



Public art projects embrace differences, build unity

Embracing Our Differences and the UNITED Mural Project use art to bring people together.

By [Deborah Bostock-Kelley](#)

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Embracing Our Differences is March 7 to April 12 at Poynter Park in St. Pete. (Embracing Our Differences)

In 2026, two powerful art installations celebrating creativity and community come to the Tampa Bay region. Embracing Our Differences returns for its 23rd season, filling Sarasota's Bayfront Park and St. Petersburg's Poynter Park with billboard-sized works of art.

On January 31st, a one-day mural festival at Studios@5663 in Pinellas Park will begin the UNITED Mural Project, a collaborative public art initiative designed to bring the community together. The two art initiatives are different in scale and format, but share a common purpose – using art as a catalyst for connection, resilience, and hope.

Embracing Our Differences

Embracing Our Differences will be on display from January 17 to April 19 in Sarasota and March 7 to April 12 in St. Petersburg. The juried exhibition features 50 billboard-sized works of art and

accompanying quotations with messages of kindness, respect, and inclusion. The free event has welcomed more than 5.2 million visitors since its inception in 2004.

“The mission of our organization has evolved as the world and culture has evolved,” Embracing Our Differences President and CEO Sarah Wertheimer says. “We really see the exhibition every year as a reflection of what’s going on in society, what people are struggling with, what they are excited about, what inspires them, and it seems like our mission is needed even more today than it was all those years ago when it first began.”

The two venues underscore the exhibition’s message of accessibility.

“Having it in a public park is vital to sharing these messages with the world and allowing everyone to explore and interact with the artwork without barriers,” Wertheimer says. “And then, of course, having these in beautiful parks that are on the water just adds so much more to the entire experience.”

The 2026 exhibition received 14,000 submissions from 125 countries and 48 states.

“You don’t have to speak the same language to connect with someone’s message, experience, perspective, or culture,” Wertheimer says. “Art makes this giant world feel a little smaller, a little closer when you’re able to relate with something that someone is going through across the globe.”

With 60 percent of the submissions coming from students, Embracing Our Differences works closely with schools in Sarasota, Manatee, and Pinellas counties. There’s also strong international participation.

“We had entire classrooms and schools participating in many other countries, which was really phenomenal to see,” Wertheimer says.

For Wertheimer, these young voices represent hope for the future.

“I see them as making our world more respectful and more inclusive,” she says. “When I work with these young students, and when I hear directly from them, they really are open-minded, caring, kind people.”

Over the years, kindergartners as young as five and adults in their nineties have submitted artwork for the exhibition.

The pairing of visual art with quotations is a unique feature of Embracing Our Differences. They artwork and statement are submitted and judged separately, then matched together in the exhibition.

“It just adds such a layer of depth that these two individuals were both inspired by the same messages of kindness, respect, and inclusion,” Wertheimer says.” And yet they didn’t see the art piece or see the quotation ahead of time and how beautifully they’re able to complement one another.”



Sarah Wertheimer (Embracing Our Differences)

She says a powerful pairing from the 2025 exhibit coupled Ukrainian artist Alena Grom’s photograph “Stolen Spring,” winner of the show’s “People’s Choice” award, with a quotation from Sarasota resident Craig Ullom. The two became pen pals, exchanging letters during the war in Ukraine.

While the art installation is the public face of Embracing Our Differences, Wertheimer says year-round education programs are its true foundation.

“That’s where we’re able to truly impact people’s lives and perspectives and hopefully have them grow into open-minded, caring, compassionate members of society,” she says.



On February 7, the monthly Art pARTy will feature the ribbon-cutting for the completed mural and a gallery show featuring work by the six mural artists and the community canvases created during MuralFest.UNITED Mural Project's six artists (Urban Dog Studio)

Studios@5663 co-owners John Gascot and Laurie Meehan-Elmer created the mural project to bring the community together through art. It's a response to the Florida Department of Transportation's statewide purge of street mural art, including the Black History Matters and Progressive Pride murals in St. Pete.

"The UNITED concept was born out of loss and resilience," Meehan-Elmer says. "Recently, several meaningful murals in our area were erased or painted over, including works representing Black history and LGBTQ+ pride. John was one of the artists who painted the Black Lives Matter/Black History Matters, making the erasure even more painful on a personal level. That erasure sparked an urgent conversation about visibility, voice, and belonging."

She says the event is about "honoring differences while standing together" and "collective strength, shared space, and mutual respect across all members of our community."

Each letter of U-N-I-T-E-D will be painted by a different local artist. The artists are Gascot, The Artist Jones, Miss Crit, James Eric Hartzell, Alyssa Marie, and Zulu Painter. Three of the artists

previously collaborated on the Black Lives Matter and Black History Matters murals, making their participation in UNITED especially significant.

The mural embodies the mission of Diversity Arts, a nonprofit organization Gascot established to make creative opportunities more accessible to young people and families who may not have access to conventional art programs.

Diversity Arts has grown into a thriving organization that serves hundreds of children each year through art camps, workshops, and mentorships. Its programs allow kids to explore painting, drawing, and mixed media while building confidence and discovering their own voices. Beyond classes, Diversity Arts is built on the belief that art is powerful and empowering. Its mission is to uplift underserved and at-risk youth by offering instruction and a safe environment where creativity becomes a pathway to self-discovery and social connection.

Families who participate often remark that the studio feels less like a community hub where children are encouraged to express themselves freely while learning to respect the perspectives of others. The organization provides guidance and materials so that children can experiment without barriers, whether they are trying a new medium or collaborating with peers on group projects. These experiences foster sociocultural interaction, teaching kids that art is about listening, sharing, and building empathy.

Parents are invited to volunteer, reinforcing the idea that creativity is a family affair and professional artists and community members can be mentors. Diversity Arts also partners with local schools and organizations to reach more children who might not otherwise have access to art programs.

“Diversity Arts is rooted in equity, representation, and opportunity, using art as a vehicle for expression, confidence-building, and connection,” Gascot says. “Creativity is not a luxury. It’s a necessity, especially for young people navigating challenging circumstances.”

Embracing Our Differences and the UNITED Mural Project show how public art can shape the way communities see themselves and one another. One invites reflection through artwork from around the globe on display in Sarasota and St. Petersburg. The other invites participation through paintbrushes and canvases in Pinellas Park. Both projects demonstrate that art is something to experience, not just observe.

For more information, go to [Embracing Our Differences](#) and [UNITED Mural Project](#)