

WATERFRONT ART EXHIBITS CELEBRATE OUR DIFFERENCES

Waterfront art exhibits celebrate our differences

By **Susan Rife**, Herald-Tribune
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The 12th annual Embracing Our Differences, an outdoor art exhibit celebrating diversity, is on display at Island Park in Sarasota. A similar display is also at the Riverwalk in Bradenton. (Staff photo by Dan Wagner)

Wander among the 39 billboard-sized banners emblazoned with gorgeous artwork and heartfelt quotations celebrating the diversity of humankind, and you'll be struck by a couple of thoughts:

What creativity lies inside the human heart, and how do we recapture the kindness expressed on the banners?

“Embracing Our Differences,” an annual outdoor display of supersized banners in Sarasota’s Island Park and Bradenton’s Riverwalk, opens this weekend for two months of programs, tours, and opportunities for reflection.



Sarah Wertheimer, associate executive director of Embracing Our Differences. (Staff photo by Dan Wagner)

“I remember last year, we had this flamingo piece, each flamingo was different in a different way, the disabled one, the fat one, the skinny one. . . . I remember one little kid pointing at it and saying, ‘Well, I have glasses, too, and everyone still likes me!’ and all his classmates agreeing, ‘Of course we do,’ ” said Sarah Wertheimer, associate executive director of Embracing Our Differences. “The younger ones don’t see why it’s bad to be different.”

Adults at the exhibit “love to watch the kids interact; they love how the pieces make you think and start a conversation,” Wertheimer said. “They really walk away remembering the quotes.”

Each year’s exhibit draws submissions of original art and quotes from artists, writers and students around the world; this year, the first time it’s been open to online submissions, captured 6,454 submissions from 80 countries. Students from 118 elementary, middle and high schools submitted both art and quotes.

The first criterion in judging is the underlying concept or idea represented, said Michael Shelton, the program’s executive director.

“We believe all people should feel safe, be empowered and make a difference,” Shelton said. “That’s our guiding philosophy.”

Awards are given for best in show for adults and students, with \$1,000 prizes. Ahmed Sami of Kuwait City, Kuwait, won in the adult category for “Encourage Me,” while the top student award went to Mackenzie Reiss, a student at Venice Middle School, for her work, “A Duet is Better Than a Solo.”

Embracing Our Differences also presents teacher workshops in art appreciation, character building and diversity education; support for field trips for area students and teachers; and a docent program that pairs high school student docents with groups of younger students.

INTERESTED?

Embracing Our Differences is open through May 22 at Island Park in Sarasota and Riverwalk in Bradenton. For more information: 404-5710; embracingourdifferences.org