



Sarah Wertheimer

Embracing good

BY RUTH LANDO

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN WAGNER

Sarah Wertheimer knows exactly which quotation spoke to her heart most in this 15th year of Sarasota's Embracing Our Differences outdoor art exhibit celebrating diversity. She opened the commemorative book and read me the brief words submitted by 6-year-old Juliette Martin of St. Petersburg, Fla.: "I like me, but I'm glad that everyone isn't like me." Little Juliette's message in favor of social inclusiveness is well-paired with a colorful cartoon painted by artist Bente Schoone of the Netherlands called "Together."

The billboard-size pieces of inspirational art on display at Bayfront Park offer phrases and images sent in by more than 8,300 people from 98 different countries. Judges choose and combine their favorites, creating communications of love and acceptance for a fractured world. As associate executive director of the nonprofit for the past four and a half years, Sarah not only embraces the mission and vision of ending prejudice, hatred and exclusion, she has lived its ethos since childhood.

"Giving back wasn't just an option, it was just something that you do," says the petite 30 year old.

"Much of my childhood was spent at the Jewish Community Center at all of the festivals and fairs. My brother and I were always volunteering with my mom, setting up the food, counting the tickets, checking people in — just doing lots of hands-on volunteer activities, setting up and breaking down a ton of events."

The Wertheimer family — going back to Sarah's paternal great grandparents — has been a pillar of the Jewish community known for their generosity, service and commitment to others, especially through the Jewish Federation of Sarasota-Manatee. Sarah and her two brothers learned by example the true meaning of tzedakah — philanthropy, compassion and empathy — and tikkun olam — acts of kindness meant to help repair the world.

"It was enjoyable and I loved it," she says. "That's how I knew a lot of my friends and mom's friends, and their kids were also involved. It's not like they were showing me that it was something extra that you do, but it was an expectation — a part of life — that you give back to your community. I was really lucky to have my parents, David and Patti, as role models in my life."

Sarah grew up in Sarasota's public schools (Brentwood Elementary, MacIntosh Middle and

Sarasota High) and attended the University of Central Florida. She majored in philosophy and minored in Spanish, but changed to a double major when she realized her speaking fluency was lacking. "I could talk about Latin American history all day long, but couldn't have a day-to-day conversation," she notes. After graduation, moving to Costa Rica meant Sarah could immerse herself in the language. It was a great adventure and an opportunity for a lot of soul-searching, but working part-time for a real estate broker wasn't terribly fulfilling, and Sarah missed her tight family and good friends.

"I also realized that I wanted to work for a nonprofit and really help to change lives and do something good," she adds, which meant returning to Sarasota to test her ambition. After six months at the Jewish Federation in the programs department, Sarah moved to Children First as development coordinator and discovered a love for the "analytical part" of fundraising. "I'm a total math person," the young woman confesses. Donor cultivation and communication responsibilities also feed the Wertheimer gift for "schmoozing and getting to know people," passed down by Sarah's gregarious mother who has served as board

president of the Jewish Federation, among many other charitable roles. Sarah likes being around older people and listening to their stories, too. "It's amazing getting to know the philanthropists in this community and what inspires each of them to give," she tells me, "especially those with a passion for the arts and education. That's what keeps me here."

Unlike many of her millennial peers, Sarah has found every kind of success in her personal and professional lives in a city not known for its youthful vibe. "It's a really different community and I've grown to love it so much more than I did as a child," she says. On July 1, she took over as the executive director of Embracing Our Differences, the designated successor to her retiring boss, Michael Shelton. Not only is this an impressive career milestone for her age, but it also rewards Sarah's conviction that art can be a powerful tool for social change. She's helped the nonprofit increase its international reach, secured sponsors and donors and developed the year-round educational outreach to children, teachers and others.

Influential people have taken note. The young leader has been named one of the "30 under 30" by a local publication and been accepted into the prestigious Leadership Florida Connect Class VIII, after also being chosen for the 2014 Gulf Coast Leadership Institute. Some supporters have asked Sarah to get involved in politics, but so far, although public speaking is another of her talents, she's demurred. There are still things to accom-

plish at the helm of Embracing Our Differences.

Messages of kindness and respect for others resonate with a girl who was one of only three Jewish kids in most of her schoolrooms. "I was constantly teaching people," she says, "not wanting them to judge us. ... I understand when someone feels different and I want kids to feel more comfortable." Society's increasing challenges with cyber-bullying and harassment make the business of Embracing Our Differences more essential than ever, Sarah says. "It's so much more dangerous for kids. Bullying is not a new subject or problem, but you can't escape it now. Kids are so much nastier when they're hiding behind a [computer] screen."

Workshops for teachers and guidance counselors now focus on weighty issues such as teen suicide, the destruction of self-esteem and the barriers to academic success posed by intolerance. Sarah feels that the field trips and conversations stimulated by Embracing Our Differences both inside and outside of the classroom open children's minds and allow them to question their diverse personal experiences and perspectives. "I love being down at the park listening to the students and hearing their interpretations and the way they relate to the different art pieces," she says.

For the foreseeable future, the executive director

plans to concentrate on running her charity and developing her executive skills. She's currently working on earning her CFRE fundraising credentials and looking into the part-time executive MBA program at USF Tampa. When Sarasota's social season slows down, she can finally carve out time with another goal-oriented young adult — boyfriend Adam Negroski, also a Sarasota native, who shares a love of wine, cheese, boating and

cooking. When peers ask how Sarah's made this town work so well for her, she advises them to "find something you are passionate about and work your way up." You may have to accept low pay at the beginning and keep proving yourself, but you can progress into higher positions and "find a job that suits you and pays you better."

It might sound "cheesy," she says with a big, "I've got this" grin, but "if you love what you're doing you can find a way to make it work and to give back and contribute to the community."

And never forget the importance of making connections and putting yourself "out there" for the causes that mean something to you. Join committees and organizations and keep learning, says one who knows. And if you are lucky enough to be surrounded by people who care about you and want you to succeed, you can really soar.

WHERE WE ATE:

Perq Coffee Bar

WHAT WE BOTH ATE:

Sarah: Hibiscus iced tea
What I had: Cold brew and most of a chocolate coffee muffin

