

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **Sarasota Artist Wins "People's Choice Award" in the 2014 Embracing Our Differences Exhibit**

*Tobias Norton's work, "Bridging the Gap," was voted best in show by exhibit goers.*

*Norton received a \$1,000 cash award.*

(Sarasota, FL) "Bridging the Gap," Tobias Norton's heartwarming depiction of seven mice triumphantly crossing a river with the help of a friendly elephant, won visitors' hearts and the "People's Choice Award" at Embracing Our Differences' 11<sup>th</sup> annual outdoor juried art exhibit celebrating diversity. Norton, who lives in Sarasota, received a cash award of \$1,000. His exhibit banner was sponsored by the Swart Family Foundation.

In creating "Bridging the Gap," Norton expresses his conviction that "sometimes our differences can work in our favor if we can recognize them as strengths." In this jubilant work, the artist illustrates how friendship "can transcend race, ethnicity, orientation, age, gender, and even species." Norton's elephant comes to the aid of the mice by stretching himself across a wide river and allowing the mice to cross it by leaping across his spine, and sliding elatedly down his trunk to the other bank. In his artist's statement, Norton writes that if we are open to our differences, "they can no longer be used as a means to separate us, but rather they become something to embrace."

Michael Shelton, executive director of Embracing Our Differences, says that more than 700 people completed the annual exhibit survey, which includes ballots for visitors to choose their favorite artwork. "This award is especially meaningful because it's determined by exhibit goers choosing the artwork that has moved and captivated them the most," he says.

Norton, 30, is an editorial illustrator for various media formats around the country. He received his BFA in illustration from the Savannah College of Art and Design. He says he's thrilled to receive this honor.

"I've been very grateful for all of the exposure and am honored to be supporting such a great cause," says Norton. "Without awareness there can be no progress." (*For more information about Tobias Norton, visit [www.tobynorton.com](http://www.tobynorton.com).*)

For 11 years, "Embracing Our Differences" has drawn on the passion and perception of artists, children and others to create powerful statements of diversity and acceptance in its annual outdoor public art exhibition consisting of 39 billboard-sized works of art and accompanying quotes. This year, the organization received 6,079 total artworks and statements from people representing 52 countries and 44 states. Students from 126 elementary, middle and high schools comprised 60 percent of the submissions. **This year's exhibits, which closed on June 1, saw a record number of visitors, with 293,000 people—or 20,000 more people than last year—who visited one or both exhibits.**

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 2013-2014 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 8,709 K-8 children visiting the 2014 Sarasota exhibits. There are approximately 115 student docents. Total**

**student participation for the 2013-2014 school year was 30,304 (up from 25,464 in 2012-2013) with more than 170,000 students participating since 2004.**

*For more information about this exhibit or Embracing Our Differences, please call 941-404-5710 or visit [www.embracingourdifferences.org](http://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. **For more information, please visit [www.embracingourdifferences.org](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org).**