

## **MEDIA CONTACTS**

Sarah Wertheimer ▪ 941-404-5710 ▪ [sarah@embracingourdifferences.org](mailto:sarah@embracingourdifferences.org)

Su Byron ▪ 941-955-8103 ▪ [subyron@verizon.net](mailto:subyron@verizon.net)

### **Community Foundation of Sarasota County Awards Grant to Embracing Our Differences**

*The \$4,000 grant, issued from the Our Sarasota Fund and the McCauley-Brown Fund, will fund the organization's 2016 Summer Diversity Institute.*

(Sarasota-Manatee FL) The Our Sarasota Fund and the McCauley-Brown Fund of the Community Foundation of Sarasota County awarded Embracing Our Differences a \$4,000 grant in recognition of the organization's outstanding work promoting gender and LGBT equality. The funds will be used by Embracing Our Differences to develop and present a three-day Diversity Institute workshop for area educators in June 2016. Over the course of the workshop, teachers and counselors, representing grades K–12, will explore the importance of creating an inclusive education environment for all students—specifically LGBT students and those who do not conform to gender norms. Community partners, including district representatives, law enforcement officers and counselors, will provide information regarding local resources. EOD's inaugural Diversity Institute, presented in June 2015, attracted more than 50 educators responsible for more than 10,000 students from Sarasota and Manatee counties.

“No community is immune to the devastating effects of bullying, including bullying based upon actual or perceived sexual orientation. Surveys of Sarasota and Manatee county students show that nearly 40 percent of them fear bullying and that

nearly 11 percent have skipped school to avoid it,” says Michael Shelton, executive director of Embracing Our Differences. "This Diversity Institute is designed to provide local educators with the support they need when they encounter such incidents. It will also give them the resources necessary to create a safe environment in which students can develop a healthy respect for diversity and inclusion.”

Shelton adds that Embracing Our Differences partnered with the curriculum and instruction department of the Sarasota County school district and nationally recognized educators from the Anti-Defamation League and Facing History and Ourselves to create the inaugural workshop in 2015.

“We’re honored to be awarded this significant grant,” says Shelton. "The late Dick McCauley and Clayton Brown were personal friends and shared Embracing Our Difference's belief that everyone deserves an environment in which they can thrive and achieve their full potential regardless of their gender, sexual orientation, color, religion or background. We're grateful to the Community Foundation of Sarasota County and to the founders of these funds for their commitment to providing educators with the resources necessary to create a safe environment for students to appreciate that a healthy respect for diversity and inclusion is not only a way of thinking but, most importantly, of acting."

The Our Sarasota Fund is a charitable group focused on assisting local non-profit organizations that offer programs that improve the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

For 12 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. In 2015, the organization received nearly 6,500 total artworks and statements from people representing 42 states and 80 countries, including Australia, Portugal, Haiti, Israel, Iran, Kuwait, Canada and Italy. Students from 118 elementary, middle and high schools submitted both art and quotes. This year's exhibits at Island Park in Sarasota and Riverwalk in Bradenton, both of which closed on May 22, were attended by 271,000 people. A total of 2.1 million people have visited the exhibit since its inception in 2004.

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 Florida Studio Theatre and nationally recognized educators. These are designed to tackle the abstract topic of diversity by teaching students to express themselves through critical thinking and creative writing. Since 2004, 993 teachers have participated.
  - **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. **In 2015, the 37 participating art**

**teachers were collectively responsible for more than 12,000 students from Sarasota and Manatee counties.**

- **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.
- **Embrace Courage: Bully Prevention in Schools:** A three-day workshop designed to give area educators the skills and tools they need to take a stand against bullying on and off campus. **Over 50 area educators participated in the recent inaugural edition of the workshop.**
- 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 Laboratory, Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, The Ringling, Sarasota Film Festival, and Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. **13,320 students participated during the 2015 school year.**
- **Coexistence Clubs**, via partnerships with Riverview, Booker and North Port high schools, provide student-led docent tours of the annual exhibit. **Student docent tours were provided to 7,706 K-8 children visiting the 2015 exhibits. There are approximately 115 student docents.**

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

### **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 transformational power of the arts to educate and inspire to create a better world. **Information:**  
**[www.embracingourdifferences.org](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org); 941-404-5710.**

### **About the Community Foundation of Sarasota County**

The Community Foundation of Sarasota County is a public charity founded in 1979 by the Southwest Florida Estate Planning Council as a resource for caring individuals and the causes they support, enabling them to make a charitable impact on the community. With assets of over \$273 million in more than 1,200 charitable funds, the Community Foundation awarded grants and scholarships totaling \$19.3 million dollars last year in the areas of education, the arts, health and human services, civic engagement, animal welfare and the environment. ***For more information, visit [www.CFSarasota.org](http://www.CFSarasota.org).***