

## MEDIA CONTACTS

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### **Embracing Our Differences' Annual Luncheon Raises More Than \$300,000 to Support Arts Education and Community Engagement**

*Six hundred guests packed The Ora on February 21 for the sold-out event, which featured inspirational speeches from high school and middle school students and educators. The funds raised, kickstarted by a pivotal \$100,000 contribution from Hugh and Eliza Culverhouse, helped EOD exceed a record-breaking \$300,000.*

(March 3, 2023) Embracing Our Differences (EOD) hosted its annual fundraising luncheon on February 21 at The Ora, bringing together 600 supporters for an inspiring event that celebrated the power of the arts to promote community engagement, respect, and meaningful dialogue. The event surpassed its \$300,000 fundraising goal, propelled by a pivotal \$100,000 contribution from philanthropists Eliza and Hugh Culverhouse, which helped kickstart the campaign.

During the luncheon, EOD President and CEO Sarah Wertheimer spoke about the organization's ongoing commitment to fostering a more inclusive, respectful and compassionate community, despite recent challenges. She addressed the financial strain caused by budget constraints and funding cuts while also acknowledging the broader cultural climate that has impacted students, educators, and volunteers.

"These challenges are deeply concerning and unacceptable," said Wertheimer. "But let me be clear — we will not be deterred."

The luncheon also highlighted the profound impact of EOD's educational programs. Educators and students shared personal stories of how participating in the annual outdoor art exhibition and related educational initiatives have shaped their lives.

Dr. Brooks Tracey, an artist and arts educator at both Ringling College and Sarasota Middle School, has worked with Embracing Our Differences for more than 10 years, guiding his students to engage with the program's mission. Under his mentorship, countless students have had their artwork selected for the annual exhibition, earning recognition and awards along the way.

"Embracing Our Differences offers my students the invaluable opportunity to engage with art that challenges their perspectives and sparks important conversations about empathy, respect, and understanding," Tracey said. "The program brings the world into our classroom, helping students step beyond their own experiences and consider the diverse lives and viewpoints of others."

He recounted how one of his students, after having her artwork selected for the exhibition, gained newfound confidence that led to high school accolades and a future in the arts.

Embracing Our Differences continues to grow its global reach while maintaining strong local engagement. This year, the organization received over 10,000 art and quotation submissions from 122 countries and 46 states. Since its inception, the open-air art show has welcomed more than 4.8 million visitors, cementing its impact as one of the largest educational arts initiatives in the region.

Wertheimer emphasized that the funds raised at the luncheon will support EOD's ongoing efforts to provide arts education programs, teacher resources, and community outreach initiatives.

"The overwhelming support from attendees underscores the community's commitment to creating a more inclusive future through the arts," she said.

**Embracing Our Differences' 2025 exhibitions run through April 13, in Bayfront Park, Sarasota; and March 1-March 31, in Poynter Park, St. Petersburg. "Embracing Our Community: A Celebration of Kindness," a free event, takes place on Sunday, March 30, from noon to 3 p.m., at Sarasota's Bayfront Park.**

*For more information about these exhibits or Embracing Our Differences, call 941-404-5710 or visit [EmbracingOurDifferences.org](http://EmbracingOurDifferences.org).*

**Photo captions:**

- *Coexistence Club high school students greet guests at Embracing Our Differences' 2025 Annual Luncheon at The Ora on February 21. Photo by Harry Sayer.*
- *Linda Poteat-Brown, EOD's Vice Chair; Judge Charles Williams, EOD's Chair; Rich Bergman, EOD's Secretary; Sarah Wertheimer, EOD's President and CEO; Dr. Christina de Guia, EOD board member; and Patrick Arthur Jackson, Vice President of Learning & Engagement at Embracing Our Differences' 2025 Annual Luncheon at The Ora on February 21. Photo by Harry Sayer.*
- *Carol Butera, Victora Kasdan, Hank and Phyllis Battie and Kirsten Russell at Embracing Our Differences' 2025 Annual Luncheon at The Ora on February 21. Photo by Harry Sayer.*

- *Isabelle Cicala, Bryson Day, and Sarah Wertheimer at Embracing Our Differences' 2025 Annual Luncheon at The Ora on February 21. Photo by Harry Sayer.*

### **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 different perspectives and experiences 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](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org).