

Sarasota Schools Teach Tolerance Through Art

By [CATHY CARTER](#) · JUN 12, 2017



Exhibit docent, Caitlyn Bradley, a junior at Riverview High School in Sarasota.

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There's little doubt that America is becoming more diverse.

Perhaps nowhere is that more evident than in the nation's public schools. But differences can extend beyond race and ethnicity, as students in Sarasota County are learning.

At Island Park in Sarasota recently, a few dozen 5th graders all dressed in matching T-shirts stand in front of a giant image of giraffes. The students

are here on a field trip to see an art exhibit called ["Embracing Our Differences."](#) Their tour guide is Caitlyn Bradley, a junior at Riverview High School in Sarasota.

"OK, so what's the first thing you guys see when you look at this?" she asks the group.

"Probably since that giraffe's smaller and it's a little bit lighter than the other ones, it might get picked on more even though it's not right," answered Gionni Heintz, a student at Atwater Elementary School in North Port.

The art exhibit includes mediums from painting to photography but the subject matter is all about diversity and inclusion. It was launched in 2004 with works by regional artists and has grown steadily ever since. This year, students from 204 schools from around the world submitted artwork and inspirational quotes for the show.

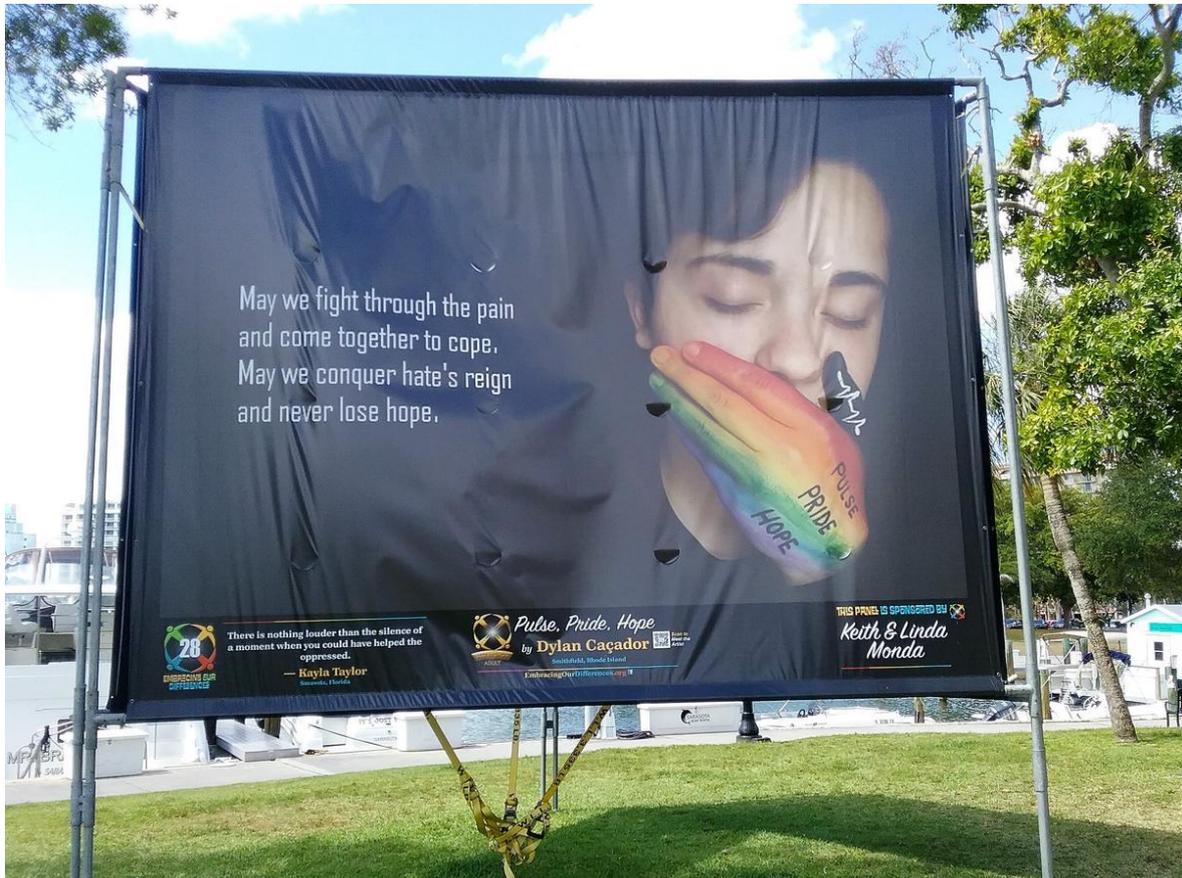
But "Embracing Our Differences" is more than just an end-of-the-year field trip.

"We create a series of lesson plans for teacher's grades elementary, middle and high school," said Bernadette Bennett, a program director for Sarasota County Schools. She adds that issues of tolerance are blended in classroom instruction throughout the school year and educators attend diversity workshops.

Marina Lamela, a teacher at Atwater Elementary school, also went to a 3-day bullying prevention summit last summer. She says her students really connected with the "Embracing Our Differences" curriculum, and its exploration of themes like prejudice and bullying.

"Because I feel like they took ownership of that and they were able to put those feelings and emotions in art," she said.

To date, more than 235,000 students in Sarasota and Manatee counties have participated in the educational initiative that doesn't use school district money. But are schools the right place for these kinds of programs? Detractors may call it an exercise in political correctness.



The Best-in-Show Adult winner for 2017 is Dylan Caçador of Rhode Island, for his work entitled "Pulse, Pride, Hope."
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Not so, says the Southern Poverty Law Center. In late 2016, the group administered an [online survey](#) to U.S educators and more than 10,000 responded.

A total of 80 percent reported heightened anxiety among certain groups, including immigrants, Muslims, and LGBT students.

Bennett from the Sarasota School District said students interact with people of differing ethnicities and religions more than ever. The school district is majority white, but the minority student population is [growing](#).

Hispanics make up almost 20 percent of the total school population. Over 8.5 percent are black, and close to 5 percent are multicultural.

"How do we help children navigate those relationships? If we want a tolerant community, they have to understand how to be a tolerant person," said Bennett.

Back at Island Park, student docent Caitlyn Bradley steers the 5th grade field trip towards another image in the exhibit. This one depicts playing cards, each has a face and each is a different color. 5th grade student Gionni Heintz points out that the literal race cards are linked together with a single string.

"I really like this art because it kind of gets the point across that even though that one's brown, white, red, black; they're all the same and you can't take them apart," he said.

"So no matter what color you are you're as equal the other person," added Bradley.

And with that the group moves on to the next piece. A brightly colored work in pencil called "Square Peg and Round Hole Live Happily Ever After."

"Embracing Our Differences" recently partnered with the 2017 World Rowing Championships in a new initiative called "Adopt a Team." Students at 39 schools throughout Sarasota and Manatee counties spent the past two months creating artwork representing 54 of the countries participating in the event. The art will be displayed at the competitive event this September in Sarasota.