

SARASOTA

UNITY AWARDS 2018

Embracing Our Differences Fosters the Spirit of Inclusion and Diversity

Last year, the nonprofit received more than 10,000 entries from 115 countries and 48 states before 45 winners were chosen.

By [Susan Burms](#) 1/23/2018 at 12:24pm



Booker High student Carly Stafford's winning *Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil*.

IMAGE: [PHOTO COURTESY EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES](#)

Every spring for the last 15 years, thousands of people have strolled through Sarasota's Bayfront Park to view the billboard-sized artworks displayed as part of Embracing Our Differences, a nonprofit with the singular goal of fostering the spirit of inclusion and diversity.

The first exhibition attracted 126 entries. Last year, the nonprofit received more than 10,000 entries from 115 countries (Russia and Iran were Nos. 1 and 2) and 48 states before the 45 winners were chosen. A few years ago, an Iranian whose artwork dealt with trans-gender issues

had to smuggle his piece out of Iran through Dubai. This year's exhibit runs April 4 through June 1 and is on track to collect a record number of submissions.

Founding executive director Michael Shelton says diversity is not just race, color and creed; it's about tolerating diversity of thought. And it's also an economic driver. "Communities that have accomplished diversity in all its forms are thriving," he says.

In 2018, more than 42,000 students will be involved with Embracing Our Differences, either through field trips to view the artwork or lessons and discussions in partnership with nonprofits such as Mote Marine Laboratory and Florida Studio Theatre.

Shelton says all the work of soliciting and collecting artwork, setting up the exhibit, collaborating with nonprofit partners and engaging students can be boiled down to this: "We're trying to get everybody to play nice in the sandbox."

Come celebrate present and past Unity Award winners with us at a luncheon on February 8 at Michael's On East. For more information and to purchase tickets, click [here](#).