

Embracing Our Differences Winners Just As Diverse As The Art

Winners from Sarasota, Bradenton and all around the world were honored at a reception Tuesday evening at the Ringling College of Art + Design for Embracing Our Differences art exhibit.

By Charles Schelle



Adult Best in Show Winner Andrea Rankin of Sarasota, left, stands beside Gloria Tracy, center, whose quote was selected to be with Rankin's "Life Library" piece. On the right is the piece's sponsor Betty Schoenbaum.

It's a project to celebrate people's differences, or to embrace them, and the winners of the "Embracing Our Differences" art and quotation contest are just as diverse.

Take the Adult Best In Show winner Andrea Rankin of Sarasota — a student at Sarasota County Technical Institute.

"I'm not used to being the center of attention," she said. "When I hear someone using the word inspiring on me tonight, I ... I'm speechless. It makes me feel so good."

Rankin and other winners from Sarasota, Bradenton and all around the world were honored at a reception Tuesday evening at the Ringling College of Art + Design for Embracing Our Differences, an exhibit that featured oversized art and quotations promoting inspirational art and has been displayed on Sarasota's Island Park.

Rankin decided to go back to school and enter the graphic design realm after her and her partner's daughter went off to college and has been self employed for a long time.

Her "Life's Library" piece has "Don't judge a book by its cover," on a chalk board and all sorts of books with inspirational titles and diversity issues we face today like "I have two mommies," "My Brother Is Now My Sister, and I will still love her," and "Different is another word for wrong."

"I really wanted to make sure I had a good cross section of the titles, and just do a better representation," she said. "Often times you'll see it limited to about 10 different maybe religions or ethnic races. I wanted to expand that more."

Each piece of art was teamed up with a quote, and Gloria Tracy of Bradenton felt like hers was a perfect fit with Rankin's piece because it was about loving people for being different and not saying everyone's the same.

"I always heard people saying it doesn't matter that your black, or it doesn't matter that your Hispanic, and I always took offense to that," said Tracy, who is the Equity Officer and Employment manager in State College of Florida, Manatee-Sarasota's Office of Human Resources. "Their intent is to say we're all the same it doesn't matter, but what I see it as, let's recognize my difference and acknowledge that, and let's talk about that if you have questions.

"See me, is really what it's saying."

Her quote says: "Stop judging ... Notice skin color, hear accents, ACKNOWLEDGE the differences; THEN, ask questions and be open to learning about others."

Then there's Peter Bassen of Sarasota, also a student at Sarasota County Technical Institute attending there for a career change. An adult division winner, he grew up during a time when diversity and Civil Rights were the hottest topics in America.

What better way to illustrate that than using Photoshop to have Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A Dream Speech" written across and shadowed and lightened just the right way to form King's bust.

"I was only born in '65 and it was very prevalent when I was growing up as a child. The most prolific person was Dr. Martin Luther King, and so immediately I thought of the 'I Have a Dream Speech' and the iconic image of him being in deep thought," Bassen said.

Bassen wanted to convey the power of the black and white contrasting along with the words themselves being in black and white.

"It's all in different shades as well, so it's quite fitting," he said.

Casey Miller, 18 of Bradenton, a senior at Lakewood Ranch High School, created "See through your eyes," in Photoshop.

She was excited and said she was just messing around with a design and came together and was happy to be selected.

"I was basically saying that everything's the same, so it's all equal," Miller said of her design. "We're all different colors but we see the same person in the end."

She'll attend University of Central Florida for graphic arts and photography. Gabrielle Holt, 17, of Sarasota is a junior at Riverview High School whose quote was selected to appear with a piece of art.

It reads: "Society tells us how to "act," "exist," and "be." We must LEARN for ourselves how to "interact," "coexist" and "become."

Holt is happy to be selected.

"Humans are a lot more than what the media tells us," she said. "I was going with the society thing because as a girl I see a lot of things in the media that tell you how to act, what to wear and what to look like, and being in high school, there's a lot of pressure to do those kinds of things."

Though she's quite the succinct poet, Holt would love to work for Nike because she's a runner and wants to study human physiology, but a freelance writing gig at *Runner's World* wouldn't be bad either, she admitted.

Holt is a member of the Coexistence Club at the high school, which is a youth chapter part of the Coexistence Inc. nonprofit that creates the educational lessons, field trips and exhibit to embrace diversity. The group provides tours to elementary students during the school day, too.

Michael Shelton is the executive director of Coexistence and said the main component beyond fund raising to create the programs, is the programs themselves of providing teachers a template of a lesson plan, workbooks and free field trips to enhance diversity education.

"We're the only organization in town that provides free field trips," he said.

The organization is in talks to have its own version in Manatee County and said Bradenton Mayor Wayne Poston has embraced the idea.

About 5,000 Manatee County students participate in Coexistence's programs and the logistics of busing them down to Sarasota is too difficult, so it's time to forge north.

The key for the group will be to find out how Bradenton could have its own version. They have a spot picked out along Rossi Park on the waterfront to mirror the bay front aspect of the Sarasota Island Park, Shelton said.

"What we're adamant about not doing is taking a Sarasota concept and dumping it on Bradenton," he said.

Yep, that seems to be in the spirit of the organization. Bradenton and Sarasota should not be the seen as the same — embrace the differences.