

Diversity exhibition tackles new issues

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Staff photo by [Mike Lang](#)

Holly and Jordan Clark of Knoxville, Tenn., walk past newly installed panels of the Embracing Our Differences exhibit at Bayfront Park in Sarasota on Tuesday.

The first panel you see as you enter Island Park to view this year's "Embracing Our Differences" art display shows a menacing wolf hunched over a computer sending hateful messages.

The title underneath reads, "Cyberbullying: Beware of the Big Bad Predator," the quotation alongside, "Bullies thrive where silence reigns."

This example of the 39 works that will hang along Sarasota's bayfront and in Bradenton's new waterfront park hints at how the annual display of art and quotations promoting diversity has changed in the 10 years of its existence.

"It's gone from being race, creed and color to cyberbullying, body image, homelessness, sexual orientation, gender identity and mental health issues," says Michael Shelton, one of the founders and executive director of Co-Existence, Inc., the nonprofit organization behind the exhibit.

This year's display, which is expected to draw more than a quarter of a million visitors to Sarasota and an additional 55,000 to Bradenton, was selected from more than 4,000 entries. Sixty percent were from elementary, junior and high school students.

Submissions that once focused on "the normal stuff," like love, friendship and peace, have morphed into "things we never thought we'd get, from places we'd never thought we'd reach," Shelton says.

Not only have the issues changed, so has the field of competition. Shelton recalls how organizers had to coerce entries from Ringling College of Art and Design students to come up with half of the billboard-sized banners in 2004.

This year entries came from 52 countries, including at least one where the art had to be smuggled across borders to be transmitted.

“Guess what country had the most submissions besides the U.S.?” says Shelton. “Iran! Things are changing, and with warp speed.”

The wolf panel won student “Best in Show” for Steven Staub, Bobby Alvarez and Gennadity Kazimirov, seventh-graders at Heron Creek Middle School in North Port. It represents just one of many topics that never surfaced a decade ago — among them body image, gender identity and physical disability.

One entry portrays the body of an obese girl back to back with the figure of a girl who is anorexically thin. By the heavy girl, large red letters read: “FAT.” By the second girl, more letters: “STILL FAT.”

“Mommy's Little Girl” shows a mother holding up a frilly dress to a young girl standing in front of a mirror. The mirrored reflection is of a young boy.

Eleven-year-old Bianca Carey's entry, “Differences Don't Hold Me Back,” has a drawing of a young boy and girl standing side by side, a heart between them; the girl has a prosthetic leg.

Some of the art is professional quality; some is childlike or primitive. But ultimately, Shelton says, the exhibit is less about the art than the impact.

“It was created for people to enjoy in the park,” he says, “but what's more important is that it helps us teach our message.”

That message is conveyed through quotations that are also submitted as part of the competition. Those have changed too; now they frequently emphasize the individual responsibility to discourage acts of discrimination and harassment.

Almost 2,000 quotations came in this year.

Grace Castilow, a seventh-grader from Booker Middle School, took “Best in Show” with the all-encompassing “No one deserves to be limited by another's perspective.”

The best quotes always come from children, says Shelton, who does the blind judging, along with Nancy Roucher, a Sarasota educator and member of the EOD steering committee, and Tim Cameresi, the group's art director.

“They don't have the same filters and preconceived ideas adults have,” he says.

The fact that children feel “the confidence to talk about this stuff publicly,” is at least in part a result of the education efforts of “Embracing Our Differences,” which Shelton says have superseded the show itself.

Last year, more than 23,000 area students and teachers were involved in outreach programs like a “Make a Day of It,” a program providing busing to the exhibit and other cultural venues; “Writing About Diversity” workshops for teachers; an art teacher retreat at RCAD, and a docent program at Riverview, Southeast and North Port high schools, for students who serve as exhibit guides for young visitors.

It isn't about just seeing the pictures. Phillippi Shores Elementary School kindergarten teacher Angela Perotta made entering the contest a class art project, as well as a lesson about inclusivity.

“This year my class represents diversity from culture to language to abilities to interest to just about every aspect a person can be,” says Perotta.

The class, which includes white, African American and Asian students, some of whose first language is not English, created a poster from their combined hand prints, each child choosing a color that most closely matched his or her skin tone. It is called, “We All Have a Hand in It.”

Often the children who enter the contest are the very ones who most need to feel validated, Shelton says. Winning can become a catalyst for confidence; a few young artists have gone on to become Ringling students.

“The one constant we see every year is that the kids who are selected are not the captains of the football team, class presidents or cheerleaders,” he says. “They're just run of the mill kids. But when they get selected, teachers tell us they become rock stars.”

When Embracing Our Differences began, it was the founders' hope that they could “change the world,” says Shelton. While he recognizes the progress that has been made, he now accepts that things will never change to the point of making the exhibit obsolete.

“Gays, blacks, Muslims . . . Who knows what it will be tomorrow?” he says. “There's always going to be someone out there who is being taken advantage of.”

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