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For student artist Carly Stafford, Embracing Our Differences is a chance to share her message about domestic violence.

The Art of Equality: Embracing Our Differences fills Sarasota bayfront with art

by: [Nick Friedman](#) Managing Editor of Arts and Culture

Carly Stafford had had enough. Then a sophomore at Booker High School, Stafford recalls a conversation she had in the hall with another student about the prevalence of abusive behavior toward women — especially the tendency to blame the victim.



Carly Stafford's piece, "Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil"

"They just kind of brushed it off," says Stafford, now a senior. "They acted like it was no big deal. I couldn't believe it. I thought, 'Why aren't we talking about this?' People need to know that this is not OK."

An aspiring artist, Stafford expressed her outrage the best way she knew how — on canvas.

The concept came to her quickly. She grabbed a pencil and started sketching, then filling in the details with watercolors.

BY THE NUMBERS

The 14th annual outdoor exhibit saw record-breaking submissions by student and adult artists from around the world.

"The number of submissions is so encouraging," says Sarah Wertheimer, associate executive director. "It's not about winning; it's about the process. While these people are working on their pieces, they're immersed in this concept of diversity."

Some numbers from this year:

10,761 Art and quote submissions

48 Winning art selections this year

4 Consecutive years Iran was among the top-submitting countries

115 Countries represented this year

104 Countries represented last year

48 U.S. states represented

6,800 Student submissions

3 Volunteer judges

10 Days winning works are chosen

Her work addresses what she sees as the hidden-in-plain-sight nature of the problem. Turning the familiar three wise monkeys motif (“Hear no evil; see no evil; speak no evil”) — on its head, her piece portrays three physically abused women of varying ethnicities, each embodying a component of the expression.

The first, with open wounds on the bridge of her nose and lower lip, covers her ears, gazing off to the left of the frame. In the middle, a woman in a hijab is blindfolded with a large bruise visible on her cheek. The last woman has white tape over her mouth, as well as a large black eye and colorful bruise on her throat.

The statement is powerful.



Photos by Nick Friedman Booker High School AP art teacher Jeffery Cornwell, Carly Stafford and her father, Frank Stafford, stand near Stafford's winning work.

Now, two years and plenty of revisions later, Stafford's piece, titled "Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil," stands at the Sarasota bayfront, enlarged and printed on vinyl canvas as the winner of the Best in Show award at the annual Embracing Our Differences exhibit. The exhibit is an outdoor art exhibit and culmination of a yearlong series of educational workshops using art to promote diversity.

Stafford's piece joins 44 other works, both visual art and original quotes submitted by student and adult artists from around the world. This year, staff narrowed 10,761 submissions down to the 45 winners on display.

SHARING HER MESSAGE

It's a warm, windy May afternoon, and Stafford, her father, Frank Stafford, and her art teacher of three years, Jeffery Cornwell, are seated at a picnic table near the front of the exhibit, admiring the art.

Stafford and Cornwell recall the process through which her art from two years ago became this year's Best in Show Student winner.

"She entered it the first year, but it wasn't chosen," says Cornwell. "But it was such a powerful message and a great concept. I hadn't seen it done before. It was the Thursday before this year's deadline, and I said, 'Hey Carly, do you remember your piece from sophomore year? Do you think you can re-do that this weekend?'"



Sarah Wertheimer, associate executive director of Embracing Our Differences, says this year's exhibit received record submissions from around the world.

Stafford laughs, remembering the demanding quick turnaround. Cornwell jokingly calls himself the taskmaster.

"I took it as a challenge," she says.

With two additional years of experience, Stafford says she brought a higher level of skill to the piece this year. She estimates she revised it at least 20 times. Using pencil, watercolor and Photoshop, she perfected

the facial compositions and pushed herself to create more depth and contrast and find the right color palette.

“It was the bruises,” she says. “They had to be just the right color.”

IF YOU GO:

Embracing Our Differences Outdoor Art Exhibit

When: Runs through May 31

Where: Island Park at the Sarasota bayfront

Tickets: Free

Info: Visit Embracingourdifferences.org.

For Stafford, who plans to attend art college next fall, the win was more than an opportunity to display her work. It was a chance to share a message close to her heart.

“Knowing I created something that emotionally affects people is surreal,” she says. “Domestic abuse survivors have messaged me saying my piece spoke to them — people I don’t even know. It gives me goose bumps.”