

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## **Embracing Our Differences Receives The President's Volunteer Service Award**

*The award, which recognizes individuals and groups for their sustained commitment to volunteerism and civic engagement, was presented on behalf of President Barack Obama by members of the Martin Luther King Celebration Committee of Sarasota.*

(Sarasota-Manatee, Florida) Embracing Our Differences (EOD) has been honored with The President's Volunteer Service Award, one of the highest federal recognitions an organization can receive, for its ongoing commitment to volunteerism and civic engagement. The award was issued on behalf of President Barack Obama and presented by Che Barnett and Jetson Grimes, both members of the Martin Luther King Celebration Committee of Sarasota, an initiative facilitated by the Greater Newtown Community Redevelopment Corporation. The award acknowledges Embracing Our Differences' sustained commitment to civic participation and engaging volunteerism in the service of promoting diversity.

“Embracing Our Differences is renowned for its vital outreach work throughout our community,” says Che Barnett, executive director of the Greater Newtown Community Redevelopment Corporation. “The group empowers thousands of individuals, including students and teachers, to embrace diversity and promote tolerance and understanding

though art and education. Through these important programs, Embracing Our Differences helps create a vibrant community that is safe and inclusive for all.” <I need to vet this with Che so open to changes.>

The President’s Volunteer Service Award is issued by Points of Light Institute and the Corporation for National and Community Service on behalf of the President of the United States to recognize the best in American spirit, and to encourage all Americans to improve their communities through volunteer service, and civic participation. The Award is given to individuals, families, and groups that have demonstrated outstanding volunteer service and civic participation over the course of a 12-month period. *For more information about the President’s Volunteer Service Award, visit [www.presidentialserviceawards.gov](http://www.presidentialserviceawards.gov).*

“We’re deeply moved to be honored with this recognition,” says Michael Shelton, executive director of Embracing Our Differences. “We’re all in this together. We all share a deep commitment to the human family—both at home and across the globe.”

For 11 years, “Embracing Our Differences” has drawn on the passion and perception of artists, children and others to create powerful statements of diversity and acceptance in its annual outdoor public art exhibition consisting of 39 billboard-sized works of art and accompanying quotes. This year, the organization received 6,079 total artworks and statements from people representing 52 countries and 44 states. Students from 126 elementary, middle and high schools comprised 60 percent of the submissions. **This year’s exhibits, which closed on June 1, saw a record number of visitors, with 293,000 people—or 20,000 more people than last year—who visited one or both exhibits.**

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 2013 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. **Participating art teachers were collectively responsible for more than 12,000 Sarasota and Manatee county students.**
  - **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.
- 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 and Ringling Museum. **More than 13,000 students participated during the 2013-2014 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 Sarasota exhibits. There are approximately 115 student docents. Total student participation for the 2013-2014 school year was 30,304 (up from 25,464 in 2012-2013) with more than 170,000 students participating since 2004.**

*For more information about this exhibit or Embracing Our Differences, please call 941-404-5710 or visit [www.embracingourdifferences.org](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org). **To view the 2013 annual report, visit <http://embracingourdifferences.org/pdfs/2013report%20low.pdf>.***

### **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. **For more information, please visit [www.embracingourdifferences.org](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org).**

**Photo Caption:** ***Dennis J. McGillicuddy** (founding co-chairman and board president of Embracing Our Differences), **Che Barnett** (executive director of the Greater Newtown Community Redevelopment Corporation), **Jetson Grimes** (president of the Greater Newtown Community Redevelopment Corporation) and **Michael Shelton** (executive director of Embracing Our Differences); photo by Brenna Wilhm.*