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Exhibit celebrates cultural diversity



Digital design student Peter Bassen poses in front of his artwork, "Embracing the Dream," at Ringling College of Art and Design.

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INTERESTED?

For more information about Embracing Our Differences, visit www.embracingourdifferences.org or call 941.928.0567.

Peter Bassen stood in front of his artwork "Embracing The Dream," beaming as a Sarasota County Technical Institute classmate took his photo.

An adult student with disabilities who could no longer work in his career field, Bassen is learning digital design and saw Embracing Our Differences as the perfect opportunity to express his creativity and appreciation for diversity.

Bassen selected a photo of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in a thoughtful pose and the words of King's "I Have a Dream" speech to help convey his message.

His classmate, Andrea Rankin, won the Adult Best in Show award for her creation, "Life's Library," featuring the words "Don't judge a book by its cover."

The quote by Bradenton resident Gloria Tracy that matched with her artwork reads, "Stop judging ... Notice skin color, hear accents, acknowledge the differences; THEN ask questions and be open to learning about others!"

The "Artists and Quoters Reception" for Embracing Our Differences, now in its ninth year, was Tuesday at Ringling College of Art and Design.

This year, the international art exhibit celebrating diversity received more than 4,500 professional, amateur, student and teacher submissions from 53 countries, 40 states and 127 schools all over the world.

Of those submissions, 39 were chosen to enlarge to billboard size and display on the Sarasota bayfront at Island Park during April and May.

The exhibit is free and open to the public.

According to Embracing Our Differences founding co-chairman Dennis McGillicuddy, last year the exhibit hit its 1,000,100 visitors mark with about half of the visitors living outside of Sarasota.

Almost 18,000 students visited the exhibit last year via free bus trips from the schools.

McGillicuddy talked about why he felt a calling to be a part of Embracing Our Differences with Executive Director Michael Shelton

"Since I was a child, my parents instilled respecting all people," McGillicuddy said. "I've tried to live my life that way, and this has been a wonderful way to express that. Through this exhibit, we share common values that make our world better."

Each summer, Embracing Our Differences announces a call to artists on art websites, blogs and social media sites. The organization also works with local teachers to encourage their students to participate.

A panel of judges who are on the steering committee reviews the artwork, and submissions are judged solely on merit. The judges do not know who the artists are or where the art comes from when they are in the selection process.

The quotes are selected in the same way by a separate panel of steering committee judges. The quote submission judges do not see the art submissions prior to making their selections and vice versa.

Art Director Tim Camerisi pairs the art and quotes after they all have been finalized. Committee members said they are amazed every year at how well the quotes coincide with the visual messages.

Another aspect of the exhibit is its educational outreach.

Embracing Our Differences provides buses to attend the exhibit for local schools at no cost to the schools or students. It also partners with local nonprofit organizations, such as Selby Gardens, the Sarasota Film Festival and Mote Marine, to give the students two field trips using one school bus.

The educational partners incorporate diversity into their field trip activities so that it gives the students a day of character-building exercises.

Embracing Our Differences also hosts a teacher workshop prior to the exhibit opening, demonstrating to teachers how they can incorporate the art and quotations into their lessons and adhere to Sunshine State Standards for the FCAT.

More than 100 students from Riverview High School's Co-Existence Club volunteer as docents for the exhibit.

Bassen, the digital design student, has found deep meaning by participating in Embracing Our Differences.

"Anyone, no matter their age or circumstances, can make their dreams come true," he said. "If you have a passion, you need to pursue it. Never believe when others say 'You can't do it.' With enough faith, you can accomplish anything. I'm living proof of that."