

Impact Statement

Noah Hrung, Grade 11.

Robert's Vision for the World, 2023.

Digital art, 19 x 15.5 inches.

Millburn High School, Short Hills, NJ

Unsung Hero: Robert R. Williams

With a post-pandemic world, I wanted to look back at the past at heroes who helped others in the face of disease and sickness. I landed on Robert Williams, who helped find a cure for beriberi and advocated against nutrition deficiency. When I reflect on his contributions, I am most in awe over how his work can still be felt today. With modern vitamin-enriched food, I feel Williams' contributions are not recognized enough. Furthermore, I am inspired by his unquitting and genuine drive for progress. The fact that the horrors of others' suffering stuck with him since childhood reveals to me that Robert truly cared to help make the world a better place. Alongside his work to make thiamine cheap for all, despite criticism, I truly believe that Robert is a selfless figure to look up to. Through leveraging his knowledge of science, Williams was able to spark social change beyond the lab, and also across the world.

I found the way that thiamine was extracted and isolated from rice husks extremely interesting, as I often don't hear about the origins of vitamins. Through my research on Robert Williams, I noticed that there was a connection to rice later on in Williams' life, in which Williams advocated for nutrient enrichment in popularly consumed food products such as rice. I felt this progression over a storyline, from the origins of thiamine to advocacy, which is still apparent today, was a great way to represent Williams' contributions. Rice is involved in both the beginning and the end but is completely different with Robert Williams' involvement. I really wanted to emphasize a relatable and modern way people could understand such developments, in which enriched food options are still existent and are ubiquitous. Thus, I wanted to demonstrate how Williams has impacted others, rather than just depicting the processes and steps that led to the ability to do so. With advocacy for thiamine-enriched food, I also made use of the thiamine molecule as Williams' glasses. With this, I wanted the artwork to be reflective of his pursuit to discover the compound as well as his vision to help others worldwide against beriberi. With his direct gaze to the viewer, I wish to show Robert as someone who perseveres and pushes on. Amidst controversy over patents, or debates over nutritional deficiency, Robert Williams' work spans decades with sustained motivation to help others.

Williams' contributions to food insecurity are really inspiring, in which he was able to advocate for combatting nutritional deficiencies on an international level. Though I haven't been able to find a cure for a disease, Robert Williams' story motivates me to help fight against food insecurity as well. Specifically, I enjoy combining my artistic interests with helping others, where I make notecards for meal packages delivered to Asian American senior citizens via an organization called Heart of Dinner (<https://www.heartofdinner.org/>). Food insecurity amongst Asian American elders was something that I noticed this organization was working against, and I felt the need to help out the initiative in any way I could. I've made a number of cards personally (see additional artwork file), and I decided to bring it to my community by hosting workshops to help other people help make notecards as well. In total, my school made over 100

cards which would be paired with regular meal packages. Even though Robert Williams was faced with the word beriberi, which means “I can’t, I can’t,” through his scientific discovery and application of his findings, Williams’ work continues to affect numerous people in the modern day. The time I spent on this artwork truly made me consider the reasons why Williams deserves greater representation, in which I now understand yet another way “changing the world” is possible. More specifically though, I’ve learned that everything starts small—and I take small steps towards progress within my local community. In both impacting people through modern-day food supply as well as his inspiring story, I hope that more people will hear about his work.