” she says. “I mean, for the last four or five years now, the countries with the most submissions after the U.S. have been Russia and Iran. And I think that shows this hunger and desire to be able to express their diversity, what they’re going through, that they can’t do in their own home place.”

It means so much to some to have their piece selected for the exhibit that they will travel halfway around the world to see it.

“We do have a lot of people who fly in,” Wertheimer says. “We just helped a guy from India get his visa who will hopefully be coming for the exhibit. Last year, we had someone from England, someone from Canada and someone living in Australia but from China.”

Lasting impressions

Providing people around the world with an outlet for expression is tremendously satisfying, but education is the organization’s priority.

“The education program is what really has evolved over the years,” Wertheimer says. “It used to be mainly the field trips to the exhibit. And then we started doing more lesson plans and curriculum for the teachers to use before, during and after the field trips.”

Now, Wertheimer says, “We’ve really focused on trying to make it so it’s not just a one-time field trip to the park and that one day you focus on diversity. We’re trying to make it so it’s multiple, different experiences throughout the year.”

Embracing Our Difference started the program Unity Day, in which students from all seven Sarasota County high schools engage in team-building exercises.

For several years, the organization has coordinated volunteer reading days of books selected to initiate conversations about diversity, personal character and respect for others.

The organization is particularly focused on bullying prevention. It is so important to reach children at an early age, Wertheimer says, to learn the importance of respecting one another. “And that way, if they’re not worried about who’s going to pick on them or who’s going to say this to them, they can actually focus on their academics and they can hopefully succeed more in life and know how to work with others.”

It’s a constant balancing act, Wertheimer says, among the immediate message of Embracing Our Differences, the exhibition and trying explain the bigger picture of what the organization is trying to accomplish.

“We really do want to get it out there to people that it’s not just artwork that’s up there for you to see one time,” Wertheimer said. “It’s an entire initiative throughout the year.”



Taken individually and as a group, the artwork creates an interesting and meaningful landscape.