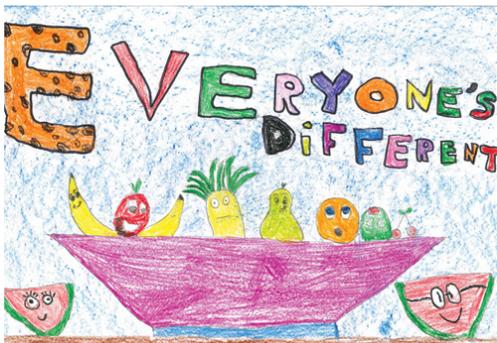


Editor: All of us, in one big holiday bowl



Embracing Our Differences art submission from Nicole Corporan, Davika Desai, Grace Schultz and Holly Schwartz.

By Bill Church

Published: Saturday, December 21, 2013 at 6:14 p.m.

'Twas the Sunday before Christmas, when all through the Gulf Coast

The editor was grumbling, his mood crustier than burnt toast;

His column was written for Page 2A with great haste,

In hopes that readers overlooked this sizable time waste . . .

Scratch the poetic rip-off. It's brutal writing a Christmas column when the temperature is in the 80s, the majority of gifts still need to be bought (and mailed), and the bearded guy is under assault.

The seasonal debate about whether Santa is a fat white guy already has been played out by serious, big-city newspaper columnists. It's a high-minded discussion except for one detail that keeps getting overlooked, i.e. "The Talk" our parents gave about the big fella's true identity (driver of a four-door station wagon with fake wood panels, and no, not a reindeer-hauling sleigh).

This discussion isn't about Santa's skin color.

It's about a bearded guy more important to the American political debate.

It's about "Duck Dynasty."

Phil Robertson, the bearded patriarch of the hit cable reality show, has been suspended for comments he made about gays in an interview with GQ magazine.

Social and electronic media have played this story with more fervor than a young violinist trying to impress Itzhak Perlman.

Liberals are howling for a boycott of a show many of them don't watch.

Conservatives are arguing that this is a free-speech issue being manipulated by the mainstream media.

What's missing, of course, is the obvious question:

"Duck Dynasty" in GQ?

Really? What's next — McDonald's Happy Meal on the cover of Bon Appetit?

I jest, of course. Diversity, after all, is about understanding differences.

Unfortunately, discussions about diversity are polarizing because otherwise intelligent people insist on being right or simply don't know how to listen. Sound bites replace sound discussion.

That's why I've tuned out much of the reactive rhetoric — good, bad or otherwise — about Robertson's religious beliefs or Santa Claus' political correctness.

You don't have to like or agree with someone's opinion. That's the beauty of free speech. Besides, true bipartisanship is recognizing that diversity of opinions should be acknowledged instead of vilified.

That's why I'm turning to Nicole Corporan, Dovika Desai, Grace Shultz and Holly Schwartz for some wisdom this Christmas.

The four Ashton Elementary fourth-graders were featured in Dennis McGillicuddy's rousing presentation Wednesday at the Embracing Our Differences luncheon at Michael's On East.

Embracing Our Differences goes beyond the outdoor art exhibit along the bayfront. The program involved 25,464 students last year, participants in a variety of programs.

If you think Embracing Our Differences is one of those warm-and-fuzzy programs swathed in political overtones, think again. A scan of the crowd showed Republicans, Democrats, independents and indifferents listening intently, not rushing to judgment.

The four students, taught by Regina Miller, created a sweet drawing about diversity that accompanies this column. Here's their statement about the drawing:

Fruits are just like people.

They can be sweet, sour, soft on the outside, hard on the inside,

wide, tall, skinny and fat.

In the end, these fruits are

Colorful, healthy, and give us variety.

They can all be in one bowl,

So why can't we?

Ah, what a joyous Christmas gift.

A bowl of fruit where the apples and oranges get along and make room for the bananas.

Merry Christmas, everyone.

Bill Church can be contacted at bill.church@heraldtribune.com or (941) 361-4991. Follow him on Twitter @BillChurchMedia.