

# Riverwalk's 'Embracing Our Differences' showcases Manatee students

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MANATEE -- "Embracing Our Differences" could be the motto for Louise R. Johnson Middle School in Bradenton.

"We are extremely diverse," said Mary O'Brien, a Johnson Middle School world language teacher. "Our students are Hispanic, Latin-American, Indian, Mexican, African-American, Caucasian, Haitian and other ethnicities. Our students feel very comfortable talking about where they are from."

The school with an Embracing Our Differences state of mind does well in the worldwide competition held by Embracing Our Differences, a Sarasota-based not-for-profit whose mission is to educate and inspire students to create a better world through artwork and inspirational quotes, according to Sarah Wertheimer, associate executive director of Embracing Our Differences.

Over the last three years, six Johnson students have won prizes, including two Best-in-Show inspirational quotes, in Embracing Our Differences.

This year, Jasmin Maldonado, 12, a Johnson seventh-grader, won Best-in-Show inspirational quote for: "When you judge me, you show the person that you are, not the person that I am."

Jasmin's quote was one of 6,454 entries submitted by individuals from 80 countries, 42 states and 118 schools in the 12th Annual Embracing Our Differences Outdoor Art Exhibit, Wertheimer said.

Odalis Lopez, a fifth-grad

er from Orange Ridge-Bullock Elementary School in Bradenton, had her artwork, "Lonely Should be Friendship," chosen as one of 39 billboard-size images to be displayed by Embracing Our Differences from Sunday through May 31 on Bradenton's Riverwalk and Sarasota's Island Park. Jasmin's quote is also on one of the large billboards.

The Riverwalk images, which start just east of the Green Bridge and go to the children's playground area, were installed Thursday, Wertheimer said.

This is the third year Embracing Our Differences has been mounted at Riverwalk.

"There is critical thinking involved in the exhibit," Wertheimer said. "The billboards are so large you can't miss them. They start conversations."

Embracing Our Differences plans the diversity curriculum lessons for Manatee and Sarasota counties, Wertheimer said.

Like all of Johnson's roughly 300 students who participated in Embracing Our Differences competition, Jasmin started her project in October by meeting with other students in small groups and talking about it.

"I had very little to do with it," said O'Brien, Jasmin's French teacher. "I gave her the opportunity to interact with her peers. It's a student-led process."

Student group effort

The students come up with quotes on 3-x-5 file cards and talk about them with each other, O'Brien said.

Jasmin's quote reveals how perceptive she is, O'Brien added.

"She realizes that everyone sees the world through their own filters," O'Brien said. "She understands that when someone is criticizing, they have a critical filter in their head that shows what they don't like. If someone calls some one ugly, Jasmin understands that's just that person being mean and not that the person is ugly."

Jasmin's quote gets her point across she won't stand for being judged by someone else's critical filter, O'Brien added.

"Jasmin is quiet and thoughtful," O'Brien said. "She also has a good sense of humor. She is studious, likes to smile and is very polite. She is also very well-liked by her classmates."

The Best-in-Show Adult winner for art was Ahmed Sami of Kuwait City, Kuwait, for his work, "Encourage Me," a close-up of the face of a downtrodden young boy, a portrait of sorrow and rejection. Ahmed said the image is modeled after one of thousands of "lost children roaming the streets of São Paulo." The boy's name was Roney. Ahmed writes: "Roney's cold-blooded murder happened shortly after he met the boy." The title of his piece comes from a quote by American actress Celeste Holms: "We live by encouragement and die without it -- slowly, sadly, angrily."

"Our Art Selection Committee spent two weeks reviewing thousands of submissions from around the world," said Michael Shelton, executive director of Embracing Our Differences. "We were inspired by the high quality, heartfelt conviction and by the large amount of submissions we received from outside of the United States. Each contributor made a statement to be part of the solution and to do his or her best to promote respect, acceptance and understanding."

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Read more here: [http://www.bradenton.com/2015/03/30/5719258\\_riverwalks-embracing-our-differences.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy](http://www.bradenton.com/2015/03/30/5719258_riverwalks-embracing-our-differences.html?rh=1#storylink=cpy)



Judgment by others is inevitable, but  
**ACCEPTING**  
yourself is up to you.  
— **Regina Brinkley** (Actress, Actress, Model, Model, Model, Model, Model, Model)

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by **Emma Siegel**  
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The 2015 Embracing Our Differences outdoor exhibit now on display along the Bradenton Riverwalk features images and text from local, national and international students and artists. PAUL VIDELA/Bradenton Herald [PVIDELA@BRADENTON.COM](mailto:PVIDELA@BRADENTON.COM) |

