



## Learning to embrace differences

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Prejudice. Hatred. Bigotry. Bullying. These are the targets of Embracing Our Differences (EOD), which, through the transformative power of the arts, seeks to educate and inspire children, and, in the process, create a better world.

More than 360 guests came out to Michael's on East in support of that mission. Among the guests were Executive Director **Michael Shelton**, co-chairs **Carol Buchanan** and **Graci McGillicuddy**, **Mark Pritchett**, Sheriff **Tom Knight**, **Bernadette Bennett**, **Rich Bergman**, **Patty Wertheimer**, **Brenna Wilhm**, **Wanda Patterson**, **Aundria Castleberry**, **Merrill Wynne**, **Keith** and **Linda Monda**, **Gila Meriwether**, **Sherry** and **Tom Koski**, **Iris Starr**, **Jen Rust**, **Caroline Ellerson**, **Donna Koffman**, **Jane Goodwin**, **Shirley Brown**, **Diana Greene** and **Paul Gallagher**, among many others.

Guests were greeted by members of the Riverview and Booker High School Coexistence Clubs, what Board Chair **Dennis McGillicuddy** called "the backbone of our docent program. McGillicuddy then explained the two parts of Embracing Our Differences: the juried art exhibit of 45 billboard-sized images created by local, national and international artists, writers and students reflecting the theme "enriching lives through diversity." The exhibit is on display during April and May on Island Park on Sarasota's bay front.

The second part of EOD is a series of educational initiatives, which include free educational field trips (29,000 students last year), workshops, student docent programs, community collaborations and more.

Associate Executive Director **Sarah Wertheimer** then explained how the program has grown dramatically, from 95,000 visitors in 2004, to 209,000 visitors last year, and 2.3 million visitors since the program began. In terms of submissions, last year 8,350 submissions were received, representing 104 countries, 44 states and 106 schools. The educational field trips are "much more than a walk in the park," Wertheimer said, as students come away understanding the importance of diversity and civility. "I know we are changing lives," she added.

**Brooks Tracey**, who, as a Sarasota Middle School student, submitted a drawing the first year of Embracing Our Differences, recounted how he has now come full circle, working as a teacher at that same school, and encouraging his students to take part in the EOD program. Riverview student and EOD docent **Anton Kernohan** gave a moving presentation about his own journey through bigotry and bullying, to become a mentor to young school children today. If the Embracing Our Differences exhibit can impact a single child in a positive way, then the program is doing its job, he said. "We are helping to create the first generation where hate will no longer exist."