

MEDIA CONTACTS

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Embracing Our Differences' Reading Day is Tuesday, March 2

Embracing Our Differences presents a unique virtual classroom reading opportunity promoting diversity, inclusion, respect, and integrity in 449 pre-K through third grade classrooms throughout Sarasota and Manatee counties.

(Sarasota-Manatee, FL) Nearly 8,000 elementary school students in 449 pre-K through third grade classrooms in 77 early learning centers and elementary schools in Sarasota and Manatee counties will celebrate reading and diversity on March 2, by reading books by BIPOC (Black, indigenous, and people of color) authors and illustrators. Each participating classroom, as well as each student, will be gifted with a copy of the book selected for their grade.

According to Ben Jewell-Plocher, EOD's education director, this year's Reading Day will be presented virtually via the Zoom platform in Sarasota County schools and YouTube streaming in Manatee County schools and early learning centers. Zoom readings will be conducted live by 151 volunteers from the community and YouTube streamings will be hosted by local VIPs, including Cynthia Saunders (Superintendent, School District of Manatee County); Janene Amick and Rick Kirby (CEO and producing artistic director, Manatee Performing Arts Center); and Barbara Harvey (retired Manatee County teacher, administrator and school board member).

“Children begin to internalize messages about power, privilege, cultural and societal norms from a very young age,” says Jewell-Plocher. “Research on prejudice shows that encountering people who are different helps reduce stereotypes. For some children, a book can serve as a first introduction to a world centered on embracing diversity.” He adds that, over the course of the day, nearly 8,500 books will be gifted to every participating student and classroom through funding from Embracing Our Differences, The Patterson Foundation, the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, United Way Suncoast, and an anonymous family foundation.

For the past seven years, Embracing Our Differences Reading Day has engaged tens of thousands of regional elementary school students. The objective is to show children that reading is fun and important by stimulating student-mentor conversations about diversity, bullying and respect. In 2020, with the help of more than 300 volunteers, this initiative reached 7,800 students in 440 classrooms in 60 Manatee and Sarasota County classrooms. This massive outreach reflects a collaboration between Embracing Our Differences and the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. The program’s profound impact earned national honors when the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading recognized it as a “Best Event” at its All-America City Awards Ceremony in 2016.

The books selected for the school readings are:

- **Pre-Kindergarten and Early Learning Centers: *You Hold Me Up* by Monique Gray Smith; illustrations by Danielle Daniel.** This vibrant picture book, beautifully illustrated by celebrated artist Danielle Daniel, encourages children to show love and support for each other and to consider each other’s well-being in

their everyday actions. This is a foundational book about building relationships, fostering empathy and encouraging respect between peers, starting with our littlest citizens.

- **Kindergarten: *Why Am I Me?* by Paige Britt, illustrations by Sean Qualls & Seluna Alko.** Have you ever wondered why you are you? Or who you would be if you were someone else? Someone taller, faster, smaller, smarter? Someone lighter, older, darker, bolder? Presented as a poetic exchange between two characters, this beautiful celebration of our humanity and diversity invites readers of all ages to imagine a world where there is no you or me, only we.
- **First Grade: *The Name Jar* by Yangsook Choi.** Being the new kid is hard enough, but what about when nobody can pronounce your name? Having just moved from Korea, Unhei is anxious that American kids will like her. So instead of introducing herself on the first day of school, she tells the class that she will choose a name by the following week. But while Unhei practices being a Suzy, Laura, or Amanda, one of her classmates comes to her neighborhood and discovers her real name and its special meaning.
- **Second Grade: *Last Stop on Market Street* by Matt de la Peña, illustrations by Christian Robinson.** Every Sunday after church, CJ and his grandma ride the bus across town. But today, CJ wonders why they don't own a car like his friend Colby or an iPod like the boys on the bus? How come they always have to get off in the dirty part of town? Each question is met with an encouraging answer from grandma, who helps him see the beauty, and fun, in their routine and the world around them.

- **Third Grade: *Tomás and the Library Lady* by Pat Mora, illustrations by Raul Colón.** Tomás is a son of migrant workers. Every summer he and his family follow the crops north from Texas to Iowa, spending long days in the fields. At night they gather around to hear Grandfather's wonderful stories. But before long, Tomás knows all the stories by heart. "There are more stories in the library," Papa Grande tells him. The very next day, Tomás meets the library lady and a whole new world opens up for him.

Following the virtual classroom readings, Embracing Our Differences and the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading will present an online Family Engagement Night featuring *THIS BOOK IS COOL!* host Beth Duda and artist Cedric Hameed. During this one-hour workshop, families will explore thoughts and feelings through spoken word poetry, share ideas, and create a family work of art. Participating families will receive a copy of the book, *Salt in His Shoes: Michael Jordan in Pursuit of a Dream*. Families can register for this event at <https://forms.gle/9kBZeNU369q1oPSw9>.

Since 2004, EOD's outdoor art exhibit, celebrating the theme of "enriching lives through diversity," showcases the art and words of thousands of artists and writers from around the world, including hundreds of area-based students and educators. Embracing Our Differences' annual outdoor exhibits are 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 continues through April 1 at Bayfront Park in Sarasota. *For more information about Embracing Our Differences, call 941-404-5710 or visit www.embracingourdifferences.org.*

About Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

The Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is a communitywide effort in Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee and Sarasota counties to help all children, especially those from asset-limited families, succeed in school and life by ensuring they read on grade level by the end of third grade. For more information, please visit www.gradelevelreadingsuncoast.net.

About Embracing Our Differences

Embracing Our Differences is a not-for-profit organization that uses the transformational power of art and education to celebrate and promote the diversity of the human family. It accomplishes this through an annual, large-scale outdoor juried art exhibition and a comprehensive series of educational initiatives, programs and resources designed for teachers and students. Visit www.embracingourdifferences.org.