

Impact Statement

Seraphina Gillman, Grade 11.

And I Was Still Determined, 2020.

Acrylic on paper, 24 x 18 Inches.

Hopewell Valley Central High School, Pennington, NJ

Unsung Hero: Sheyann Webb

I found the story of Sheyann Webb through the Lowell Milken Center website. What she did was impactful, and the image her story portrays is impactful, this young girl facing the violence of America's racism head on. There were so many children like Sheyann Webb who marched, like the children of the Birmingham Children's Crusade, who were brutalized by the people who had sworn to protect them. She stands out from the crowd for how young she was, and the adversity she faced in her community because of her choice to march. I feel that her story speaks to the present, where young men and women are at the head of movements that look towards the future, fighting against gun violence, climate change and tyranny in their own countries. Webb was one face amongst many, but every person who fought against American racism, the most vile institution to curse this country, is a person of importance.

I looked into Webb's own accounts of her childhood for my research. I watched interviews she was a part of and read excerpts of the book she wrote. The title of the piece itself is a direct quote from Webb's interview with Biography. What was most important to me was to portray her story as she told it. I wanted to capture both what she faced when she marched to Montgomery, the angry dogs, the tear gas, the armed police, and what pushed her forwards against it, her freedom song. The song is a point of faith and innocence, the pages fall around her feet as she looks towards the audience. Webb was young, I wanted her to be portrayed as brave but vulnerable. This is shown in part by a ribbon that unrolls from her hair, as ribboned hair is often seen on young girls. While she is young and the ribbon represents that, both her steely gaze and the red of the ribbon, a color that represents bravery, shows her great virtue. She is framed by the violence as her story is, but the ribbon is the innocence that makes her story impactful. Webb looks towards the viewer, with her heart in her hand, literally. She was a child, she was vulnerable, she was scared, and even so she moved forward, determined still.

There are many other intentional parts of this piece. One of the police officers has a "Marion P.D." badge on his helmet, as Marion was where the march devolved and where she would be when police and marchers clashed. The people are actually taken from civil rights protest photos, some from Birmingham and the Birmingham children's march, some from independent instances of police violence. The marchers are very human and are covered in red to show the bravery they share with Webb. The police officers are very different. Their skin is ghostly pale, their facial features are poorly defined, almost mannequin-like, and they are covered in blues that contrast with the red of the protestors, a color that represents the police force. This is made to show the inhumanity in how the police treated the protestors.

Most importantly, in my opinion, is the sunrise framed by the smoke of tear gas. A bird is flying the cage, a reference to Maya Angelou's "Caged Bird", and moving towards the sun rising on a new day. While the tear gas has plenty of blue and white, representative of the police force,

through it purples and yellows can be seen. The sunrise shines through the suffering, a new day is here, and change will come.

Webb's story, like the stories of many other young protesters, shows me how powerful my voice can be if I merely put myself forward. It's so easy to stifle yourself, to keep yourself hidden for fear of oncoming pain, but you will never be heard if you keep quiet and still. I want to be able to speak on what I care about and influence change, and Webb inspires me to take a more active role in doing just that. She was half my age when she strapped on her marching shoes, what's stopping me from following in her footsteps? Webb was more vulnerable than anyone else in the march from Selma to Montgomery, and the people that fought with her came together to protect her. Webb was kept safe, her teacher held her hand as she marched, protestors picked her up as she ran from dogs and batons, and Martin Luther King Jr. sent out rescue in the form of the bus that took her home. Most importantly, even facing threats, possible violence, and the possibility of losing their income, her parents stood behind her and did everything they could to support her and keep her safe. I cannot help but be encouraged by her story, knowing that should I make myself vulnerable there will be people who will stand with me.