

Students embrace differences



Joining 1,000 youth from across Sarasota County Schools, Goldie Feldman Academy students linger in front of oversized artworks, matched with expressive messages of inclusion and peace, at the "Embracing Our Differences" outdoor exhibit on Friday at Island Park. CORRESPONDENT PHOTOS / ERICA NEWPORT

By ERICA NEWPORT Correspondent

Youth from schools across Sarasota County congregated at Sarasota's Island Park on Friday to experience a supersized art show, "Embracing Our Differences," promoting expressions of inclusion, diversity, tolerance and acceptance.

Laurel Nokomis School had 19 developmentally disabled students participating in the exhibit tour of the community-based project that aims to channel change.

Exceptional student education teachers Lauren Brook and Chris Hradek said their students deeply understand the ideologies and actions needed to embrace others' differences.

Josh Larimore, 14, Krista Backus, 15, and Josh Isma, 13, all Laurel Nokomis students, took time out during the exhibit tour for a group hug.

Brook said the students are being equipped with advocacy tools to help them express their feelings of being different, differences that everyone has in one way or another.

"Well, I love being here today," Krista said, standing in the shade of a towering art piece titled "Defying Boundaries," which shows two hands connecting through a fence. "I really love the colors and the names of the art. They are helping us to know about embracing differences."

The quote on the art panel was submitted by a Cranberry Elementary School fifth-grade student, Ben York, of North Port. Ben's teacher was Nancy Garland.

The quote read: "Open your heart before you close your fist."

According to the "Embracing Our Differences" website, it is a project of CoExistence Inc., a local nonprofit presenting the international outdoor art exhibit to demonstrate how diversity enriches lives.

The exhibit includes 39 billboard-sized images, created by professional artists, art students and schoolchildren from Florida and around the world.

Beside Krista was Josh Isma, who had just pointed to an art panel of a computer superhero working for all that represented good and right, titled "Cyber Hero."

The art was submitted by Phoenix Academy students in eighth through 10th grades and Ringling College of Art and Design student Michele Smith.

The quote matched to the art was submitted by Kathleen Hagan-Rogerson, a seventh-grader at Booker Middle School, and read: "I never knew how much words hurt until they were aimed at me."

"'Cyber Hero,' is about saving all of us from anything that could be dangerous," Josh said.

Once they return back to school, Brook said, the Laurel Nokomis students will continue in a conversation about the artwork and quotes and how the exhibit relates to people with disabilities.

Across the park, second-grade students from Emma E. Booker gazed up at an art panel submitted from Hong Kong, People's Republic of China.

"I know that if you are different, you still have things that are the same as other people," Josh Bailey, 7, said. "Other people can do the same things that you like to do, and then you can get together like a family."

Josh's classmate, Lynayah Mills, 7, was with her mother, Clona McGruder, a volunteer at the Booker Elementary.

McGruder said she encourages her daughter to foster every message matched to the exhibit panels showcased at Island Park.

"I have been embracing my differences today, and I just like them all," Lynayah said. "It doesn't matter what color you are, or what kind of hair you have, we just have to make sure we respect everyone equally."