

Sarasota artist wins People's Choice Award for Embracing Our Differences 2020



"El Sueño Americano," won the "People's Choice Award" at Embracing Our Differences' 17th annual outdoor juried art exhibit celebrating diversity. The boy's eyes reflect the flags of both Mexico and the United States. PHOTO PROVIDED BY CLIFFORD MCDONALD

SARASOTA — "El Sueño Americano," Clifford McDonald's striking photograph of a young boy whose eyes reflect the flags of both the United States and Mexico, won the "People's Choice Award" at Embracing Our Differences' 17th annual outdoor juried art exhibit celebrating diversity.

McDonald, a Sarasota-based artist and educator, received a \$1,000 award. The artist will share his prize money with Elijah Garza, the subject of his photograph. Garza is a first-grade student at Visible Men Academy in Bradenton.

In his artist statement, McDonald said the image reflects the often precarious situation children of immigrant parents face.

“People move to the United States from all over the world for many different reasons,” he said. “This piece represents the opportunity that others see in the United States. Who wouldn’t want to live in a country that promises freedom, education, job opportunities, quality healthcare and an overall better life? But imagine coming to America as a child and being taken away from the hands of your mother. Or as a parent having your child ripped out of your arms. It’s sad to see how some immigrants have been treated for chasing the American Dream.”

McDonald has enjoyed drawing and painting since childhood. A graduate of Booker High School’s Visual and Performing Arts program, he earned a bachelor of fine arts degree in studio art from the University of Maine at Presque Isle and currently teaches art at Visible Men Academy, a tuition-free, public, K-5 charter school in Bradenton. Art is a passion through which McDonald has always found inspiration, and he has donated several pieces to local nonprofit organizations and events, including VMA and M. Chapel Project/SPAACES (Sarasota Project Aligning Art Community Exhibits Studios).

Sarah Wertheimer, executive director of Embracing Our Differences, said winners of the People’s Choice Award are determined by a survey that was available to the 388,000 visitors who attended this year’s exhibit, which was on display Jan. 18-May 15, and also to visitors to EOD’s website.

“We always look forward to seeing what audiences favor,” Wertheimer said. “Sometimes it’s a total surprise but not this time. We received so much positive feedback from students and teachers about this work. Multiple teachers told us that students whose families originated from Latin American countries were especially touched by the image. Those students clearly understood the meaning of the two

reflected flags and how conflicted life can be for immigrants. It inspired many deep conversations, which is exactly what we hope the art in these exhibits will do.”

For 17 years, Embracing Our Differences has drawn on the passion and perception of artists, children and others to create powerful statements of diversity and acceptance in its annual outdoor public art exhibition consisting of 50 billboard-sized works of art and accompanying quotes. The scale and impact of this outdoor exhibition has continued to grow, attracting 3,308,000 million visitors since its inception. This exhibit is the heart of a year-round program of activities designed to use art as a catalyst to create awareness and promote diversity. The 2021 exhibit will be Jan. 20 through April 1, in Bayfront Park in downtown Sarasota.

For more information, call 941-404-5710 or visit embracingourdifferences.org.