

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Embracing Our Differences Showcased in PBS “Diamonds Along the Highway” Series

The half-hour episode, which initially aired May 8 on WEDU, features interviews with philanthropist and founder of EOD, Dennis McGillicuddy, executive director Michael Shelton, and students, teachers and artists who participate in the program.

(Sarasota/Manatee, FL) Embracing Our Differences was recently showcased in season two of the PBS “Diamonds Along the Highway” series. The half-hour episode, which initially aired May 8 on WEDU, features interviews with philanthropist and EOD founder, Dennis McGillicuddy, executive director Michael Shelton, and many of the extraordinary students, teachers and artists who participate in the organization. The segment will air on different PBS stations throughout the year.

Producers Mark Reese and Gus Mollasis, both Sarasota residents, introduce viewers to fascinating aspects of Florida history and culture through these half-hour documentaries. "We're taking a unique look into the heart of the state with stories that are undiscovered gems of Florida's history, culture and diversity," says Gus Mollasis, adding that Embracing Our Differences fits that theme perfectly.

“Mark and I were fascinated by Embracing Our Differences and the powerful way it promotes diversity and encourages students to learn about co-existence through the art of others, as well as their own,” says Mollasis. “In this documentary, the founder of EOD,

Dennis McGillicuddy, says he wants to eradicate prejudice. Sure, it sounds like an impossible goal, but through Embracing Our Differences, he and others are reaching the heart of the matter---our children. Through the fusion of art and education, the program encourages students to learn about co-existence through the art of others, as well as their own.”

Reese, whose father was the renowned baseball player, Pee Wee Reese, says that his father embraced Jackie Robinson when he broke baseball's color barrier in 1947. “As a Southerner who was raised under the reigns of segregation, my father didn’t have the luxury of an educational system that celebrated diversity. As a father myself, and a new grandfather, I take Embracing Our Differences’ message to heart and wish it could be a mandatory part of our country’s educational curriculum. Pee Wee once said, ‘People will always need someone to hate.’ True, but EOD gives us definite hope for the future. My father would be relieved to see what Dennis McGillicuddy and the people at Embracing Our Difference have accomplished. It’s not about tolerance. It’s about a commitment to accepting and understanding all cultures and how important that diversity is to any nation’s wellbeing.”

Michael Shelton explains that EOD’s annual outdoor international art exhibit employs art to spark discussions and promote peaceful coexistence. The 2014 exhibit received submissions of more than 6,000 total artworks and statements from people from 52 countries, including South Korea, Greece, Israel, Serbia, China, Canada, India, Portugal, Scotland, and the United States. Students from 110 elementary, junior and high schools submitted both art and quotes.

“We’re making a difference,” says Shelton. “This PBS series is a recognition of that. It’s a formidable honor and we’re deeply grateful.”

Shelton adds that, “Diversity and respect are essential to 21st-century life on our planet. Embracing Our Differences exists to promote this understanding. Accepting diversity is not a challenge to national and cultural identity; mutual respect for others is the only way to assure one’s own identity. EOD is getting that message out there through its many programs. We’re encouraging people around the world to become active, compassionate and lifelong learners who understand that accepting other people, with all of their differences, will lead to a better world for everyone.”

Embracing Our Differences’ annual outdoor exhibits are the heart of a year-round program of activities designed to use art as a catalyst to create awareness and promote diversity. **Aside from the annual outdoor exhibition, Embracing Our Differences' ongoing educational outreach programs and initiatives include:**

- **Teacher workshops** developed by nationally acclaimed educators to provide curricula and lesson plans relating to art appreciation, character building and diversity education. These include:
 - **Creative Writing Workshops** presented in partnership with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and Florida Studio Theatre. These are designed to tackle the abstract topic of diversity by teaching students to express themselves through critical thinking and creative writing. **Collectively, the 105 teachers participating in 2013 were responsible for more than 15,000 students from Sarasota and Manatee counties.**
 - **Art Teacher Retreat:** Presented in partnership with Ringling College of Art and Design, this two-day retreat is focused on reinvigorating art educators’ creativity while teaching new skills and strategies for inspiring students to explore the concepts of prejudice and diversity. **Participating art teachers were collectively responsible for more than 12,000 Sarasota and Manatee county students.**

- **Lesson Plans Workshops:** Designed to provide curriculum-aligned lesson plans and other resource materials. Participating teachers discover new and innovative methods of engaging students in critical thinking while creating the perfect environment for a rich discussion on the value of diversity.
- The "**Make-a-Day-of-It!**" **program**, providing free bus transportation for area students and teachers to the outdoor exhibit and to other cultural venues, including Florida Studio Theatre, Mote Marine Aquarium and Ringling Museum. **More than 13,000 students participated during the 2012-2013 school year.**
- A **docent program** that, via partnerships with Riverview, Southeast and North Port high schools, provides student-led docent tours of the annual exhibit. **Student docent tours were provided to 10,453 K-8 children visiting the 2013 exhibits. There are approximately 150 student docents.**

*For more information about this exhibit or Embracing Our Differences, please call 941-404-5710 or visit www.embracingourdifferences.org. **To view the 2013 annual report, visit <http://embracingourdifferences.org/pdfs/2013report%20low.pdf>.***

About Embracing Our Differences

Embracing Our Differences is a project of Coexistence, Inc., a local non-profit that began in 2004. The project showcases a community-based outdoor exhibit promoting positive, inspirational artistic and verbal expressions of inclusion, acceptance and respect. The mission of Embracing Our Differences is to use the arts as a catalyst for creating awareness and promoting, throughout our community, the value of diversity, the benefits of inclusion and the significance of the active rejection of hatred and prejudice.