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Embracing Our Differences Opens 20th Anniversary Exhibit with Grand Celebration at Sarasota's Bayfront Park

More than 3,000 people attended the event, which featured performances by Jah Movement, poet Cedric Hameed, and Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe.

(January 23, 2023) More than 3,000 people celebrated at Embracing Our Differences' 20th anniversary exhibition opening on Sunday, January 22, noon-3 p.m., in Sarasota's downtown Bayfront Park. The event featured live performances by Jah Movement, Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe and poets Cedric Hameed and Whit the Poet. Artists featured in the exhibition traveled from around the nation and state, including Best-in-Show Student Artist Alexis Lee, a 10th grade student from Irvine, CA; Donna Richardson from Tampa; Sahar Al-Louthai from Brooklyn, NY, and Diego Dillion from North Carolina. Local arts and education organizations were onsite with booths and activities, including Art Center Sarasota, CreArte, Florida Studio Theatre, Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall and State College of Florida.

Sarasota City Manager Marlon Brown and Judge Charles E. Williams, EOD's board chair, greeted the enthusiastic crowd. Brown spoke of the profound contribution of EOD's annual outdoor exhibition to our region's cultural life. He reaffirmed the City of Sarasota's commitment to EOD's values of diversity, inclusion and equality. After reading an official proclamation, Sarasota Mayor Kyle Battie handed the Key to the City

to Executive Director Sarah Wertheimer and Judge Williams. EOD co-founder and board member, Richard Bergman, then spoke of the organization's many accomplishments in its 20 years of existence. He noted that EOD's yearly exhibition has attracted more than four million visitors in those two decades — and hopes to draw many more in the years to come.

2023 marks the 20th anniversary of the exhibit. Wertheimer explains that the past 20 years have been ones of monumental growth, forward movement—and many milestones.

“Our first call to artists received 124 submissions,” says Wertheimer. “This year, we received 13,733 from 119 countries. And we're thrilled that annual visitor attendance has quadrupled since we began. Less than 100,000 people attended the first exhibit; we had almost 400,000 last year.”

Wertheimer adds that EOD's 20th anniversary theme is “Embracing Kindness,” and the organization is planning several special events to celebrate the anniversary, including exhibiting at two new venues in addition to Bayfront Park.

Sheila D. McKoy, EOD's exhibition director, says that the 2023 exhibit will also be displayed at Butler Park in North Port and at State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota in Bradenton. “We are so excited to have the 2023 exhibit in North Port and in Bradenton. This will allow us to broaden our reach as well as our impact on the community while staying true to our mission and vision.”

2023 ART WINNERS:

The **Best-in-Show Adult** winner for art is for “We Are All Pearls” by Whitney de Araújo, of Recife, Brazil. In it, eight women, seen from behind, sit on a bench in a

museum staring at a wall with eight different paintings of a woman. The artist says she used the painting, "Girl with a Pearl Earring," by Johannes Vermeer as a reference for the eight paintings in her work. As the viewer glances more deeply, we see the paintings reflect the diversity in color, size, physical ability, style and ethnicity of the women on the bench. "It doesn't matter what you look like, your race, orientation, or sexual identity, where you're from, or whether you have a disability," says de Araújo. "Representation matters and makes a difference in the life of each person."

Alexis Lee, a 10th grade student at the Icon Art Academy in Irvine, CA., won the **Best-in-Show Student** award for her work, "Stretching Beauty," which depicts a thin ballerina who sees herself as much larger in the mirror. "Body dysmorphia is something so many people go through as they try to reach the extremely demanding beauty standards of society, which usually lead to eating disorders," says Lee. "I have a close friend in the hospital recovering from anorexia, so this theme means a lot to me and I definitely think that there should be more body positivity in today's society."

2023 QUOTATION WINNERS:

The award for the **Best-in-Show Adult** inspirational quotation was given to Alexis Morrell of Wolcott, Connecticut for: "It takes more courage to speak in a silent room than to become another voice in a crowd."

The award for the **Best-in-Show Student** inspirational quotation was given to Hartley Livesey, a fifth grade student at The Out-of-Door Academy for "Always remember you are braver than you think and stronger than you believe." Hartley's teacher is Mrs. Gulacsy.

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.

For more information about Embracing Our Differences, call 941-404-5710 or visit www.embracingourdifferences.org.

A Quick Glance at Embracing Our Differences' 20th Anniversary Schedule and Celebrations

Sarasota Exhibit (Bayfront Park):

- Opens: 1/18/2023
- Last Day: 3/12/2023

North Port Exhibit (Butler Park):

- Opens: 3/22/2023
- Last Day: 4/19/2023

Bradenton Exhibit (State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota):

- Opens: 4/26/2023
- Last Day: 5/29/2023

- **Grand Opening Event at Bayfront Park: Sunday, January 22, 2023**
- **Grand Opening Event at Butler Park: Saturday, March 25, 2023**
- **Grand Opening Event at State College of Florida: Saturday, April 29, 2023**
- **Annual Luncheon at Michael's On East: Friday, February 17, 2023**

About Embracing Our Differences

Embracing Our Differences is a nonprofit 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:

- *Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe performs at Embracing Our Differences' Grand Opening Celebration at Bayfront Park on January 22. Photo by Michael Kinsey.*
- *Poet Cedric Hameed performs at Embracing Our Differences' Grand Opening Celebration at Bayfront Park on January 22. Photo by Michael Kinsey.*
- *Sarasota Mayor Kyle Battie honors Embracing Our Differences with an official proclamation. EOD board chair, Judge Charles E. Williams, and EOD executive director, Sarah Wertheimer, wait to receive Key to the City at Embracing Our Differences' Grand Opening Celebration in Bayfront Park on January 22. Photo by Cliff Roles.*
- *Judge Charles E. Williams, EOD's board chair, welcomes attendees at Embracing Our Differences' Grand Opening Celebration in Bayfront Park on January 22. Photo by Cliff Roles.*
- *Exhibit Director Sheila McKoy, Executive Director Sarah Wertheimer, and Best in Show Student Artist Alexis Lee at Embracing Our Differences' Grand Opening Celebration in Bayfront Park on January 22. Photo by Cliff Roles.*
- *EOD's Learning & Engagement Director Ben Jewell-Plocher with Cintia Elenstar, Executive Director of Unidos Now, at Embracing Our Differences' Grand Opening Celebration in Bayfront Park on January 22. Photo by Cliff Roles.*
- *Sarasota City Manager Marlon Brown welcomes attendees at Embracing Our Differences' Grand Opening Celebration in Bayfront Park on January 22. Photo by Cliff Roles.*

- *EOD's Executive Director Sarah Wertheimer spoke of the organization's many accomplishments during the past 20 years at Embracing Our Differences' Grand Opening Celebration in Bayfront Park on January 22. Photo by Cliff Roles.*
- *EOD's Exhibition Director Sheila McCoy at Embracing Our Differences' Grand Opening Celebration in Bayfront Park on January 22. Photo by Cliff Roles.*