

# The Bradenton Times

## Embracing Our Differences Honored with The President's Volunteer Service Award

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by Staff Report



SARASOTA – For its ongoing commitment to promoting diversity through volunteerism and civic engagement, Manasota's **Embracing Our Differences** (EOD) has been honored with **The President's Volunteer Service Award**, which is one of the highest federal recognitions a non-profit organization can receive. The award was issued on behalf of U.S. President Barack Hussein Obama, and was presented by Che Barnett and Jetson Grimes of the **Sarasota MLK Celebration Committee**.

“This year we hosted our 32nd annual MLK celebration, motivated by Dr. King's desire to ‘create the beloved community’ as our theme,” says Barnett. “Embracing Our Differences empowers thousands of individuals, including students and teachers, to embrace diversity and promote tolerance and understanding through art and education. As Dr. King stated, ‘We must learn to live as brothers or perish as fools.’ Through its vital work,

Embracing Our Differences helps create a vibrant community that is safe and inclusive for all.”

Barnett adds that The President's Service Award is a new facet of the MLK Celebration Committee’s annual presentation. “We want to recognize people and groups that go above and beyond their commitment to community service,” says Barnett. “We feel that Embracing Our Differences lives up to that ideal.”

The President’s Volunteer Service Award is issued annually by Points of Light Institute and the Corporation for National and Community Service on behalf of the President of the United States to recognize the best in American spirit, and to encourage all Americans to improve their communities through volunteer service and civic participation.

Embracing Our Differences is a project of Coexistence, Inc., a local non-profit founded in 2004. The project showcases a community-based outdoor exhibits that promote positive, inspirational, artistic and verbal expressions of inclusion, acceptance and respect. The mission of Embracing Our Differences is to use the arts as a catalyst for creating awareness and promoting, throughout our community, the value of diversity as well as the benefits of inclusion, and the significance of the active rejection of hatred and prejudice.

For 11 years, Embracing Our Differences has drawn on the passion and perception of artists, children and others to create powerful statements of diversity and acceptance in its annual outdoor public art exhibition, which consists of 39 billboard-sized works of art and accompanying quotes. This year, the organization received 6,079 total works of art and statements from people representing 52 countries and 44 states. Students from 126 elementary, middle, and high schools comprised 60 percent of the submissions. This year’s exhibits, which closed on June 1, saw a record 293,000 visitors—20,000 more people than last year—who visited one or both exhibits.

Embracing Our Differences’ annual outdoor exhibits are the heart of a year-round program of activities designed to use art as a catalyst to create awareness and promote diversity. EOD's ongoing educational outreach

programs and initiatives include teacher workshops, creative writing workshops, lesson plan workshops, retreats and more—all of which can be found at [www.embracingourdifferences.org](http://www.embracingourdifferences.org).