

# SRQ

## Embracing Our Differences Brings Inspiration to Island Park

BY PHILIP LEDERER SRQ DAILY WEDNESDAY PHILANTHROPY EDITION WEDNESDAY  
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For 15 years, Embracing Our Differences has championed acceptance and promoted the power of diversity through art and community events, the most prominent being its annual Bayfront exhibition. With the 2018 exhibition currently on display in Island Park, 45 billboard-sized works of art from students around the globe, along with accompanying inspirational quotes, broadcast a mighty message of peace, transforming the idyllic to the downright inspirational. On display through June 1, this 15th anniversary edition also revives 15 past favorites for a mini-retrospective.

Entering the park, “Invitation to the Conversation” greets visitors first—serving double-duty as the name of student-artist Zach Timmons’ artwork and introduction to the exhibition—with an image of a ring of seats of all sorts, and a wheelchair joining the circle. The quote below, paired with Timmons’ image, reads, “Speaking about things with no action is like a dull pencil; there’s no point.” Traversing the park, zig-zagging from one tri-panel installation to the next, the exhibition offers a cross-section of the hopes and fears of a young community, largely students, as they take stock of a world that doesn’t always embrace its differences, but maybe could, with just a little more effort. In one, the Earth is a demon, offered a flower by a young girl; in another, the Earth floats in space, a hemisphere-sized band-aid slapped across its continents.

Racism, religious prejudice, body image issues, refugee crises and bullying all feature heavily, making the message all too clear that the youngest have not been blind to the social ills of the day. Still somehow, hope, not despair, rings loudest. Some look to the past, when soldiers of all faiths sacrificed together in World War II, and others look to the future, when humanity may one day overcome its baser instincts—but all point to the potential waiting to be unlocked by this coming together. Here, a new *American Gothic* reimagines the iconic portrait as people of color, one with a headscarf, while the Best-in-Show award-winning *The New Rosie the Riveter* depicts the feminist symbol as a multi-racial woman, with Asian, African, South American and Caucasian influences. “My new Rosie represents the strength of many races,” said the artist, Elisa Uzcategui, an 8th-grade student at Sarasota Military Academy Prep.

“We need this now more than ever,” says Sarah Wertheimer, associate executive director for Embracing Our Differences. Over the years, she’s watched the messages evolve at the annual exhibition, and while some remain constant—anti-racism, pro-love—others, such as ageism and cyber-bullying, indicate growing awareness of other issues as well. And awareness is what it’s all about, and why Wertheimer says it’s important that the annual Embracing Our Differences exhibition remain large-than-life, outdoors and free and open to the public, year after year. “We need to be constantly reminded of the importance of kindness and respect, and the value of differences,” she says. “It’s an extremely important message in today’s climate.”

Currently on display in Island Park, the Embracing Our Differences 15th annual outdoor art exhibit runs through June 1.

*Photo by Wyatt Kostygan.*