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Embracing Our Differences' Reading Day Makes a Significant Impact: Over 9,600 Students Engaged Across 528 Classrooms

9,641 students from 80 elementary schools and early learning centers in Manatee and Sarasota counties celebrated reading, kindness, and inclusion through books written and illustrated by diverse authors and illustrators. Embracing Our Differences partnered with the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading to distribute 10,169 books and stimulate conversations about what we share, and what makes us unique, in 528 classrooms.

(March 11, 2024) More than 9,600 pre-k through third grade students from 80 elementary schools and early learning centers in Manatee and Sarasota counties celebrated reading, kindness, and inclusion on March 5, through books written and illustrated by diverse authors and illustrators. For the past 11 years, Embracing Our Differences Reading Day has engaged tens of thousands of elementary school students in Sarasota and Manatee counties. The objective has been to show children how fun reading is by stimulating student-mentor conversations about inclusion, kindness, and respect for all members of our community.

According to Ben Jewell-Plocher, Embracing Our Differences learning and engagement director, 188 in-person volunteer readings were scheduled for pre-kindergarten to third-grade classrooms across Sarasota and Manatee counties on March 5, with the remaining read-alongs occurring via [pre-recorded webisodes](#) featuring community leaders and local teaching artists from Florida Studio Theatre, Sarasota

Rising Festival, Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, Sarasota County Schools, and the School District of Manatee County. This year, adult community members and high school students from Booker, Braden River, New Gate, Palmetto, SCF Collegiate Bradenton, Suncoast Polytechnical, and Venice High Schools made the in-person readings come alive. Over the course of the day, more than 10,100 books, focused on stories that celebrate both what we share and what makes us unique, were gifted to every participating student and classroom.

"Books can be portals," Jewell-Plocher says, "unlocking self-discovery and fresh viewpoints. Our hope is that EOD's 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."

When reflecting on what they loved about this year's event, one kindergarten teacher from Sarasota County shared, "I love any program that gets books in kid's hands, but especially this program because you pick such wonderful and meaningful stories." A School District of Manatee County second grade teacher reflected, "we look forward to EOD Reading Day each year! There is always a positive lesson that we can address and keep referring back to as a class."

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

For 21 years, Embracing Our Differences has drawn on the passion and perception of artists, students, writers, and others to create powerful statements of respect, kindness 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 4.3 million visitors since its inception in 2004. The exhibit is the heart of a year-round program of activities designed to use art as a catalyst to create awareness and promote diversity. **The 2024 Sarasota exhibit in Bayfront Park runs through April 14. In addition, for the first time in 21 years, the exhibit is also displayed at Poynter Park in St. Petersburg through March 31.**

About Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

The Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is a four-county initiative fostering wide community participation to achieve shared aspirations for the success of families and children. The Suncoast region — Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee, and Sarasota counties in Florida — is focused on addressing the most common issues and obstacles that impact a child's ability to read to learn. For more information, please visit www.gradelevelreadingsuncoast.net.

About Embracing Our Differences

Embracing Our Differences is a nonprofit organization that uses the transformational power of art and education to celebrate and promote our individuality and common humanity. 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:

- *Alta Vista Elementary students read along with community volunteer Nancy Shapiro at Embracing Our Differences' Reading Day in March.*
- *Barbara A. Harvey Elementary students showcasing their new books as part of Embracing Our Differences' Reading Day in March.*
- *Booker High School students show off their books before reading to Emma E. Booker Elementary's third grade classes as part of Embracing Our Differences' Reading Day in March.*