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Embracing Our Differences Brings Nationally Acclaimed Anti-Bullying Music Tour to Sarasota County Schools May 18-21

Artists from "X-Factor" and "The Voice" will perform at six free concerts.

(Sarasota, FL) The Sarasota-based Embracing Our Differences will take a stand against bullying by partnering with the Allstar Nation Tour (ANT) in six free concert assemblies for students from eight Sarasota County schools, May 18-21. The Allstar Nation Tour delivers powerful, anti-bullying messages to students across the nation through concert assemblies that feature popular musical artists. Some of the artists have appeared on top entertainment shows like *The Voice* and *X-Factor*. Between songs, performers speak out against bullying, share personal experiences, and discuss prevention methods.

Former *X-Factor* Top 6 finalist **Drew Ryniewicz**, *The Voice* contestant **Branden Mendoza**, Canadian pop sensation **Nic Neufeld**, and **Lauren Carnahan**, Indie Music Channel's "Best New Teen Artist" of 2014, are a few of the artists scheduled to perform in North Port and Sarasota for students from North Port High School, Heron Creek Middle School, McIntosh Middle School, Sarasota School of Arts and Sciences, Gulfgate Elementary, Ashton Elementary, Sarasota Military Academy Prep School and

Riverview High School. The concerts will be held at the performing arts centers at North Port High School, 6400 West Price Blvd., North Port; Heron Creek Middle School, 6501 West Price Blvd., North Port; and at Riverview High School, 1 Ram Way, Sarasota (**See *schedule attached***).

According to the latest Florida Department of Education report on school safety and discipline, more than 4,300 total incidents of bullying in Florida schools was reported with more than 4,700 threats, 1,700 harassment, and 1,700 sexual harassment incidents claimed.

In-school bullying is of increasing focus at Florida schools and districts. In 2008, the Florida Department of Education (FDOE) required each school district to create a policy prohibiting bullying. Each school district creates its own policy based on the FDOE guide. Statute 1006.147, also known as The Jeffrey Johnston Stand Up for All Students Act, requires school districts to adopt an official policy prohibiting bullying and harassment of students and staff on school grounds, at school-sponsored events, and through school computer networks.

"These concerts deliver a powerful anti-bullying message that resonates with young audiences," says Paul Gallagher, assistant principal of Riverview High School and Embracing Our Differences' education consultant. "Kids need to hear it--now more than ever. Bullying, especially cyber-bullying, is on the rise across America. It's time to turn that around with events like this. Every child should feel valued, respected and safe."

Tour founder and manager Dillon Smith agrees with Gallagher. "Bullying affects nearly one in three American schoolchildren in grades six through 10 and it is a major factor in teen suicide and shootings," says Smith. "Six out of 10 teenagers say they

witness bullying in schools once a day and it is estimated that 160,000 students miss school every day due to fear attack or intimidation by other students. It's a phenomenon that needs to be addressed more aggressively."

Inspired by research supporting the powerful effect of music on memory, mood and behavior, Smith launched his tour and schools across the nation are requesting concerts. "One of the artists had just finished his performance and speech when a young girl approached him, handed him a razor blade and said, 'I was going to cut myself with this tonight and your story really changed my life,'" says Smith. The tour travels with its own sound system and a truck festooned with banners and lights to provide a full-out concert experience. Smith adds that students are invited to meet the artists after the concert.

The scheduled lineup for the Sarasota leg of the tour includes former *The Voice* contestant Branden Mendoza, who goes by the stage name "My Only Escape," former *X-Factor* standout and top 6 finalist Drew Ryniewicz; Canadian pop sensation, 13-year-old Nic Nuefeld; and 18-year-old pop singer, songwriter and musician Lauren Carnahan, who was named Indie Music Channel's 2014 "Best New Teen Artist of the Year."

"This event works perfectly with Embracing Our Differences' mission to use the transformative power of the arts to educate and inspire to create a better world," says Gallagher, who adds that EOD will provide the funds to transport students to the concerts free of charge.

Since 2004, downtown Sarasota's Island Park has been the backdrop for Embracing Our Differences' colorful, larger-than-life canvases integrating powerful imagery and thought-provoking messages celebrating diversity. The scale and impact of this outdoor exhibition has continued to grow since its inception. In 2013,

the organization marked its tenth anniversary with an expansion of the exhibit to Riverwalk in downtown Bradenton. The annual outdoor exhibits are the heart of a year-round program of activities designed to use the arts as a catalyst to create awareness and promote diversity. **The 2015 exhibition runs through May 22 at Island Park and at Riverwalk.**

For more information about Embracing Our Differences, call 941-404-5710 or visit www.embracingourdifferences.org. For more information about the Allstar Nation Tour, visit www.allstarnationtour.com or call 713-562-1708.

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. **www.embracingourdifferences.org; 941-404-5710.**

About Allstar Nation Tour

The Allstar Nation Tour is a free national anti-bullying school concert assembly featuring nationally recognized recording artists who perform and speak out against bullying. Based in Houston, the tour's main message is "Support, Report, and Defend!" with the mission to educate and empower students to support one another, report when a bullying incident occurs, and defend against bullying. Performances are free to schools. The Allstar Nation Tour launched in August 2014. Since then, the tour has visited hundreds of schools in Michigan, Texas, Wisconsin, Florida, and Oklahoma performing and speaking to more than 75,000 middle and high school students, faculty, and community members.