



Local Students Awarded Scholarships from EOD

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Embracing Our Differences (EOD) has awarded scholarships to three graduating high school seniors and renewed funding for eight college students who previously received the honor. The students are part of an EOD initiative that provides annual \$1,000 renewable scholarships to members of regional high school Coexistence Clubs—student-led groups that foster inclusion, respect, and kindness through hands-on projects and volunteer roles with EOD’s year-round educational programming. The scholarships are made possible by generous private donors, including the Jody Beresford and Robert Mayer Scholarship Fund.

This year’s new scholarship recipients are:

- Bryson Day (Venice High School) will study mechanical engineering at State College of Florida before transferring to Ohio State University. “Embracing Our Differences and the Coexistence Club created a community of unity and made my school feel like a home for everyone, regardless of skin color, ethnicity, or sexuality,” says Day.
- Melora Saing (Sarasota High School) will major in biology at the University of Florida. “Embracing Our Differences helped me overcome my fear of meeting new people, taught me how to be a better communicator, and allowed me to be a positive influence on young children,” says Saing.

· Max Hunter (Riverview High School) will pursue a degree in risk management and insurance at Florida State University. “Coexistence Club encouraged me to build bridges with those around me,” says Hunter. “These clubs teach empathy and respect and help create stronger school communities.”

These three new recipients join the following eight returning recipients, who are now attending colleges:

· Kennedy Flatch (Riverview High School) is a sophomore at Florida State University, majoring in marketing. “Coexistence Club taught me that change doesn’t have to come from the top down—it starts with how we treat each other every day.”

· Melissa Graham (Riverview High School) is a sophomore at Florida State University, studying biological sciences. “Being an EOD exhibition docent taught me how to listen and connect—skills I now use to build relationships with people from all walks of life.”

· Jaylen Benony (Booker High School) is a sophomore at the University of North Florida, majoring in interdisciplinary studies with a concentration in film and screenwriting, and minoring in entrepreneurship. “Writing has been the way I’ve claimed my voice and if it wasn’t for Embracing Our Differences and the Coexistence Club, I believe my voice may still be unheard. They have helped me to become a young man who understands his morals and principles.”

· Kasey-Huong Nguyen (Venice High School) is a junior at the University of Florida, studying nutritional sciences. “Respect isn’t just being polite; it’s meeting people where they are and offering care with dignity.”

· Lucia Warren (Booker High School) is a junior at the University of South Florida, majoring in marketing. “Inclusion isn’t always about grand gestures.

Sometimes it’s how we respond in small, everyday moments that matters most.”

· Mateo Rizzo (Booker High School) is a junior at the University of Florida, majoring in aerospace engineering. “I’ve learned the value of stepping up for others. Inclusion means making sure no one feels left behind.”

· Mya Fraser (Booker High School) is a senior at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, studying business administration. “EOD gave me the emotional tools to lead with empathy and view the world through a more open lens.”

· Anela Ajkic (Booker High School) is a senior at the University of Florida, pursuing a degree in health sciences. “My experiences with EOD and volunteering in healthcare taught me that

compassion means meeting people where they are—and treating every individual with dignity and respect.”

· Megan Meese (Riverview High School) is a senior at the University of Florida, double majoring in international studies and anthropology, with minors in nonprofit leadership and Spanish. “My experiences with EOD and the Coexistence Club shaped the course of my college career—academically, socially, and professionally,” says Meese. “They helped me discover my voice, and I now use it to educate others, build inclusive communities, and advocate for equity and cultural understanding at every level.”

Patrick Arthur Jackson, EOD’s vice president of learning and engagement, says each recipient demonstrates the lasting impact of the Coexistence Club experience. “Their stories are powerful reminders that the lessons of empathy and inclusion extend well beyond high school. It’s inspiring to see them carry those values into their college lives and future careers.”

Coexistence Clubs are currently active at area schools, including: Booker, North Port, Pine View, Riverview, Sarasota, Suncoast Polytech, and Venice high schools, along with Imagine Schools North Port Upper Campus. These clubs are

central to EOD’s education initiatives, creating a lasting ripple effect of inclusion, respect, and student-led leadership throughout the region.

“At its core, this scholarship initiative honors students who lead with purpose,” adds Jackson. “We’re proud to uplift young people who will continue to promote respect, build bridges, and strengthen civic life wherever they go.”

For 22 years, Embracing Our Differences has captivated audiences with its annual outdoor exhibitions of 50 billboard-sized works of art and quotations celebrating inclusion, kindness, and respect. With more than 5.2 million visitors to date, the exhibitions remain the centerpiece of a year-round education program that promotes respect and connection to community through cultural field trips, reading days, student clubs, and teacher workshops.