

ART NEWS: Embracing Our Differences 2016

By [Marty Fugate](#), Herald-Tribune

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Sarah Wertheimer (photo Marty Fugate)

It was a bright spring day and Island Park in downtown Sarasota was filled with vibrant works of art and words of wisdom. Forty five brightly colored, billboard-sized banners fluttered in the gentle breeze. Eloquent visual parables of peace, love and understanding. Multicolored figures unlocking the hate from each others' minds. A detente between Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf. Birds of different feathers making beautiful music together.

These colorful expressions mark the 13th annual [Embracing Our Differences](#) (EOD) outdoor, juried art exhibit. This exhibition celebrates diversity every year with large-scale artwork and inspirational quotations. Sarah Wertheimer, EOD's associate executive director, adds that no two are ever the same.

"Our definition of diversity is very diverse," she laughs. "It's really expanded over time."

Wertheimer notes that the current exhibit still challenges attitudes towards race, gender and ethnicity. But the current artists are also looking at ageism, body image, depression and bullying. "The conversation evolves here as it evolves nationally and globally," she says. "This year, we've received completely new topics and point of view. Seeing the discussion grow is always exciting."

She adds that the scope of the exhibition is also growing. "This year we had a record number of submissions," she says. "We had 8,350 submissions from 104 countries, 44 states and 106 schools. The participants represent a wide range of amateur and professional artists, students and adults."



Chad Glass' "Planting Peace" (Adult Best-in-Show)

Embracing Our Differences extends best-of-show awards and \$1,000 prizes to both adult and student categories. Chad Glass of Canyon Lake, Texas, won in the adult category for "Planting Peace," which re-imagines the iconic flag-raising on Iwo Jima as a group of students raising a patchwork flag of peace. The top student award went to Zach Sherman, a 10th-grade Booker High School student, for his "Ability to Change" — a graphic image of multicolored, Keith Haring-like figures unlocking each other's minds and removing the hate.

Jeffery Cornwell is Sherman's art teacher, and an instructor at Booker High School's VPA program. Work by students in his 10th grade arts class has been consistently



Zach Sherman's "Ability to Change"

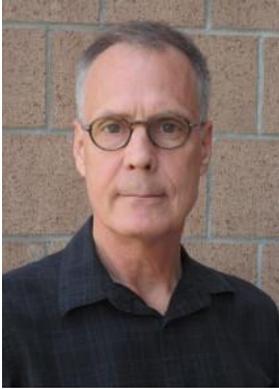
chosen for shows in the past. Sherman is one of two participating in the general exhibit this year, along with Maya Nightsky, whose "Which Will You Follow" shows a young man following his inner compass in a world of mixed messages. Zaine Lodhi also received an honorable mention for "A Mother's Embrace." What's the secret of Cornwell's success?

"Hard work and more hard work," he says. "And it's the students who do the work and deserve all the credit."

Cornwell prepares his students by immersing them in the topic of diversity. "We're using visual art to communicate," he says. "If you know what you're talking about, it'll show in your art." Subject matter aside, he offers gentle criticism of the young artists' technique — and a wealth of art books and clippings showing how to do it right. "I've got some great examples of how to think visually," he says. "I've shown my students classic

posters dating back to Toulouse-Lautrec. I really give them a mini workshop in the history of poster art.”

Cornwell adds that believing in what you're saying makes all the difference. “I really do think this is an important message,” he says. “My students do, too.”



Jeffery Cornwell (courtesy photo)

Wertheimer notes that the outdoor art show marks the culmination of a year-long educational outreach. “We do educator workshops throughout the year,” she says. “We provide the teachers with curriculum materials and conversation starters. If they need more paint and paper, we provide that, too.”

Students enjoy the lessons — and really enjoy the free field trip to EOD’s exhibition. For some, it’s their only field trip for the entire year. Wertheimer notes that about half the students participate in the “Make-a-Day of It,” program. Here, participants start at the Island Park exhibition, and continue to Selby Gardens, Mote Marine, the Van Wezel and other destinations. “So, students might learn about diversity in marine life at Mote Marine, then find out about the complex web of life in the rainforest at Selby Gardens. It’s a full day of diversity education.”

As we speak, a young mother kneels down, giving an impromptu lesson to her two toddlers. She points at the participants of an animal dinner party in Jennifer Hawkins' image. “Do you see the elephant? Do you see the bird?” The kids giggle and respond. She continues to draw them out. Wertheimer smiles.

“Not all our lessons are planned,” she says.

***Embracing Our Differences** is open through May 31 at Island Park in Sarasota. For more information: 404-5710.*

EXHIBIT: Embracing Our Differences runs through May 31 at Island Park, Sarasota; 404-5710.



MARTY FUGATE

Marty Fugate is an area-based critic, screenwriter, science fiction writer, humorist and cartoonist. He was the co-editor / co-publisher of “The Sarasota Arts Review” from 1989 to 2000 and the A&E editor and theater and visual art critic and staff cartoonist for the Observer Group newspapers from 2001 to 2007. He now writes about theater, visual art and architecture for the Sarasota Herald-Tribune. For links to his fiction writing, go to: [Marty Fugate](#). He can be reached by [email](#) Make sure to “[Like](#)” Arts Sarasota on Facebook for news and reviews of the arts.