

Embracing Our Differences sends diversity message loud and clear

by Joe Hendricks
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The Embracing Our Differences panel on display at Island Park. Photo by Joe Hendricks.

Take a stroll through Sarasota's Island Park (adjacent to O'Leary's Tiki Bar) and through the power of art you will be reminded of the importance of accepting the racial, cultural, physical, sexual and philosophical differences that exist among us.

This message is brought to us by **Embracing Our Differences**, the Sarasota-based non-profit organization responsible for the annual public art exhibit sharing the same name. Now in its 10th year, the annual Embracing Our Differences exhibit was erected in Island Park at the end of March and will remain there for the public to experience free of charge through June 2.

The exhibit features 39 drawings, paintings, photographs and multimedia creations submitted by artists of all ages from around the world. Each selected piece of art is paired with a quotation pertaining to diversity and acceptance, submitted by a wordsmith with no direct connection to the artist or the artwork their words will share space with.

Submitted in digital format via CD, the 39 selected submissions were enlarged and transferred to weather-proof canvas panels measuring 16 feet wide and 12.5 feet high, then attached to

metal frames and erected in 13 triangular formations throughout the park. Six “honorable mention” selections are also on display in a smaller format.

“It is a very unique way of displaying art that you’ll only see in a couple other places in the world. The sheer size of it magnifies the message of the art, which is ‘enriching lives through diversity,’” said Embracing Our Differences Executive Director and co-founder **Michael Shelton**.

“There are very few things that are as powerful as art, no matter what the form, whether it be the performing arts, the visual arts or the written arts. For us, diversity is an extremely broad-based concept and this year we have pieces that deal with mental illness, body image, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, age ... there are many ways in which diversity can be embraced.”



“Siblings,” by Melanie Chatot and *“Working”* by Dennis Smith. Photo by Joe Hendricks.

International Flavor

In preparation for the 2013 exhibit, Embracing Our Differences received 4,419 submissions from professional artists, amateur artists, adults and students from 41 states and 51 countries. More than 60 percent of the submissions were submitted by students in the 12th grade and under.

“We have school kids in India, Korea, England, France, Portugal and Russia as well as here. Last year we had 186 different schools that were in some way part of the program,” Shelton explained.

Crediting “the power of the Internet” for the organization’s international reach, the 2013 exhibit produced an influx of submissions from an unexpected source: “We had more than 50 submissions come from Iran this year, from individual artists working within Iran to the Iran School of Art for Girls, which sent us 10 or 15 pieces,” Shelton said.

“There are some really fascinating generalizations you can take from that. One of them is how westernized the art was. You couldn’t look at it and identify it as coming from a Middle Eastern or predominantly Muslim country,” he explained.

“Another is that it’s not easy to send things out of the country by mail. We got some submissions in which the artists didn’t feel comfortable mailing them because they have to go to a post office and the contents have to be inspected. We had one art piece that dealt with gender identity and a little story came with it about how the artist snuck it out of the country and went to the United Arab Emirates to mail it. We hear stories like that all the time.”

Two separate committees judged the submissions, one group reviewing the art and the other reviewing the quotations, with neither committee having knowledge of the submissions collected and eventually selected by their counterparts.

Once the final selections were made, the responsibility fell to Embracing Our Differences Artistic Director **Tim Cameresi** to marry each piece of art with an accompanying quote.

“The process of matching the quotes to the artwork remains a bit of mystery even to me,” Cameresi said. “It’s actually pretty magical. Each year there seems to be a ‘perfect’ quotation for each piece of art and that continues to amaze me year after year.”

As for the impact the exhibit might have on those viewing it, Cameresi said, “Anytime you give someone the opportunity to view others in a new light, you’re opening the doors for acceptance and understanding on a whole new level.”

The 2013 Best in Show adult art submission was *Differences Work, Just Ask A Fork*, submitted by **Liat Waks** from Israel, who says in her “From the Artist” statement, “This illustration demonstrates how even simple tasks are impossible if we are all exactly the same. If we are open to embrace the fact that we are different, together we can achieve much more.”

The accompanying quote, written by **Masie Chong** from Herndon, Virginia, says, “A second glance opens a world of possibilities.”



Best in Show (adult), “Differences Work, Just Ask A Fork,” by Liat Waks. Image courtesy EOD.

Area Students Make Good



Grace Castilow alongside her Best in Show quote. Photo by Jennifer Castilow.

This year’s overall Best in Show quote came from Booker Middle School student **Grace Castilow**, who wrote, “No one deserves to be limited by another’s perspective.”

When asked about the origins and creative process behind her quote, Grace, who is 13 and in the 7th grade, said, “This year I have learned to surround myself with the people that really care about me and appreciate me. By changing the way I think about others I am changing the way I think about myself. When I created this quote it was to express my emotions towards how being a middle school student affects my point of view on how others should not be judged or limited.”

When asked to provide an example of young people imposing limitations on their peers, Grace said, “Judging someone based on looks, appearance or personality without getting to know them more.”

As for the importance of diversity on the Booker Middle School campus, Grace said, “Booker is such a diverse campus, it’s really important that we’re able to function as a team and that we all accept each other.”

Submitting the Best in Show quote led to Grace recently being profiled on **SNN Local News**. When asked how it felt to be featured on a television news broadcast, she said, “It was really cool. I felt honored. I really enjoyed it and I’m really fascinated with how the news is brought together.” The SNN 6 experience has Grace now considering a career in broadcast journalism.

Sharing her own thoughts on her daughter’s accomplishment, **Jennifer Casitlow** said, “I’m proud that she’s able to speak her mind using such and an abbreviated form of expression.”

In regard to how it felt to see her words on display in Island Park, Grace said, “It felt really great because I was honored to be featured alongside such a great piece of art.”



“Heavy Rain,” by Stephen Parks. Image courtesy EOD.

Grace’s Best in Show quote appears at the bottom of a work of art titled *Heavy Rain* that was created by **Stephen Parks**, a Sarasota County Technical Institute student from Venice.

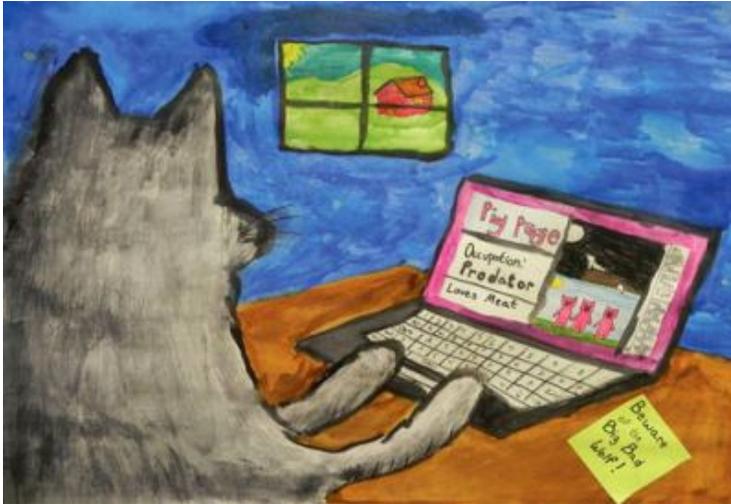
“My piece represents the hate and stereotyping that children face in their daily lives,” says Parks in his written artist’s statement.

The Best in Show student art submission is a piece called *Cyber Bullying: Beware of the Big Bad Predator*, created by **Steven Staub**, **Bobby Alvarez** and **Gennadiy Kazimirov** from Heron Creek Middle School in North Port.

Their artist statement says, “The Big Bad Wolf represents predators in cyberspace. The Little Pigs do not know who is stalking them. Beware of who is watching you through the Internet.”

The accompanying quote, written by **Daphne English-Bazenas** from Sarasota, says, “Bullies thrive where silence reigns. Look up. Stand up. Speak up. Refuse to be a victim or a silent bystander.”

Many of the Embracing Our Differences artists, wordsmiths, parents, event sponsors and board members will gather Tuesday evening, April 16, for a celebration ceremony taking place at Ringling College of Art and Design.



“Cyber Bullying: Beware of the Big Bad Predator.” Image courtesy EOD.

More Than Meets the Eye



Park visitors enjoy “Card Games” by Osprey artist Terri Adams. Photo by Joe Hendricks.

Best known for its annual art exhibit, the Embracing Our Differences organization operates year-round and is the second largest not-for-profit education program in Southwest Florida according to Shelton, who said 23,600 children participated in EOD-affiliated programs last year.

“That’s really the main focus of where we put our energies and resources,” he said, noting that partnerships with Mote Marine Lab, Selby Gardens, the Ringling Museum and others allow the diversity message to be woven into various educational programs and reinforced throughout the year.

“We’re rapidly approaching the point where we will have had an entire generation of young children go through our program year after year,” Shelton said.

“With that constant reinforcement we have feedback that supports the idea that over time, people change the way people think. Arts integration is really starting to get credit as being a viable and important component of teaching kids the things they need to know about life. Our goal, ultimately, is to create a community that welcomes all, embraces differences and celebrates individuality.”

The organization’s annual budget is in the \$350,000 to \$400,000 range, with approximately \$200,000 dedicated to educational efforts.

“We spent \$100,000 last year on buses alone,” Shelton said of the efforts to provide free transportation for area student groups interested in experiencing the exhibit.

The primary funding source is individual donations, which are supplemented by grants from local foundations and support from corporate sponsors.

Expanded Range

Shelton estimates that 250,000 people will visit the Sarasota Embracing Our Differences exhibit in 2013.

New this year is a second and similar exhibit on display at the Bradenton Riverwalk from March 31 through April 29, with 20,000 to 25,000 people expected to experience the inaugural Bradenton event. The second exhibit will then be dismantled and transported to North Port High School, where it will be on display from May 1st through June 2nd.

The images, quotes and artist statements for all of the winning submissions can be viewed at the Embracing Our Differences website, but to get the full impact of these works one should walk through Island Park and experience this thought-provoking exhibit in its full-sized glory.



"Laundry" by Myakka student artist Mariah Robertson. Photo by Joe Hendricks.

Joe Hendricks

Joe Hendricks plays drums for Ted Stevens and the Doo-Shots, is a freelance writer for This Week in Sarasota and The Anna Maria Island Sun and is the host of WSLR's Local Matters talk show. At the core of Joe's life are his lovely wife Amy and their beloved bark-less dog Mellie.