

Embracing Our Differences Raises Record-Breaking Funds

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People & Business

By [Sarasota Scene](#) |

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“I am a senior at Sarasota High School and an officer of our Coexistence Club. On paper, I am the perfect student. I have a 4.5 GPA in the AICE honors program; I am in five clubs, for two of which I serve as a student leader. I swam for my varsity team for two years, work five shifts a week as a server, and I have a good social life. But behind the perfect student there is a self-hating, stress ball of a person who just wants to relax.” This is how 17-year-old Lucia Warren began her speech to a sold-out crowd of more than 430 guests at Embracing Our Differences 20th anniversary Annual Luncheon at Michael’s On East on February 17. Warren explained how deeply meaningful EOD’s educational programs have been for her. A recent breakthrough came when she participated in EOD’s Unity Day initiative, during which she was able to share her struggles with other participants. The support she received was beyond heartwarming—it was positively inspirational. As Warren put it, “Without this experience I don’t think I would have found the courage to take a step back from my overwhelming life, step out from behind my mask, and dare to be my vulnerable self.” Other students joined Warren on stage in moving testimonies of how EOD’s programs have propelled them forward in their lives.

Sarah Wertheimer, EOD's executive director, thanked the students for their courage and dedication to EOD's mission and briefly outlined the monumental milestones EOD has experienced in its 20 years.

“When we started in 2004, we had 95,000 visitors come to that first exhibit and that has now grown to more than 371,000 attendees who visited the display at Bayfront Park last year,” she told guests. “And we know that this year’s exhibition will have an even larger impact traveling to Butler Park in North Port for a month, followed by a month in Bradenton—hopefully. Clearly, more and more people are searching for the creativity and inspiration that is represented in our exhibit.”

Wertheimer added that, in addition to visitor growth, “our art and creative writing submissions have broken records again this year. When we did our call for artists for our first exhibit, we received 124 submissions; this year we received 13,733 submissions from 119 countries, 45 states and 424 schools.”

Wertheimer also outlined the milestones achieved with EOD's year-long educational initiatives, which impacted the lives of more than 52,000 area students in 2022. In the past five years, EOD has sturdily built on its in-school programming, which includes coordinating two different reading programs in Sarasota-Manatee schools; an annual scholarship program for high school and college students; programs created for high school students that feature docent training as part of the Coexistence Club experience and a Unity Day program; and teacher workshops that provide area educators with skills, strategies and resources relating to arts appreciation, character building and diversity education.

Wertheimer also took a moment to poignantly acknowledge the 106 submissions the organization had received from artists and writers in Ukraine. “For the past five years, Russia and Ukraine have been the top five countries, after the U.S., for the most submissions. When we receive submissions from across the globe, we get a tiny glimpse into other people’s lives, cultures, perspectives, and experiences. Through this, we’re able to broaden our own perspectives, and help our students and our community do the same.”

Finally, Wertheimer reminded guests that EOD had received a \$100,000 challenge match from Charles & Margery Barancik Foundation for its 20th anniversary. She also announced that a \$50,000 match, provided by B. Aline Blanchard, The Swart Family and Patti and David Wertheimer, was specifically raised for the luncheon, and she invited guests to join in the fundraising efforts.

EOD's 20th anniversary committee was co-chaired by Aundria and Johnny Castleberry, Debbie and Larry Haspel, Linda Poteat-Brown and Allen Brown, Sofie Wachtmeister and Dr. Brooks Tracey and Sheree Kaz Zaslavsky and Larry Zaslavsky.

The Presenting Partner for EOD's Annual Luncheon was Gulf Coast Community Foundation. Other sponsors and partners included Chris Craft, Winnebago Industries Foundation, Gerald and Sondra Biller, David and Susan Macrae, David and Patti Wertheimer, Bealls, Inc., Ringling College of Art & Design, the Boxser Diversity Initiative, Johnny and Aundria Castleberry, and Jim and Charlie Ann Sypret.

For 20 years, Embracing Our Differences has drawn on the passion and perception of artists, students, writers, and others to create powerful statements of diversity, respect, kindness and acceptance in its annual outdoor public art exhibition consisting of 50 billboard-sized works of art and accompanying quotes. The scale and impact of this outdoor exhibition has continued to grow, attracting more than four million visitors since its inception.

How can area residents and visitors help celebrate EOD's 20th anniversary which is entitled "Embracing Kindness?"

By "joining us in creating a world where kindness, respect and individuality are valued," says Wertheimer.

"This universal message is a message of action. It's coming together and not closing our eyes to people in need. Each one of us holds the key to open the door to kindness, compassion and understanding. Now, more than ever, it's time to work together to eliminate the barriers of prejudice that hold back the full range of human potential. Today, the message of Embracing our Differences—that of inclusion, respect and kindness—is more vital than ever."

The "Embracing Kindness" exhibition opens in Butler Park in downtown North Port on March 22, with a free opening event on Saturday, March 25, noon to 3 p.m. The event features music by Monkey Finger, food trucks, and kid-friendly activities.

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

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