



ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT WEDNESDAY, APR. 1, 2015

With its annual public art exhibit, Embracing Our Differences gives local art students and teachers the opportunity to discuss inclusion and diversity.

by: Nick Reichert Arts & Entertainment Editor

The tables are smeared with a constellation of colors from paintbrushes, colored pencils, crayons and pastels. The smell of clay, paint and fresh paper mingle in the air. Each day hundreds of elementary, middle and high school students in Sarasota County enter their respective art rooms. Some come to doodle and pass the time, and others find a passion and a purpose.

In the case of Embracing Our Differences, an organization that prides itself on advocating inclusion and diversity, art students and art teachers learn more than just line, shade and perspective.

Since 2004, Embracing Our Differences has become a common presence in Sarasota art classrooms. The organization provides transportation for schoolchildren in the county to see the art show either in Sarasota's Island Park or the Bradenton Riverwalk. There, children view the art of international artists as well as their fellow classmates.

The 2015 show received more than 6,400 submissions from 80 countries (including China, Vietnam and Iran), 42 states and more than 100 schools. The selected artwork is presented on giant, billboard-sized canvases that make for a powerful experience.

"When I first went down to the exhibit on the bayfront, I was amazed to hear what the students were saying about the artwork and their accompanying quotes," says Sarah Wertheimer, associate executive director of Embracing Our Differences. "I was inspired

by these kids who weren't jaded yet, and they said the most life-changing comments. They started that diversity conversation in their classes and among their peers."

Two local students whose art and message of inclusion won admittance into this year's show was Mackenzie Reiss, an eight-grader from Venice Middle School, and Sayo Hayashi, a sixth-grader from Booker Middle School. Reiss' work, "A Duet is Often Better Than a Solo," won the best in show for student applicants and depicts diversity with a cello and an electric guitar lying next to each other under moonlight.

"I was having trouble coming up with a concept for my entry," says Reiss. "I was in band class one day and we had just got in all the orchestra equipment. I wanted to use music because music applies to everyone's life."

When it came to finding the inspiration to her piece, Hayashi found it in everyone's pocket: cell phones.

"It has one side of a cell phone and the other side is the person living what's on the phone's screen but in the real world," says Hayashi. "My quote for everyone is, 'Stop looking at your phone and start living your life.'"

When she heard the news she was selected for the public gallery, Hayashi was thrilled.

"I couldn't process in words how I felt," says Hayashi. "I'm not dreaming and this is actually happening."

Winning placement in the Embracing Our Differences art show has inspired both students to continue their artistic journeys.

"I had always enjoyed art, and I had won a few little contests at my school," says Reiss, "but I never thought I'd make it into the art show or let alone make it as best in show in the student division."