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To interview local students and teachers whose artwork and quotes are included in this exhibit, please email your request to subyron@verizon.net.

12th Annual Embracing Our Differences Exhibit Opens March 29

This year's exhibits will be on display March 29-May 22 in Sarasota's Island Park and at Bradenton's Riverwalk.

(Sarasota, FL) Embracing Our Differences, the annual outdoor art exhibit celebrating diversity, returns to Sarasota's Island Park and Bradenton's Riverwalk, March 29-May 22. Since its inaugural exhibit in 2004, Embracing Our Differences has become one of the area's most visible and widely anticipated events, with hundreds of thousands of visitors flocking annually to see the 39 colorful, billboard-sized images created by artists, writers and students from around the world reflecting on the theme of "enriching lives through diversity." *For more information about Embracing Our Differences, call 941-404-5710, or visit www.embracingourdifferences.org.*

In the past few years, Embracing Our Differences' annual exhibit has experienced phenomenal growth and last year was no exception. According to Michael Shelton, executive director of Embracing Our Differences, more than 290,000 people visited the Sarasota and Bradenton exhibits in 2014.

"We're excited to see how phenomenally this exhibit has grown in stature and attendance over the past few years," he says. "It's been enormously gratifying to receive the positive feedback we get from our audiences, including from hundreds of area teachers and students who look forward to participating every year."

Shelton adds that a record number of submissions were received this year. The organization received more than 6,400 total artworks and statements from people from 80 countries, including Australia, Portugal, Haiti, Israel, Iran, Kuwait, Canada and Italy. Students from 118 elementary, middle and high schools submitted both art and quotes.

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.

The **Best-in-Show Adult** winner for art was **Ahmed Sami** of Kuwait City, Kuwait, for his work entitled, "**Encourage Me.**" The **Best-in-Show Student** award went to **Mackenzie Reiss**, a student at Venice Middle School, who won for her stunning work, "**A Duet is Better Than A Solo,**" Reiss's teacher is Lisa Jodwalis.

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.”**

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.”

Area residents, especially students, fared well in the competition. Artwork and quotes from students from 23 schools in Sarasota, Manatee and Charlotte counties were chosen for the exhibit. In all, entries from 19 area artists and 30 area-based quote writers were chosen.

Embracing Our Differences’ 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. **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.**

- o **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.**
- o **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.
- o **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, Marie Selby Botanical Gardens, Van Wezel, Sarasota Film Festival, Mote Marine Aquarium and Ringling Museum. **Nearly 14,000 students participated during the 2014 school year.**
- A **docent program** that, via partnerships with Riverview, Booker 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 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.