

Embracing Our Differences – Area Students Learn About Diverse Cultures in Unique Collaboration with 2017 World Rowing Championships



Brazil: Sarasota High School (Sarasota); Teacher: Debra Markley; created by a 12th grade student.

Embracing Our Differences has coordinated a new educational initiative with students and teachers at 39 schools in Sarasota and Manatee counties. Through the Adopt a Team program, elementary, middle and high school students created art reflecting the diverse cultures of 54 countries participating in the 2017 World Rowing Championships.

(Sarasota, Florida) Embracing Our Differences recently partnered with the 2017 World Rowing Championships in a new initiative called “Adopt a Team.” As a result, students at 39 schools throughout Sarasota and Manatee counties spent the past two months creating artwork representing 54 of the countries participating in the event. Billboard-sized enlargements of the students’ art will be displayed at the competitive event this September in Sarasota.

To launch the program, Embracing Our Differences hosted a teachers’ workshop in April. This intensive session provided area art teachers with the skills, strategies and resources needed to empower their students to create compelling multicultural artistic statements.

“Embracing Our Differences uses the transformational power of art to create awareness and promote diversity,” says Michael Shelton, executive director of Embracing Our Differences. “Thanks to this initiative, students learned about diverse cultures, religions and experiences; in the process, they became a vital part of the larger global community. It’s a natural extension of our core mission.” He adds that student artists will have the opportunity to meet with representatives from participating countries during the 2017 World Rowing Championships. Shelton explains that his staff is in the process of creating digital enlargements of the students’ artworks. An estimated 40,000 spectators and 1,700 athletes will see these large-scale canvas reproductions on the grounds of the athletic event. Embracing Our Differences will also coordinate transportation for 6,000 area students to attend the tournament over a three-day period, as part of the organization’s celebrated “Make-a-Day-of-It!” program.

Since 2004, downtown Sarasota’s Island Park has been the backdrop for Embracing Our Differences’ colorful, larger-than-life canvases integrating powerful imagery and thought-provoking messages celebrating diversity. The scale and impact of this outdoor exhibition has continued to grow, attracting more than two million visitors since its inception. This exhibit is the heart of a year-round program of activities designed to use art as a catalyst to create awareness and promote diversity.

Aside from the annual outdoor exhibition, Embracing Our Differences' ongoing educational outreach programs and initiatives include:

- **Teacher workshops** developed by nationally acclaimed educators to provide curricula and lesson plans relating to art appreciation, character building and diversity education. These include:
 - **Mastering the Art of the Quote Workshops:** This workshop is designed to take the difficult topics of diversity, prejudice and inclusion and teach students to express themselves through critical thinking and creative writing. Presented in partnership with Florida Studio Theatre, the workshop fulfills a critical need of providing teachers with creative resources to meet Florida's Language Arts Standards.
 - **Art Teacher Retreat:** This two-day seminar, developed in partnership with Ringling College of Art and Design, is designed to reinvigorate educators' teaching practices while offering new skills and strategies for inspiring students to explore the abstract concepts of prejudice, diversity and inclusion. Substitute teachers are provided for participating educators. **In 2016, the 30 participating art teachers were collectively responsible for more than 9,000 students from Sarasota and Manatee counties.**
 - **Lesson Plans Workshops:** Designed to deliver new and innovative methods of engaging students in critical thinking while creating the perfect environment for a rich discussion of the value of diversity and inclusion, all lesson plans identify the relevant curriculum standards, educational objectives, materials needed, activities, step-by-step instructional strategies and assessment guidelines.
 - **Summer Diversity Institute:** The workshop offers support and structures for educators to use with students in their classrooms and on the school campus. Participants work individually and in small groups based upon grade level, as well as school location, to create lesson plans and action plans that will be used within each school to provide support to both students and faculty. **48 participants from 11 schools took part in the 2016 workshop.**
 - The **"Make-a-Day-of-It!" program**, providing free bus transportation for area students and teachers to the outdoor exhibit and to other cultural venues, including Florida Studio Theatre, Mote Marine Laboratory, Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall, The Ringling, Sarasota Film Festival, and Marie Selby Botanical Gardens. **12,469 students participated during the 2016 school year.**
 - **Coexistence Clubs**, via partnerships with Riverview, Booker and North Port high schools, provide student-led docent tours of the annual exhibit. **Student docent tours were provided to 6,820 K-8 children visiting the 2016 exhibit. There are approximately 145 student docents.**

For more information about this exhibit or Embracing Our Differences, please call 941-404-5710 or visit www.embracingourdifferences.org.

About Embracing Our Differences

Embracing Our Differences is a not-for-profit organization that uses the transformational power of art and education to celebrate and promote the diversity of the human family. It accomplishes this through an annual, large-scale outdoor juried art exhibition and a comprehensive series of educational initiatives, programs and resources designed for teachers and students. **Visit www.embracingourdifferences.org.**