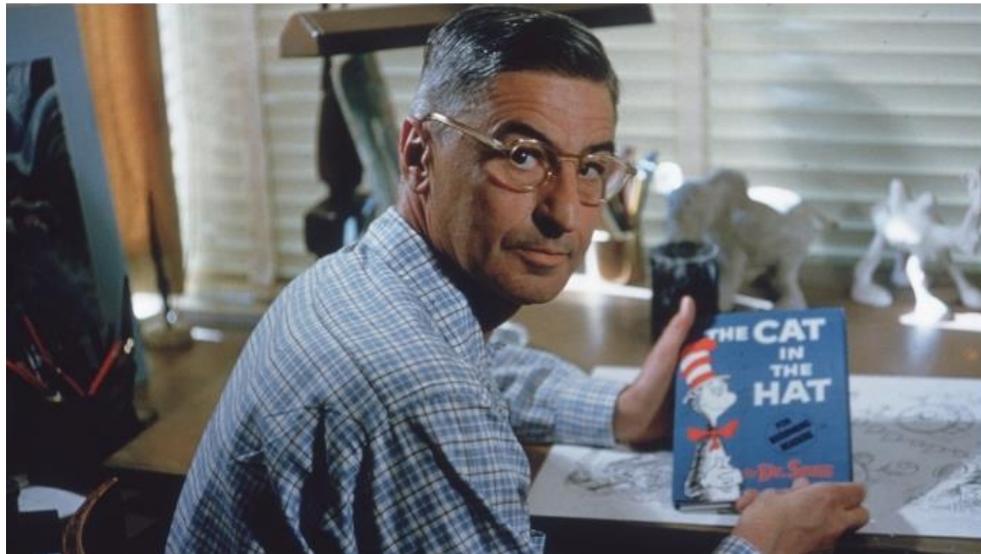


ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT WEDNESDAY, MAR. 2, 2016 4 hours ago

## Embracing Dr. Seuss' Differences



A local outreach is using a beloved author to get kids reading — and thinking.

by: **Marty Fugate** Staff Writer

America celebrated Dr. Seuss' 113th birthday with a National Education Association-sponsored nationwide day of reading on March 2. Our area was part of it. At schools throughout Sarasota and Manatee counties, local students gasped at the fate of the prejudicial Sneetches, cheered the Lorax' quest to save the planet and contemplated the collateral damage of the Butter Battle. They were learning to read — and also learning what Dr. Seuss (a.k.a. Ted Geisel) had to say about peace, love and understanding.



## Dr. Seuss

That's the thinking behind the annual Embracing Dr. Seuss' Differences Day. Brenna Wilhm is the education director for Embracing Our Differences, the organization that started this initiative three years ago. She notes that this year's Seussian celebration marks the first year they're partnering with the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, a joint effort supported by The Patterson Foundation, the Community Foundation of Sarasota County and the United Way of Manatee County. Wilhm adds that, thanks to this collaboration, Embracing Dr. Seuss' Differences Day has expanded to an ambitious, two-county scale.

"This year's celebration had over 300 volunteers," she says. "They read to over 6,300 pre-kindergarten to fifth grade students in 337 classrooms in 38 area elementary schools. Thanks to the generous support of the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, we also distributed over 1,500 Dr. Seuss books to individual students in Title 1 schools."

The goal? Have the students read the books at home. Even better — have their parents read to them.

Beth Duda is the lead consultant for The Patterson Foundation and the director of the Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading.



Reading volunteer Jenny Aldrich

“Reading aloud is the single most important activity leading to language development and the strongest predictor of reading success,” she says. According to Duda, this local campaign is part of a nationwide movement working to help all kids read on grade level by the end of third grade. “It’s aimed at all children — especially those from low-income families,” she adds. “We address the most common issues and obstacles that impact a child’s ability to read.”

Finding fun books to read is a great way to demolish those obstacles. Dr. Seuss’ books fit the bill. According to Wilhm, his lighthearted books contained some heavy truths without ever turning preachy.

“Dr. Seuss was into diversity and embracing differences before there was really a name for it,” she says. “He was ahead of his time when he wrote these books. Even today, he’s still in a class by himself. His rhymes and delightful drawings make his ideas fun.”

## IF YOU GO:

**2016 Embracing Our Differences Exhibit.** This international, juried, outdoor exhibit promotes diversity with large-scale artworks and pithy messages. March 30-May 31 at Island Park, Sarasota; 404-5710; [www.embracingourdifferences.org](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org)

Wilhm adds that fun is always a big takeaway from Dr. Seuss’ birthday bash. She shares some responses from previous volunteers as proof.

Amanda Smoot writes, “I had a delightful time with Ms. Umstead’s third-grade class at Gulf Gate School this morning. The kids were very attentive and we had good discussion about the Lorax. I felt very welcomed, and the teacher was delighted to be able to keep the book.”

Joan Lowery shares that, “The class that I read for at the Gocio School was so receptive and happy. I loved working with them.”

“That’s only scratching the surface,” says Wilhm. “You expect kids to have fun, but it’s amazing how much our volunteers enjoy it.” She adds that a Dr. Seuss reading is never a passive experience. “His books always jump-start some amazing conversations with the kids,” she says. “Many of these students will be visiting this year’s Embracing Our Differences outdoor art exhibit when it returns to Island Park this spring. We hope to keep the conversation going.”