

MEDIA CONTACTS

Sarah Wertheimer ▪ 941-404-5710 ▪ sarah@embracingourdifferences.org

Su Byron ▪ 941-726-8461 ▪ su@subyronenterprises.com

Three Graduating High School Students and Nine College Students Are Awarded College Scholarships from Embracing Our Differences

The students will each receive \$1,000 renewable scholarships.

(July 3, 2024) Jaylen Benony (Booker High School), Kennedy Flatch (Riverview High School), and Melissa Graham (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. Flatch and Graham will be entering the University of Florida, while Benony will be entering the University of North Florida in the fall. They join rising sophomores Kasey-Huong Nguyen (UF), Mateo Rizzo (UF), and Lucia Warren (USF), who received their first scholarships in 2023; rising juniors Anela Ajkic (UF), Mya Fraser (FAMU), and Megan Meese (UF), who received their first scholarships in 2022; and rising seniors Kennedy Hart (Rice University) and Emilia Przepiora (UF), who received their first scholarships in 2021. In addition, Jay Murphy, who served in an internship position for EOD in 2023, received a second \$1,000 scholarship to attend Ringling College of Art and Design.

The students are part of an EOD scholarship initiative that grants annual \$1,000 renewable scholarships to students at regional high school Coexistence Clubs. Current Coexistence Club locations include Booker, North Port, Pine View, Riverview, Sarasota, Suncoast Polytech, and Venice high schools in addition to Imagine Schools North Port Upper Campus. Coexistence Club members serve as docents for thousands of students who visit EOD's outdoor exhibits every year in addition to designing and leading student-driven initiatives in their schools to promote inclusion and acceptance. These scholarships are made possible by the Jody Beresford and Robert Mayer Scholarship Fund, along with generous support from private donors.

Ben Jewell-Plocher, EOD's learning and engagement director, explains 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.

"The dedication of Coexistence Club members to promote inclusion, kindness, and respect in their schools and at EOD's annual exhibit inspires us to honor their efforts and support their continuing education," says Jewell-Plocher.

"As we enter our fifth year of awarding scholarships, it's heartwarming to see previous awardees continue to advocate for inclusion within their university communities. We are thrilled to work with the amazing Coexistence Club students, dedicated educators, and steadfast supporters who make the Coexistence Club program and scholarships possible."

Jaylen Benony will be studying interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in film and screenwriting and minoring in entrepreneurship at University of North Florida in the fall. “If it were not for Embracing Our Differences and the staff at my school in charge of the Coexistence Club, I don’t know where I would be mentally or physically,” says Benony. “Their encouragement and constant interest in my work has helped to remind me of my values and bring me back to reality. They have helped me to become a young man who understands his morals, principles, and that it is okay to deal with things in private on your own time.” He adds that volunteering for EOD’s annual Reading Day was especially eye-opening for him. “Going to the schools and reading to the kids was a lot more than just reading a book. I built bonds, connected with the kids, and shared my dreams of being a screenwriter. Writing is the way I have claimed my voice and received acceptance and recognition.”

Kennedy Flatch will be studying business marketing at FSU this fall. She says she especially enjoyed serving as a volunteer docent at EOD’s annual outdoor art exhibit. One tour stands out for her. “The group I was scheduled to docent was a group of special needs students. The chance to play even a small part in brightening the lives of these children filled me with a sense of purpose and encouraged me to continue my commitment to supporting inclusivity and kindness in all aspects of my life. It was a good reminder of the importance of promoting a sense of belonging to everyone, regardless of their capabilities or differences.”

Melissa Graham will be studying biology at FSU this fall. Serving as a docent for EOD’s annual outdoor exhibition was also a pivotal experience for her. When a group of first graders invited her to sit with them for a picnic lunch, she said she was

taken aback by how inclusive and kind they were. “It was such a simple, yet meaningful interaction and it reminded me how much kids have to teach us. Serving as a docent helped me gain knowledge, patience and social skills. It’s so intriguing and an example of the unexpected gifts that volunteering can bring to those who volunteer.”

Lucia Warren is studying biology at USF and says that participating in EOD’s Coexistence Club helped her “gain invaluable lessons in cultural sensitivity, effective communication, and mutual respect. These lessons have significantly shaped my experiences and interactions during my first year of college, enriching both my personal growth and my contributions to the campus community.”

Mateo Rizzo is studying aerospace and mechanical engineering at UF and says that his involvement with EOD and the Coexistence Club “helped me develop organization and time management, which proved to be critical in college. These organizational skills were crucial in dealing with college life, allowing me to succeed academically while actively participating in campus activities, such as the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers.”

Kasey-Huong Nguyen, who is studying nutritional sciences at UF in the fall, says that, as a former Venice High Coexistence Club Member, she was able to carry many lessons into her first year of college. “Compared to Venice, the University of Florida has a wider range of students from diverse backgrounds. Before I started my fall semester, I attended a program called FiND (Forming our Identities through Networking and Development). This program was for first year APIDSE (Asian Pacific Islander Desi Affairs) students, and I was able to meet many new friends that share the same culture

and values that I do. I have also been involved with the Asian American Student Union and Vietnamese Student Organization where I am able to carry on the lessons of Coexistence Club to my peers. Many of the members of these organizations are not Asian or Vietnamese, so we are able to share our cultures to create a more connected campus. I attend meetings of clubs of other ethnicities to learn more about other cultures and values, such as Indian Student Association and Chinese American Student Association. I believe that being exposed to these other cultures allows us to be more inclusive, open-minded, and respectful to the people we interact with every day. This was a lesson that I had learned from Coexistence Club that I plan to carry along with me throughout the rest of my life.”

Anela Ajkic is studying health science and psychology at UF. She says that the knowledge she gained through Embracing Our Differences has been invaluable as a future healthcare worker. “Within the past year I have joined my college’s Health Fraternity (AED) where I have committed to preparing myself for a career in healthcare and giving back to those in our local community. One of my favorite ways to participate in the club this year was to attend our outreach events where we became mentors and tutored children in Title I schools coming from various backgrounds and ages. During this time, I was able to build relationships with children of different backgrounds, provide emotional support by becoming a mentor, and help increase literacy within my community.”

Megan Meese is majoring in international studies and anthropology at UF. She notes that her involvement in the Coexistence Club at Riverview High School inspired her worldview, academic plans, and professional aspirations. She recently

had the honor of serving as the Diversity Chair for UF's chapter of Omega Phi Alpha, the national service sorority. "This role confronted me with upholding all four of EOD's core values: diversity, inclusion, respect, integrity. The first is the most evident as I planned programming that highlighted diversity of background and experience. My position also required me to be mindful of including our members, representing and validating their diverse identities through the content of my presentations and events. A tone of respect was critical when displaying and discussing aspects of minority cultures and marginalized experiences, especially those that were not my own. Ensuring this level of respect mandated integrity: putting in the effort to do sufficient research into the topic and make sure I presented accurate information to my chapter. This experience reinforced and expanded upon the values instilled in me by Embracing Our Differences."

Mya Fraser is majoring in business administration at FAMU. "Being a Coexistence Club member is an honor that I carry with me every day," she says. "When I think back to EOD's core values, I remember what I craved in my predominantly Caucasian high school. With the diversity at my university, I have opened myself up to more things I wouldn't have tried. The Coexistence Club taught me to be more open-minded and respectful. It was one of few clubs that embraced diversity and shared how to understand different cultures. The biggest lesson the Coexistence Club program has taught me is reflected by where I chose to continue my education—in an institution that embraces diversity and rejects prejudice and hatred."

Emilia Przepiora is majoring in psychology at USF. She says that she continues to be grateful for her time volunteering with Embracing Our Differences and “for the challenge to uphold EOD’s core values every day. As I continue working toward a degree in psychology, I am increasingly confident that I want to work in the field of speech pathology. As EOD’s message and many of the exhibit’s artworks have shown over the years, language can be a powerful tool of expression and connection between people. I would like to be a force in the world that empowers people by ensuring they have the necessary tools to be expressive and make connections. Whether it is through spoken language, written language, sign language, or another form of communication, people with disabilities have had their voices silenced throughout history.”

Kennedy Hart is majoring in managerial economics and organizational sciences at Rice University. She says that through her research at Rice, she has had the opportunity to continue to study and advocate for the importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion. “I ultimately hope to bring my knowledge to organizations and make change. Under my research advisors, I conducted a yearlong honors thesis investigating biases in the ways students evaluate professors with foreign accents. I discovered significant statistical evidence that stereotypes are involved and negatively impacting evaluation scores for professors with foreign accents. My research won the Janessa Shapiro Prize for Best Honors Thesis in Psychology, and I was invited to work with the Rice teaching committee in the fall to help reform the evaluation processes. All my research efforts relate to the idea of embracing diversity

and creating work environments where people can show up and be themselves, which I feel is inspired by my high school involvement with EOD.”

Jay Murphy is studying visual arts at Ringling College of Art and Design. “The importance of representing EOD has never been more important. Everyone deserves to be themselves and practice the art of kindness,” says Murphy.

For 21 years, Embracing Our Differences has delighted viewers with its annual outdoor display of 50 billboard-sized works of art and accompanying quotes. This high-profile art exhibition draws on the passion and perception of artists, students, and writers, to create powerful statements of inclusion, kindness and respect. The scale and impact of this open-air art show has continued to grow, attracting more than 4.8 million visitors since its inception. EOD’s annual exhibit is the heart of a year-round program of activities using art as a catalyst to create awareness and promote diversity.

Embracing Our Differences’ next outdoor exhibition runs Jan. 19-April 13, 2025, in Bayfront Park, Sarasota; and March 1-March 31, 2025, in Flora Wylie Park, St. Petersburg.

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