

Impact Statement

Sophia Waller, Grade 8.

Reaching for the Stars, 2022.

Mixed media, 24 x 28 inches.

LaVilla School of the Arts, Jacksonville, FL

Unsung Hero: Henrietta Swan Leavitt

I discovered Henrietta Swan Leavitt while looking at the available unsung heroes on the Lowell Milken website. Although there were many options to choose from, I was drawn to Henrietta and her captivating story of being a pioneer of strong ambitions during a time of discrimination towards such women. Henrietta Swan Leavitt was born on July 4th, 1868, in Massachusetts. Leavitt attended Oberlin College for two years, before transferring and completing her undergraduate degree at Radcliffe College, formally known as Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women. She began volunteering at the Harvard College Observatory after gaining her undergraduate degree. It was there where Leavitt started to explore and build on her passion for astronomy, and eventually earned her credits towards a graduate degree in astronomy. Soon after this, Leavitt discovered a formula that could be used to measure the distance from Earth to stars and other galaxies. Leavitt's profound revelation on luminosity in stars paved the way for modern-day space exploration and astronomy. I ultimately choose Henrietta Swan Leavitt as my unsung hero because of her strong-willed determination towards finding out answers about our universe, and persevering in her aspiration during a time of discrimination towards independent women.

My research with this project first started in the Lowell Milken Unsung Heroes website, with a basic layout of Henrietta Swan Leavitt's life, and accomplishments. I researched more into depth about Henrietta's childhood, and official research through resources like Wikipedia, Britannica and YouTube. After gathering sufficient information, I started to create thumbnail sketches with the main goal in mind being to find a way to incorporate Leavitt's accomplishment involving star luminosity as the main focal point of my piece. Eventually, after much trial and error, I ended up with my final composition; Leavitt standing on a ruler while looking through a telescope, observing the many stars in space. I decided to include a ruler in my final piece as a simple representation of the formula that Leavitt had invented to measure the distance between Earth and other stars and galaxies. I also made the decision of including newspaper articles, and pages from Leavitt's actual research about astronomy in a form of collage on the ruler, to show how Leavitt's work she did throughout her life paved the way towards her groundbreaking discovery. For the background of the piece, I took major inspiration from Vincent Van Gogh and his many artworks that including depictions of stars, including the infamous *Starry Night*. I tried my best to emulate Van Gogh's style, in both stroke and color, in order to create a sort of "character" to the stars in the background.

During the process of making my piece, I learned the importance of doing research and how it can make the conceptual part of my artwork both easier and more efficient. I've also learned about how essential brainstorming and planning is to the ultimate success of an art piece. When creating an artwork that's depicting the story of a person and their accomplishments, producing a composition that's not only understandable, but creative in its presentation to viewers is vital.

By creating multiple thumbnails and exploring different techniques and styles, I was able to find the idea that I thought was the best approach for my Henrietta Swan Leavitt piece. For me, planning out new artworks has always been fun, especially in this project, where I was creating an idea based on real life discoveries. When it's come to real life though, it's sometimes hard for me to plan ahead and get a grasp on something right from the start. I've always struggled with this burden, and from time to time, this little curse of mine always gets to me hard, getting me off track, unfocused... etc. Based on this project, I want to use the type of planning I used here and apply it to my own personal experiences and struggles.

Overall, I'm confident in my final product and how I've executed it. The creation of this project, from start to finish, had its missteps and errors, like every art piece does. There were times where I felt discouraged as the ideas for my painting flourished onto the canvas. Whenever this uneasy feeling crept inside me, the only thing I could think of was Henrietta Swan Leavitt and her drive of character. Her determination as an astronomer looking for answers in an ever-growing universe, and as a woman of persistence left me looking back at my canvas not with worry, but with inspiration. With motivation. With only one thought able to build in my head; "If she could do it, so can I."