

## MEDIA CONTACTS

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### **Three Area High School Students and Four College Students Are Awarded College Scholarships from Embracing Our Differences**

*Three high school seniors entering college in the fall and four students already attending college will each receive \$1,000 renewable scholarships for four years.*

(June 9, 2022) Anela Ajkic (Riverview High School), Mya Fraser (Venice High school), and Megan Meese (Riverview High School)—recently graduated high school seniors who served as members of their school’s Coexistence Club—were awarded \$1,000 four-year renewable scholarships by Embracing Our Differences. They join Chloe Labrecque and Cam Pham, juniors at the University of Florida, who received their first scholarship in 2020; Emilia Przepiora, a sophomore at the University of Florida, who received her first scholarship in 2021; and Kennedy Hart, a sophomore at Rice University, who received her first scholarship in 2021. The students are part of an EOD scholarship initiative that grants annual \$1,000 renewable scholarships to three students at regional high school Coexistence Clubs. Current Coexistence Club locations include Booker, North Port, Pineview, Riverview, Sarasota, Suncoast Polytech, and Venice high schools, IMG Academy and SCF Collegiate Bradenton and Venice in addition to two middle school clubs at Laurel Nokomis School and Venice Middle School. Coexistence Club members serve as docents for thousands of students who visit EOD’s outdoor exhibit every year in addition to designing and

leading student-driven initiatives in their schools to promote inclusion and acceptance.

“The ongoing commitment of Coexistence Club members to promote diversity, inclusion, respect and integrity in their schools and at EOD’s annual exhibit led us to consider how we could further honor their efforts while also supporting their education after graduation,” says Ben Jewell-Plocher, EOD’s education director. “As we enter our third year of awarding scholarships, it is heartwarming to see how second- and third-year awardees continue to advocate for inclusion and belonging within their university communities. We are thrilled to work with all the amazing Coexistence Club students, the dedicated teachers who advise and guide this student-driven initiative and our steadfast supporters who make the Coexistence Club program and scholarships possible.”

Jewell-Plocher adds that award recipients need to demonstrate how the Coexistence Club and their participation as docents for EOD’s exhibit has had an impact on their life and high school career.

**Anela Ajkic**, who will be studying health science and psychology at the University of Florida starting this fall, says she is “incredibly grateful to have received this scholarship from an organization that aligns with my own beliefs. I think that the lessons that can be taught through art are immeasurable, and EOD provides a safe space within the community for impactful art to thrive. I am thankful to Embracing Our Differences for the amazing lessons and opportunities it has provided me.”

**Megan Meese** will be majoring in international studies and anthropology at the University of Florida starting this fall. Meese says the “Coexistence Club has forever

impacted my life and shaped my future by helping me discover my passion for human rights and equity. Receiving this scholarship will allow me to pay it forward in the world by embodying and fostering Embracing Our Differences' core values of acceptance, inclusivity, and kindness through my career and daily life."

**Mya Fraser** will be attending Florida Agriculture and Mechanical University starting the fall. She says, "EOD has always made me feel heard and seen; they made me feel like I mattered. Receiving this scholarship from this amazing organization allows me to have more confidence in my worth."

**Emilia Przepiora** is a sophomore at the University of Florida, majoring in psychology. She says, "Embracing Our Differences has made an impact on my life after high school. Transitioning from a high school setting to a university setting was a step into a world full of diversity. The University of Florida's campus has students from all around the world and from many diverse backgrounds. Being mindful of this diversity is a great tool when making new relationships in an unfamiliar environment."

**Kennedy Hart** is a sophomore at Rice University, majoring in managerial economics and organizational sciences. She says: "Through Embracing Our Differences, I learned the value in establishing empathy, and how it can be crucial to communication, collaboration, and progress. I carried this lesson with me into my first year of college. This year, I took a semester-long class where I was tasked with designing a better online learning experience for Rice students and professors. A key step in this process for me was establishing empathy. Many of the professors and students I interviewed had conflicting desires and viewpoints, but I had to design a platform that would meet both of their needs. This required empathy since I had to

truly understand and embrace their different perspectives. I had already had practice through the coexistence club using empathy to respect and appreciate differences, so the process of designing a solution was much easier for me. My solution was not only able to meet the needs of the students and professors I interviewed, but it provided an extra layer of accessibility to students with learning disabilities as well. Had I not had these previous experiences through the Coexistence Club, I do not think I would have designed a solution as effectively. I feel that what I learned has helped me bridge so many connections and is something I will surely take with me for the rest of my life.”

**Chloe Labrecque** is a junior at University of Florida, majoring in English and psychology. She says that her experiences with Embracing Our Differences and the Coexistence Club “provided me with a toolkit that I have carried with me into my college years. Some of these tools are concrete and measurable, such as the ability to deconstruct a piece of art, which guided me through a final essay. The skills I learned as a docent and the core tenets I hold dear have only grown increasingly useful as I begin to navigate my adult life. The way I see it, my time with the Coexistence Club and Embracing Our Differences was an exercise in empathy, necessary not because I would lose this metaphorical muscle without practice, but because through encouraging empathy in others I can help the collective body grow stronger.”

**Cam Pham** is a junior at the University of Florida, majoring in health education and behavior. She says, “ever since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, the growth of Asian hate crimes/actions has grown dramatically, especially in the United States. As

a part of the Asian community, I, myself, have experienced harassment in public for my identity. As a part of the Asian American Student Union organization at UF, I was able to attend workshops, fundraising events, educate others about the Asian community and share my story. I was able to speak up for those who are afraid and stand up for my own culture and my identity. Not only that, but I was also able to uphold Embracing Our Difference's core value by accepting and respect others' cultures, supporting one another's beliefs, and celebrating diversity. I am glad to always have EOD supporting my journey in making."

For 19 years, Embracing Our Differences has drawn on the passion and perception of artists, students, writers, 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 more than 4 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. **Next year's Bayfront Park exhibit runs January 18-March 12, 2023. In addition, for the first time, the exhibit will also be displayed at Butler Park in North Port, March 22-April 19, 2023; and at State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota, April 26-May 29, 2023.**

*For more information, call 941-404-5710 or visit [www.embracingourdifferences.org](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org).*

## **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](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org).