

Embracing Our Differences luncheon highlights educational initiatives

- By [Ian Swaby](#)
- | 3:20 p.m. February 25, 2025



Judge Charles Williams, Sarah Wertheimer, Isabella Cicala and Bryson Day. Photo by Ian Swaby

Although severe weather may have canceled the opening ceremony for the Embracing Our Differences art exhibition currently on display, the nonprofit and its supporters were still able to come together a month later on Feb. 21.

The Embracing Our Differences 2025 Annual Luncheon, held at The Ora, shone a spotlight on the organization's educational initiatives.

While it may be best known for the exhibition, the nonprofit describes its main focus as education.

The event welcomed speakers from local schools, including Isabella Cicala, a senior at Sarasota High School, Bryson Day, a senior at Venice High, and Brooks Tracey, an art instructor at Sarasota Middle.

Among the various educational initiatives are Unity Days, Embracing Reading Day and Coexistence Clubs.

For two years at Sarasota High, Cicala has led its Unity Day, a workshop of various activities intended to foster communication and cooperation.

"Being a part of this event has allowed me and my fellow students to show our true selves in a safe place where we can trust that nobody will judge us, laugh at us or tease us just because we believe in something different or have endured something traumatic," she said.

Tracey said he has formed many relationships and connections with the organization, with six of his students having their works selected for the exhibition.

He said for one former student it opened her eyes to the opportunities available to her.

"I still have the memory of getting the opportunity to share with her the news that she was going to be a part of the show, and I still remember her trying to hold back tears of excitement when she was given that news," he said.

President and CEO Sarah Wertheimer said she is "so fortunate to be able to work with students and teachers like these every day, students who have the courage to be themselves, and teachers who have the passion to inspire them."

However, she said not everyone shares the organization's mission.



Sarasota High School student Isabella Cicala speaks at the event.

Photo by Ian Swaby

"These challenges create a climate of fear," she said. "Our teachers are often intimidated by the negativity student artists ridiculed for expressing their unique voices. Even our volunteers have been met with hostility while sharing messages of compassion at the exhibition. These experiences are deeply concerning and unacceptable, but let me be clear, we will not be deterred."

Wertheimer noted recent obstacles faced by the nonprofit.

Last year, it lost a \$60,947 state grant when Gov. Ron DeSantis vetoed \$32 million in arts and culture grants in June, and also was denied \$46,696 in July by the Sarasota County Commission, which also denied grant requests from the Chalk Festival and WSLR/Fogartyville Community Arts and Media Center.

A video played at the event said art and creative writing submissions for the annual juried competition continued to break records this year, with 10,124 submissions from 122 countries, 46 states, and 511 schools, 45% of which came from the local community.

Wertheimer announced a fundraising goal of \$300,000, noting a \$100,000 challenge match by Eliza and Hugh Culverhouse and stating \$115,000 more was needed to unlock that match.

If You Go

Embracing Our Community: A Celebration of Kindness. Noon to 3 p.m., March 30 at Bayfront Park, 5 Bayfront Drive. Visit [EmbracingOurDifferences.org](https://www.EmbracingOurDifferences.org).