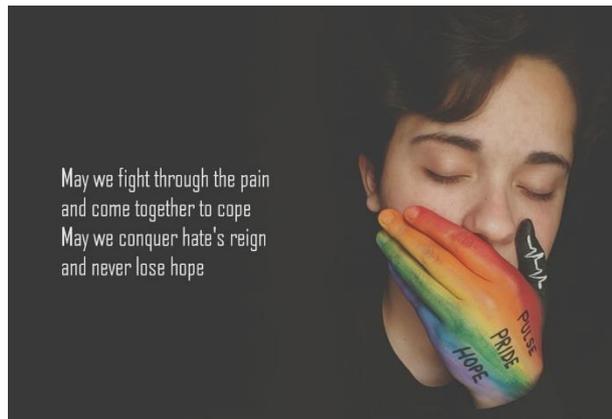


Artists share heartfelt stories in 2017 Embracing Our Differences exhibition.



Dylan Cacador won the Best-in-Show Adult award at the 2017 Embracing Our Differences exhibition for his piece "Pulse, Pride, Hope." Photo provided by Embracing Our Differences



Judith Carlin's "Kindness Matters" in the 2017 Embracing Our Differences exhibition was inspired by her many years caring for her mother through Alzheimer's. Photo provided by Embracing Our Differences.

By Marty Fugate / Correspondent

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Embracing Our Differences is an international juried outdoor exhibition combining billboard-sized artworks with pleas for peace, love and understanding.

This yearly outreach uses art as a tool to promote diversity throughout the year. The 14th annual exhibit runs through May 31 at Island Park in downtown Sarasota with 45 images displayed selected from 11,000 from 115 countries and 48 states. "Enriching lives through diversity" is the theme — and it's more than a slogan. The art is as diverse as the artists who created it. Each has a passionate story to tell.

Here are three of the most moving.

Dylan Caçador is a multimedia creator and a proud member of the LGBT+ community as a transgender male. The Rhode Island-based artist's "Pulse, Pride, Hope," received this year's Best-in-Show Adult award. His heart-rending image is based on a horrific event: Last year's deadly mass shooting at Pulse nightclub, in Orlando.

News of the massacre shook the artist to the core. After a day of silence and mourning, he turned to his art to cope. "Pulse, Pride, Hope" was one of the pieces

he created — his contribution to an online movement which had sprung up after the tragedy.

Caçador's original image was a photograph of himself. He closes his eyes and covers his mouth, as if he's pulling himself together. The artist's hand is painted in rainbow colors, topped with the words, "Pulse, Pride, Hope."

He released this photograph on Instagram. The overwhelming support it received prompted Caçador to seek a wider audience. He revised the image, added a short poem, and then submitted it to this year's exhibition.

When the artist found out about his award, he was deeply touched. When expressions of support and solidarity poured in from around the world, he said, felt like his heart would burst.

"The piece is a tribute to those we'd lost that night," he says. "It's also a reminder to those of us who remain to stick together. We must never lose our pride in our identities, no matter how much backlash we get. We will come back from this. There's still good in this world. We must never abandon hope for a better tomorrow."

Carly Stafford is a senior at Booker High School. Her "Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil" earned a Best-in-Show Student award, selected from 4,232 student submissions.

Her painting depicts three battered women of widely different backgrounds. One covers her ears; one is blindfolded; one has her mouth sealed with duct tape.

Stafford created an ancestor of that image in her sophomore year. She'd noticed that few people want to talk about domestic violence against women. When they did, they often blamed the victim.

"It's a taboo topic for many," she says. "I created the piece to break the taboo, and hopefully open up an honest conversation."

Inspired by the 2017 Women's March on Washington, she decided to submit a new version of the image to this year's exhibition. Stafford revisited the subject, drawing on all the techniques that she'd learned over the past two years. While her skills had improved, the taboos she addresses remains the same.

Stafford's ink-and-watercolor painting doesn't sugarcoat the painful truth. "I used a wet-on-wet technique for the bruises, using colors like yellow, red, purple, and blue to make the wounds look either aged or fresh." The artist then reworked some areas in Photoshop.

Stafford says she's deeply grateful for the award and the exposure, and amazed at the emotional impact her piece has made. "One survivor of domestic violence came up to me," she says. "She said my piece gave her goosebumps. After that, I had goosebumps."

Judith Carlin is a visual artist based in New York City whose art tells stories of the good, the bad and the ugly — and makes a plea for compassion for the whole human race.

Carlin’s “Kindness Matters” is profoundly simple and deeply moving. An energetic, acrylic-and-oil painting of a young woman and an elderly woman, holding hands and exchanging warm smiles.

The inspiration behind the piece? The artist’s mother — a victim of Alzheimer’s. For 17 years, Carlin and her husband cared for her mother and learned about the impact of unkindness firsthand.

“Some of my mother’s friends dropped her,” she says. “They stopped being nice to her — I think out of fear. People get older and sicker — and then they get cut off. It’s part of the cruelty of aging.”

Carlin also saw the value of kindness in action.

“On one of my daily visits to my mother’s nursing home, I gave a Hershey’s bar to another Alzheimer’s patient. She was happy for the rest of the day.”

For Carlin, it was a powerful demonstration of how a simple act of kindness could make someone’s day. And possibly change someone’s life.

To create this painting, the artist studied hundreds of photo references. “In the end, one woman came out looking like my mother and the other looks like me,” she laughs. “It wasn’t deliberate, but that’s what my hands wanted, and that’s what came out.”

A casual viewer might miss that personal connection. But Carlin’s message comes through loud and clear.

“I want to remind people to perform an act of kindness every day,” she says. “It’d have a spectacular impact on our world — and it’s such an easy thing to do. Being mean takes a lot more energy!”

Embracing Our Differences

Continues through May 31, Island Park, Sarasota. More information: 941-404-5710; embracingourdifferences.org.