

Impact Statement

Yerim Lee, Grade 11.

Explore the Unknown, 2022.

Digital art, 12 x 16 inches.

Newport High School, Bellevue, WA

Unsung Hero: Olaudah Equiano

Exploring the unknown is attractive but, at the same time, dangerous and risky. It is incredibly challenging to go through a path where no one has gone before. Despite the danger, I believe that exploring the unknown is valuable because it lets us find something better than the present. Those who challenge themselves to explore the unknown have strong faith in themselves and a firm set of values they strive to achieve, even when they meet obstacles and failures. Olaudah Equiano was one of the earliest writers to publish an autobiography with a slave narrative. As a formerly enslaved African American, he shaped his voice by sharing his story of the inhumane and brutal slavery system he went through. With his courage, he successfully brought awareness to the society, ultimately leading to the Slave Trade Act of 1807, ending the African slave trade in Britain.

Stories contain great power in them. From bed night stories to war hero anecdotes, stories bring sparks of inspiration and hopefulness and help readers feel comfort and a sense of kinship through stories similar to their experiences. I find Olaudah Equiano inspiring and heroic because he dared to share his story as a formerly enslaved person when it wasn't supported widely and was dangerous in some instances. With his firm beliefs, he influenced others into abolitionism and actively worked to take a step further towards the end of slavery. His unique perspective as a formerly enslaved person enlightened many Americans who had previously carried racial stereotypes and accepted inaccurate information about slavery. His autobiography quickly became a best seller in Europe.

As someone who struggles to share their own thoughts with others, I respect Olaudah Equiano's courage in sharing his story. Although he participated in activities other than writing an autobiography, I believe that his autobiography played a significant role in making him a hero. Other than bringing him fame and the title of the first black author to shape his voice, he brought hope and awareness to the community. Moreover, the story of his early life was very shocking to me. I knew that societal beliefs were very different back in the 19th century. Still, I wasn't aware that slave traders kidnapping Africans and enslaving them forcefully was morally acceptable at the time. I was fascinated by Equiano's resilience against setbacks and the intelligence that helped him survive as an enslaved individual.

In my creative interpretation, I illustrated Olaudah Equiano's journey of being kidnapped and enslaved, sailing around the sea, and recording all his knowledge and experience in his autobiography, <The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vasa, The African, Written by Himself>. Writing his autobiography wouldn't have been easy, as he would have had to recall all his painful memories of getting kidnapped at a young age, being separated from his sister, and being sold to multiple different owners until he was able to purchase his freedom. However, through his use of vivid imagery vividly when describing his

hometown and the incidents he went through, he led the readers to become more absorbed in his story and feel it with their whole hearts.

My artwork contains Olaudah Equiano maintaining peace, resisting the anger and resentment towards the slavery system, and thoughtfully writing his book, hoping to positively influence society. While time flies and people change, his book will remain firm and steady, ready to change the world to become a better place for everyone.

After researching Olaudah Equiano and creating an artwork portraying him, I posted my work on my social media. I tried to share his story and significance with my friends. Additionally, I found a TikTok account called "Equiano.Stories" that contains short videos from the film about Equiano's life. I linked the account profile as well so that people can watch the short videos and better understand Equiano's true story. This year, I learned about the harsh realities enslaved African Americans faced in US history by taking the AP United States History class. However, I did not learn about Olaudah Equiano during class, and I first came to know him through this contest. Just like him, I believe that there are many unsung heroes that need recognition. Without the thousands of those individuals, our society would have looked significantly different. I hope people around me also take time to learn about the unsung heroes and appreciate their sacrifice and courage in paving the path to a better, more equal, and peaceful world.