

Impact Statement

Nora Morrow, Grade 8.

Reaching For Vivien, 2023.

Printmaking on paper, 20.5 x 16 inches.

Lavilla School of the Arts, Jacksonville, FL

Unsung Hero: Vivien Thomas

Growing up, sometimes I would hear about a baby that passed. I didn't believe it. Babies should be able to grow up and live their lives, they only just started it after all. Starting this project, I knew I wanted to find someone who gave these young lives a chance to live. Vivien Theodore Thomas was that person.

Vivien, a black man, discovered a cure to Blue Baby Syndrome, against all odds. This condition causes a baby's heart to not get enough oxygen, resulting in them turning a blueish color. Without Vivien's technique and care, new-born babies with this condition would only have days to live before their life was cut short. Thousands of mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, would all be left without the baby, daughter, son, or sibling that they would have loved forever. Despite facing prejudice, poverty and racism, Vivien unselfishly gave these young souls a chance to live and become someone extraordinary. Instead of giving up and submitting to the segregation standards of the time, he instead found workaround solutions like coaching other white surgeons through his procedure. He was determined to save the future lives of children and refused to stop his brilliance and dedication. And for overcoming these many obstacles I will forever be inspired by him.

On November 29, 1944, Vivien's procedure destined to save lives from Blue Baby Syndrome was conducted for the first time. On this day Vivien became a hero, but the honor and recognition went to someone else. Someone who was white enough to be the face of this achievement. Vivien was always smart, regardless of his limited education and poverty. His desire was to become a doctor, which cost much more than he earned. He worked as a carpenter, a trade his father taught him. This also taught him how to be gentle with his hands. The Great Depression caused him to look for new employment. Through a friend, Vivien was able to secure a job as a surgical research assistant at Vanderbilt University. However, he would only be paid as a janitor due to his race. He quickly picked up prepping for surgical procedures. And he eventually came up with new procedures. Proving his worth, he asked, and received a raise. When time came to test Vivien's new Blue Baby procedure, he was prohibited from touching the baby because of his color. In order to execute the procedure due to these racist rules, he guided a white surgeon through the procedure. Vivien's story is one of perseverance, overcoming racism, and showing kindness, which are all key aspects of my print. When planning for my piece I made a list of imagery I wanted to include. Blue baby, red heart, people. The blue baby, representing Blue Baby Syndrome, is made of several hearts. However, one particular heart is red, which is closest to where a baby's actual heart would be. When Vivien invented the cure to Blue Baby Syndrome, he not only saved the baby from dying, but also turned their blue, cold, dying heart, into one that is filled with love, rather than fear, life rather than death, and warmth, rather than cold. I also wanted to represent Vivien and the struggles he faced, as well as his perseverance. At first glance, the background seems to be

random shapes in values of grey. But this background holds a very heavy meaning. One that is more truthful than a simple glance could show. These shapes are people in various values. The darkest people are the furthest in the back. As the figures are layered to the front, they get whiter. Black people were often pushed to the shadows, to the back, where no one could see them. White people covered them and took the spotlight, the honor, and the glory. Vivien's heroic work, instead of being recognized as his, was rewarded to a white man who was seen in the front and received the headlines. His name on the discovery and cure. Vivien was someone who was "just there." No. Vivien didn't do anything. He just handed the surgeon tools. But the reality is that without him, that child's life would have been lost. Without Vivien coaching through his life saving procedure, that baby would have died. In my piece, one of the baby's hands is extended and it is reaching for a black figure—Vivien--her true savior. A kind, selfless, unsung hero. On the baby's hand is a heart, representing Vivien's kindness and the kindness he shared. I designed this print to seem simple, but I have a hidden complex story that takes a little while to reveal itself. Just like it took a little while for Vivien to receive the credit he so deserved.

As a young woman, sometimes the credit for my accomplishments goes to someone who better fits the face of a headliner. Usually, I told myself to let it go. It was ok, I knew what I did. But in Vivien's case it took the world 30 years to accept that a black man could accomplish something like this. Thinking back, I shouldn't have stayed silent then. And I will not now. This project reminded me that it's important to give credit to the people who truly deserve it. People like Vivien, who fought so hard to save all children regardless of their skin color yet couldn't receive any recognition simply because of their skin color. The lessons I learned through this project are some that I will remember forever. I want to share Vivien's story to the thousands of people who survived blue baby syndrome. They need to know who saved them and gave them the life that they're living. I have since made an Instagram account named "A Memorial to Vivien Thomas". Link: https://instagram.com/a_memorial_to_vivien_thomas?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y= Vivien is an inspiration. His work and contributions will forever be remembered. And to Vivien's Thomas—I will put you in the headlines.