

Herald-Tribune

Embracing Our Differences Reading Day impacts 9,600 Sarasota-Manatee students

Sarasota Herald-Tribune



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 as part of Embracing Our Differences Reading Day.

For the past 11 years, EOD's Reading Day has engaged tens of thousands of elementary school students in Sarasota-Manatee, stimulating student-mentor conversations about inclusion, kindness, and respect for all members of the community.

"Books can be portals, unlocking self-discovery and fresh viewpoints," said Ben Jewell-Plocher, Embracing Our Differences learning and engagement director. "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."

According to Jewell-Plocher, 188 in-person volunteer readings were scheduled in classrooms across Sarasota and Manatee counties on March 5, with read-alongs taking place via prerecorded webisodes featuring community leaders and teaching artists from Florida Studio Theatre, 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 also made the in-person readings come alive. Over the course of the day, more than 10,100 books were gifted to each student and classroom.

The outreach reflects a collaboration between Embracing Our Differences, a private family foundation, and the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a joint effort supported by The Patterson Foundation, Community

Foundation of Sarasota County, and United Way Suncoast. The program's 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 outdoor exhibition has continued to grow, attracting more than 4.3 million visitors since its inception in 2004. The 2024 Sarasota exhibit in Bayfront Park runs through April 14.

The Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a four-county initiative with Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee, and Sarasota counties, is focused on addressing the most common issues and obstacles that impact a child's ability to read to learn. For more information, visit gradelevelreadingsuncoast.net.

Submitted by Su Byron