

MEDIA CONTACTS

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Gulf Coast Community Foundation

Awards Major Grant to Embracing Our Differences

The \$40,000 grant will help fund the organization's 2017 exhibition season, which runs April 1-May 31, in Sarasota's Island Park. It will also be directed to empower EOD's educational outreach programs and initiatives

(Sarasota, FL) Gulf Coast Community Foundation recently awarded Embracing Our Differences a \$40,000 grant to help fund its 2017 exhibition season, which runs April 1 through May 31, 2017, in Sarasota's Island Park. The grant will also be directed to empower EOD's annual educational outreach programs and initiatives.

Gulf Coast has invested grants in the arts since the foundation's inception. Over the years, several exceptional arts organizations have consistently earned support from Gulf Coast and its donors due to the vital roles they play in the region's cultural community. In 2014, Gulf Coast's board of directors adopted a new, more flexible approach to funding these groups in pursuit of their artistic missions. Gulf Coast's Arts Appreciation Grants offer unrestricted funding to cornerstone arts organizations to use as they best see fit. The streamlined application and reporting process enables the foundation's partners to keep their focus on what they do best.

"It's a great honor to be awarded this major grant for a third year," says Michael Shelton, executive director of Embracing Our Differences. "This opens up a world of

possibilities for thousands of area students and educators to play a leadership role in transforming lives and building stronger communities.”

Shelton notes that a portion of the grant will be directed to Embracing Our Differences' annual teacher workshops and retreats, which provide area educators with skills, strategies and resources relating to arts appreciation, character building and diversity education.

“Since 2004, more than 1,000 area educators have participated in our workshops,” says Shelton. “We’re teaching concrete strategies to inspire students to reject destructive attitudes and embrace the full potential of inclusion and diversity. For both educators and students, this new awareness can be life-changing.”

Shelton says that the grant will also provide vital resources for EOD’s Make-A-Day-of-It! program, which funds free bus transportation for thousands of students and teachers to visit the outdoor exhibits and other arts and cultural venues.

With more than 780 teachers and 37,000 students participating in EOD’s exhibit and educational programs in 2016 alone, Embracing Our Differences continues to lead as one of the largest education programs in southwest Florida.

Since 2004, Embracing Our Differences’ annual juried art exhibit has graced downtown Sarasota's bayfront with billboard-sized images created by artists, writers and students from around the world reflecting their interpretation of the message, “enriching lives through diversity.” These 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' educator workshops will be presented throughout the 2016-2017 school year for an

anticipated 200 teachers who are responsible for 20,000 students. These programs and initiatives include:

- **Mastering the Art of the Quote Workshops:** This workshop is designed to take the difficult topics of diversity, prejudice and inclusion and teach students to express themselves through critical thinking and creative writing. Presented in partnership with Florida Studio Theatre, the workshop fulfills a critical need of providing teachers with creative resources to meet Florida's Language Arts Standards.
- **Art Teacher Retreat:** This two-day seminar, developed in partnership with Ringling College of Art and Design, is designed to reinvigorate educators' teaching practices while offering new skills and strategies for inspiring students to explore the abstract concepts of prejudice, diversity and inclusion. Substitute teachers are provided for participating educators. **In 2016, the 30 participating art teachers were collectively responsible for more than 9,000 students from Sarasota and Manatee counties.**
- **Lesson Plans Workshops:** Designed to deliver new and innovative methods of engaging students in critical thinking while creating the perfect environment for a rich discussion of the value of diversity and inclusion, all lesson plans identify the relevant curriculum standards, educational objectives, materials needed, activities, step-by-step instructional strategies and assessment guidelines.
 - **Summer Diversity Institute:** This three-day annual workshop provides information and support for the creation of a respectful and civil classroom culture, while offering tools and structures for educators to use with students in their classrooms and on the school campus. Participants work individually and in small groups based upon grade level, as well as school location, to create lesson plans and action plans that will be used within each school to provide support to both students and faculty. More than 65 Sarasota school guidance counselors, psychologists and sociologists participated in a recent condensed

version of the workshop, organized out of popular demand by area school administrators. **48 participants from 11 schools took part in the 2016 workshop.**

Other programs include:

- 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. **12,469 students participated during the 2016 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 6,820 K-8 children visiting the 2016 exhibit. There are approximately 145 student docents.**

For more information about this exhibit or Embracing Our Differences, please call 941-404-5710 or visit www.embracingourdifferences.org.

About Gulf Coast Community Foundation

Together with its donors, Gulf Coast Community Foundation transforms our region through bold and proactive philanthropy. Gulf Coast is a public charity that was created in 1995 through the sale of the Venice Hospital. Since then, it has become the philanthropic home of more than 650 families who have established charitable funds there and has invested more than \$234 million in grants in the areas of health and human services, education, civic and economic development, arts and culture, and the environment. Learn more at GulfCoastCF.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 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.