

## Embracing Our Differences Selected as Finalist for Two Prestigious WEDU Awards



*Embracing Our Differences was selected as a finalist for WEDU's coveted Nonprofit Organization of the Year award. The organization also received a nomination for WEDU's "Be More Knowledgeable" award for its long-running high school Coexistence Club and docent program.*

(Sarasota/Manatee) Embracing Our Differences was recently selected as a finalist for WEDU's prestigious Nonprofit Organization of the Year award. It is the only nonprofit in the Sarasota-Manatee region to receive this recognition. The other finalists include Glazer Children's Museum of Tampa, Seniors in Service of Tampa Bay, Inc., Tampa Hillsborough Action Plan, Inc., and the Youth and Family Services Alternatives –

Heart Gallery of Tampa Bay. The organization also received a nomination for WEDU's "Be More Knowledgeable" award for its long-running high school Coexistence Club and docent program. This award acknowledges cultural organizations that offer a mentorship program aimed at improving specific aspects of community life. Winners will be announced at a luncheon on February 23 in Tampa.

"The mission of Embracing Our Differences is to use the transformational power of the arts to educate and inspire to create a better world," says Sarah Wertheimer, associate executive director of EOD. "We're deeply honored that WEDU recognizes our commitment to creating a vibrant community that is safe and inclusive for all."

Wertheimer explains that EOD's Coexistence club's student docent program was started in 2009 as a way to create a more meaningful and inspiring experience for young visitors to Embracing Our Differences' annual outdoor exhibit in downtown Sarasota. Student docents work in the parks daily, showing groups of youngsters how to recognize the messages conveyed through the art on display. With guided questions and planted seeds of inquiry, the docents allow the exhibit's young visitors make realizations of their own about diversity and the acceptance of others. According to Wertheimer, the program has grown exponentially over the years. "We started with 12 docents in 2009," she says. "Last year, we had 145 docents who took over 6,800 students on docent-led tours of the exhibit."

Since 2004, Embracing Our Differences' annual juried art exhibit has graced downtown Sarasota's bayfront with billboard-sized images created by artists, writers and students from around the world reflecting their interpretation of the message, "enriching lives through diversity." These exhibits are the heart of a year-round program of activities designed to use art as a catalyst to create awareness and promote diversity. **The 2017 exhibition season runs April 1 through May 31, in Sarasota's Island Park.**

Aside from the annual outdoor exhibition, Embracing Our Differences' educator workshops will be presented throughout the 2017 school year for an anticipated 200 teachers who are responsible for 20,000 students. These programs and initiatives include:

**Mastering the Art of the Quote Workshops:** This workshop is designed to take the difficult topics of diversity, prejudice and inclusion and teach students to express themselves through critical thinking and creative writing. Presented in partnership with Florida Studio Theatre, the workshop fulfills a critical need of providing teachers with creative resources to meet Florida's Language Arts Standards.

**Art Teacher Retreat:** This two-day seminar, developed in partnership with Ringling College of Art and Design, is designed to reinvigorate educators' teaching practices while offering new skills and

strategies for inspiring students to explore the abstract concepts of prejudice, diversity and inclusion. Substitute teachers are provided for participating educators. **In 2016, the 30 participating art teachers were collectively responsible for more than 9,000 students from Sarasota and Manatee counties.**

**Lesson Plans Workshops:** Designed to deliver new and innovative methods of engaging students in critical thinking while creating the perfect environment for a rich discussion of the value of diversity and inclusion, all lesson plans identify the relevant curriculum standards, educational objectives, materials needed, activities, step-by-step instructional strategies and assessment guidelines.

**Summer Diversity Institute:** This three-day annual workshop provides information and support for the creation of a respectful and civil classroom culture, while offering tools and structures for educators and guidance counselors to use with students in their classrooms and on the school campus. Participants work individually and in small groups based upon grade level, as well as school location, to create lesson plans and action plans that will be used within each school to provide support to both students and faculty. **48 participants from 11 schools took part in the 2016 workshop.**

**Other programs include:**

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 Laboratory, Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, The Ringling, Sarasota Film Festival, and Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. **12,469 students participated during the 2016 school year.**

**Coexistence Clubs**, via partnerships with Riverview, Booker and North Port high schools, provide student-led docent tours of the annual exhibit. **Student docent tours were provided to 6,820 K-8 children visiting the 2016 exhibit. There are approximately 145 student docents.**

*For more information about Embracing Our Differences, please call 941-404-5710 or visit [www.embracingourdifferences.org](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org).*

**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](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org).*

**ABOUT WEDU PBS**

WEDU is West Central Florida’s leading PBS station and public media company reaching 16 counties through media platforms including on-air programming and online experiences that broaden horizons, transport and transform and open gateways to new ideas and new worlds. Financially supported by the community, the organization offers a wealth of award-winning inspirational, educational and enlightening content over a variety of media platforms including: television programming, station’s website, [wedu.org](http://wedu.org) and various social media platforms, monthly member magazine Premiere, educational outreach activities and a myriad of special events. WEDU’s focus on the local community has resulted in the station being regarded as a beacon of trust for men, women and children of every walk of life no matter their age, ethnicity or socio-economic status. WEDU is a treasured community resource; a window to the world for the homebound and a vital educational source for the youngest members of society. WEDU prides itself on its position in the Tampa Bay community as a leader, partner, informed citizen and a member of PBS, the most trusted institution in America (Harris Interactive Trust QuickQuery, January 2013). *For more information, program schedules or to support WEDU visit [wedu.org](http://wedu.org); WEDU Public Media on Facebook and Twitter or call 813-254-9338.*