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Embracing Our Difference receives latest grant

by: [Ryan Butler](#) News Innovation Editor

Behind its annual [downtown artwork display](#), Sarasota nonprofit Embracing Our Difference has become a fixture of the community. After another year of grant distributions, it has also become a staple in the state's art funding budget.

For the 12th time in its 14-year history, Embracing Our Difference has received a grant from the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs. The Sarasota-based arts education program will use the funds to further outreach to nearly 50,000 area students. This year's \$20,016 contribution will also help finance its [artwork displays in Island Park](#) next spring.

"This makes all the difference in the world for us," said Executive Director Michael Shelton.

The program works directly with the local education officials to cater its outreach programs to Florida's education standards. It supplements in-class learning

with field trips to many of the region's top arts, cultural and research facilities, including the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens and the Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium.

Embracing Our Difference is perhaps best known for its annual springtime outdoor exhibit of 45 billboard-sized images that celebrate diversity and acceptance. The exhibits have attracted more than 2.5 million visitors since the program's inception 14 years ago and helps students through artistic expression, tackling issues like abuse, depression and racism.

For more than a decade, it has been aided in part by the Division of Cultural Affairs, which contributes about 3% of Embracing Our Differences's budget annually. The nonprofit competes annually with more than 500 other Florida art organizations for funding, submitting applications that are ranked by a panel of artists. Embracing Our Difference has become one of the top organizations for funding in the state during the past few years, ranking among the top 10% of applicants.

Shelton said the Division of Cultural Affairs, which was created by the Florida Legislature to promote artistic and cultural endeavors across the state, has viewed Embracing Our Difference as a key contributor in its mission. Shelton added that his group also understands how important the grant is to fulfill its goals.

"It's a very meaningful grant to us," Shelton said. "It's something we've come to rely upon."