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Embracing Our Differences' Reading Day On March 8 Reached Nearly 9,000 Students in 485 Classrooms!

8,915 students from 79 elementary schools and early learning centers in Manatee and Sarasota counties celebrated reading and diversity through books written and illustrated by BIPOC, AAPI, Hispanic and Latinx authors and illustrators. Embracing Our Differences partnered with the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading to distribute 9,400 books and stimulate conversations about diversity, bullying, and respect in 485 classrooms.

(March 9, 2022) Nearly 9,000 pre-k through third grade students from 79 elementary schools and early learning centers in Manatee and Sarasota counties celebrated reading and diversity on March 8, through books written and illustrated by BIPOC (Black, indigenous and people of color), AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander), Hispanic and Latinx authors and illustrators. For the past nine years, Embracing Our Differences' Reading Day has engaged tens of thousands of elementary school students throughout Sarasota and Manatee counties. The objective has been to show children that reading is fun and important by stimulating student-mentor conversations about diversity, bullying and respect.

According to Ben Jewell-Plocher, EOD's education director, 107 in-person volunteer readings were scheduled for pre-kindergarten to third-grade classrooms across Sarasota and Manatee counties on March 8, with the remaining read alongs occurring via pre-recorded webisodes featuring community leaders and local teaching

artists. Over the course of the day, more than 9,400 books, focused on the theme of diversity and inclusion, were gifted to every participating student and classroom.

“A new book can be a doorway to affirmation and new perspectives,” says Jewell-Plocher. “Our hope is that reading day participants not only recognize themselves in the pages of this year’s titles, but also recognize that what makes an individual ‘different’ is also what makes them beautiful, inside and out.”

This massive outreach reflects a collaboration between Embracing Our Differences and the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a joint effort supported by The Patterson Foundation, the Community Foundation of Sarasota County, United Way Suncoast and an anonymous family foundation. 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.

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 2022 exhibit is through April 10 at Sarasota’s Bayfront Park. *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 Manatee and Sarasota counties to help all children, especially those from low-income 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.

Photo captions:

- *Gilbert W McNeal Elementary School students showcasing their new books as part of EOD Reading Day 2022.*
- *Dreamers Academy students showcasing their new books as part of EOD Reading Day 2022. Volunteer reader is Kirsten Russell, VP – Community Impact; Community Foundation of Sarasota County*
- *Booker Elementary students showcasing their new books as part of EOD Reading Day 2022.*