

'Embracing our Differences' exhibit stirs reactions at Bradenton's Riverwalk

BY RICHARD DYMOND

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BRADENTON -- Deborah Greenleaf of Sarasota and her partner, Bill Anderson of Bradenton, put their arms around each other Sunday and stood quietly gazing, absorbing and meditating over one of the 39 colorful, billboard-sized, art panels that comprise the exhibit, "Embracing Our Differences."

The free exhibit, whose theme is diversity and tolerance, consists of panels arranged in triangular groups of three. It was mounted Saturday on Bradenton's Riverwalk.

Hundreds viewed the exhibit, most prominently displayed in the area behind the children's playground, which will run through June 1.

The panel that made the Bradenton couple embrace was "Tears are Colorless" by Jerry Bacik of Tarpon Springs. Bacik's artwork shows tears running down cheeks of three people, one an older person of color, one a young person and one who could be a victim of domestic violence.

The quote by Beth Duda of Sarasota on the lower left side of the billboard reads: "There is no difference in the color of our tears or the sound of our laughter."

"I think it's a tremendous project," Greenleaf said. "It's an 'ah-ha' moment for anyone who takes the time to look at them. Some of the quotes that go along with the art made me cry."

"I like the whole idea," Anderson said. "When we grew up it was terrible to be different."

The panel messages came through better in some than others, according to Nancy Horne of Bradenton. Horne said she gave the panels her full attention, even some she didn't grasp.

"I am very concerned about prejudice," she said.

She said she liked "Playing Together" by Freda Cheung of Hong Kong, which showed brown legs and white legs running together, each with Band-Aids. And she also giggled at "Happy Together" by Young Sook Park of Seoul, South Korea, which showed two different-colored zebras. It bore the caption, "Wait a minute. Are you the wrong color or am I?"

But "Radiohead" by Leah Mehtala, a seventh-grader at Booker Middle School in Sarasota, and "You're the One with the Problem!" by Hope Mathews of Bradenton's Orange Ridge/Bullock Elementary School left her perplexed.

"Radiohead" shows a woman with a tape measure around her waist and a TV for a head. The caption reads: "It's all in your head, darling."

"You're the One with the Problem!" shows a huge, angry red face.

"I'm not sure I get those," Horne said.

She was open, however, to try to understand what the artists were saying as were many others who strolled by to take a look.

"Did you see the panel called 'We phones?'" Greenleaf asked.

Greenleaf was speaking of "Wepholes" by Elise Raimon, a seventh-grader from Haile Middle School on State Road 64. Elise's artwork shows two cell phones, one with a cross and one with a Star of David. Instead of saying, "slide to unlock" her phones say: "hug to unlock."

Elise's artwork carries a quote by Farrah Cavus, a sixth-grader from Pine View School in Sarasota that says: "Being kind takes nothing from you, but gives hope to countless others."

Embracing Our Differences is an annual outdoor international art exhibit that uses art to spark discussions and promote peaceful coexistence, said Michael Shelton, executive director of the 11-year-old Sarasota-based Embracing Our Differences organization.

Embracing Our Differences came to Bradenton for the first time last year and has been at Sarasota's Island Park since 2004.

Bradenton and Sarasota each have the same 39 panels this year, Shelton said.

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