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Embracing Our Differences Announces Winners for 2015 Outdoor Art Exhibit

*Twenty area residents are among the 82 winners whose artwork and inspirational quotes were selected to participate in the 12th-annual outdoor art exhibit celebrating diversity. More than 6,400 entries were submitted by individuals from 80 countries and 42 states. **The Best-in-Show Adult winner for art is Ahmed Sami of Kuwait City, Kuwait. Jasmin Maldonado, a student at Louise R Johnson Middle School in Bradenton, won Best-in-Show inspirational quote.** This year's exhibits will be on display March 29-May 31 in Sarasota's Island Park and Bradenton's Riverwalk.*

(Sarasota, FL) For 11 years, Embracing Our Differences (EOD) has drawn on the passion and perception of artists, children and others to create powerful statements of inclusion and acceptance in its annual outdoor public art exhibitions consisting of 39 billboard-sized works of art, each accompanied by an inspirational quote. The response to this year's call for artwork and inspirational quotes was strong, with more than 6,400 entries pouring in from 80 countries and 42 states. Students from 118 schools around the world submitted artwork or quotes; 40 of this year's winners were students. **The winning quotes and art will be showcased in the 12th-anniversary exhibits, March 29 to May 31, in Sarasota's Island Park and Bradenton's Riverwalk.** *For more information about this exhibit or Embracing Our*

*Differences, call 941-404-5710 or visit www.embracingourdifferences.org. **A fact sheet is attached.***

“Our art selection committee spent two weeks reviewing thousands of submissions from around the world,” says Michael Shelton, executive director of Embracing Our Differences. “We were inspired by the high quality, heartfelt conviction--and by the large amount of submissions we received from outside of the United States. Each contributor made a statement to be part of the solution and to do his or her best to promote respect, acceptance and understanding. We can take heart that there are many people who share this point of view.”

According to Shelton, the first criterion in judging the submission is by the underlying concept or idea each represents. “We believe *all* people should feel safe, be empowered and make a difference,” he says. “That’s our guiding philosophy. We select the quotes and artworks that best reflect that conviction.” Shelton adds that winning artwork is also judged on how effectively its message can be read when enlarged to billboard size. Awards are given for "Best-in-Show Adult," "Best-in-Show Student," and "People's Choice" categories, with the last chosen by visitors to the exhibit. Adult winners each receive \$1,000; students receive \$1,000 to be directed to their school’s art program.

2015 ART WINNERS

The **Best-in-Show Adult** winner for art is **Ahmed Sami** of Kuwait City, Kuwait, for his work entitled, "**Encourage Me**," a close-up of the face of a downtrodden young boy, a portrait of sorrow and rejection. Sami explains that the image of the boy is modeled after one of the thousands of "lost children roaming the

streets of São Paulo." The boy's name was Roney and Sami writes that "Roney's cold-blooded murder happened on the early morning hours of January 15. May he find peace wherever his journey has taken him." The artist explains that the title of his piece comes from a quote by the American actress, Celeste Holms: "We live by encouragement and die without it - slowly, sadly, angrily." In addition to the honor, Sami will receive a \$1,000 cash award.

Mackenzie Reiss, an 8th-grade student at Venice Middle School, was selected to receive **Best-in-Show Student** award for her stunning work, "A Duet Is Often Better Than A Solo," depicting an electric guitar lying next to a viola beneath a starry sky. Reiss's artist's statement declares: "We may sound completely different, but together we can create beautiful music. To me, this mean that just because you look different, it doesn't mean that you can't do well together." Reiss's teacher is Lisa Jodwalis. Venice Middle School will be awarded a \$1,000 cash prize to be used in its art programs.

In addition to these winners, three people won honorable mentions in the artwork category: **Ben Herskowitz**, of Ma'ale Adumim, Israel, won for his work, "Fire and Ice." **Zahra Khadem Shariat** of Tehran, Iran, won for her work, "Be Different and Change Your Life." **Kadin Brock and Ryan Trimper** of Venice High School won for their work, "We Are Beautiful."

A "People's Choice Award" will be selected by visitors to the Island Park and Riverwalk exhibits and announced in late May. Any visitor who participates in an EOD survey can vote for this award. The winning adult artist will receive a \$1,000

cash award; if a student wins, his or her school art department will receive the \$1,000 cash award.

2015 QUOTE WINNER

Winning quotes in the 2015 exhibition include, **“Don’t judge my choices without understanding my reasons”** (Emily Casey, a student at North Port High School); and **“When will the road to equality be the road most traveled?”** (Irene Nicola). The award for **Best-in-Show** inspirational quote was given to **Jasmin Maldonado**, a student at Louise R Johnson Middle School in Bradenton for her quote: **“When you judge me you show the person that you are, not the person that I am.”** Maldonado’s school will receive \$1,000 for its art department or creative writing department.

Shelton explains that the statements accompanying each artwork are vital. “Each shows insight into our common humanity—and the differences that make us human,” he says. “We’re always moved by heartfelt thought, creativity, wit and compassion the quotes represent. In the end, we choose the ones that best complement the artwork.”

According to Embracing Our Differences founding co-chairman, Dennis McGillicuddy, “These exhibits connect the dots between artistic experience and the realities of bullying, prejudice and injustice. People, even as young as 12, tell me they feel deeply moved and inspired to be a force for change.” He adds that the combined attendance at both venues for 2014 clocked in at 293,000 people, including more than 25,000 students. “Enhancing the resources we provide to area teachers remains our top priority,” he says.

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 the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and Florida Studio Theatre. These are designed to tackle the abstract topic of diversity by teaching students to express themselves through critical thinking and creative writing. **Collectively, the 105 teachers participating in 2014 were responsible for more than 15,000 students from Sarasota and Manatee counties.**
 - **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. **Last year, 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.
 - **New this year! The Summer Diversity Institute:** June 2015 marks the debut of this three-day retreat designed to provide educators with the skills and resources needed to foster a healthy respect for

diversity in their students, and to teach the importance of safely standing up to bullying and discrimination.

- 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 Aquarium, The Ringling, and Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. **Nearly 14,000 students participated during the 2014 school year.**
- A **docent program** that, via partnerships with Riverview, Southeast and North Port high schools, provides student-led docent tours of the annual exhibit. **Student docent tours were provided to 8,709 K-8 children visiting the 2014 exhibits. There are approximately 200 student docents.**

For more information about this exhibit or Embracing Our Differences, please call 941-404-5710 visit www.embracingourdifferences.org. To view the 2014 annual report, visit <http://embracingourdifferences.org/pdfs/2014-Annual-Report-Insert>.

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. *For more information, visit www.embracingourdifferences.org.*