



# EMBRACING OUR DIFFERENCES®

By Dennis McGillicuddy



As we enter our 9th season, Embracing Our Differences®, the international outdoor art exhibit that demonstrates in a positive way how diversity enriches our lives, will once again return to Sarasota's beautiful bay front during the months of April and May. The exhibit features 39 billboard-sized images created by artists, writers and students from around the world reflecting their interpretation of our message: "enriching lives through diversity." Since 2004, this vitally important and timely message has impacted more than 1,100,000 visitors.

Since our first exhibit in 2004, annual attendance has grown to a record setting 277,000 last year. For 2012, 4,502 submissions were received from 53 countries, 40 states and 127 schools, including student submissions from such places as China, India, Romania, and many other countries. Almost half of the submissions selected for display this year were submitted by students.

Of great importance are our education initiatives that we believe represents the most important aspect of our efforts – impacting the lives of our children. Through this program, age appropriate lesson plans and support materials are created each year and provided to teachers in various electronic formats. Providing free transportation for field trips to the exhibit is also an integral part of this program. Since 2004, more than 94,000 students have participated in our various education initiatives including 19,695 students in 2011 alone making us one of the largest educational programs in Sarasota County.

Our very successful "Partners in Education" program with organizations such as Florida Studio Theater, Sarasota Film Festival, the Van Wezel and Selby Gardens continues to grow. This past year more than 7,000 Embracing Our Differences® students participated in a full day of character education. This collaborative effort is unique on the Gulfcoast.

Embracing Our Differences'® partnership with Riverview High School's International Baccalaureate Program continues to grow with 88 students acting as docents and mentors in our education program. The Co-Existence Club has become one of the largest at Riverview High School. This year has seen the expansion of this type of partnership with both Venice & North Port High Schools.

As a result of these efforts, we not only have a great field trip for the students, but also a robust curriculum of character education taught before, during and after visiting the exhibit. By commissioning an annual independent outcomes measurement evaluation, we are able to verify how Embracing Our Differences® is changing our future for the better and we assure you that we are!

Finally, our incredibly successful "Community Partner" program with the Gulf Coast Community Foundation, Jewish Federation, Ringling College of Art and Design, Sarasota Sister Cities and YEA Arts play an integral part in enhancing the effectiveness of all our programs.

We look forward to our 10th anniversary next year and consider it a privilege to continue providing an opportunity for our community to reflect upon and deepen its awareness that embracing our differences, respecting the views of others and standing up against hatred and prejudice will lead to a better world for everyone. 