

## Impact Statement

Cailyn Choi, Grade 10.  
***My Right to Ride***, 2024.  
Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 inches.  
Lakeside School, Seattle, WA  
Unsung Hero: Elizabeth Jennings Graham

Everyone knows the story of Rosa Parks, but who knows about Elizabeth Jennings Graham? I surely did not, yet after learning about Graham, it is clear that she was the “original” Rosa Parks, a trailblazing figure who resisted discrimination about a hundred years before what we know as the Civil Rights Movement. I came across her name while scrolling through the list of unsung heroes. The brief introduction to her character intrigued me, and I recognized the familiarity of her story. It sounded much like the popular story of activist Rosa Parks. Growing up learning about the Civil Rights Movement and prominent figures such as Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks, I realized that many people such as Elizabeth J. Graham, were similarly fighting against racial oppression but went completely unrecognized. In July of 1854, Graham was thrown off a streetcar into the streets of Manhattan while simply on her way to Church. Her persistence inspired me despite the physical violence and force used against her.

As previously mentioned, my research began when I was drawn to her story from the short summary presented on the website. I immediately went to Google to gather additional information. I came across her background as an elementary school teacher who taught at both private and public schools for African American students when discrimination and segregation were heavily prevalent. In my painting, I wanted to pay tribute to her influence and role in education, hence the classroom in the background. However, the main focus of my art was based on her activism and her advocacy for desegregation. The center of the piece displays Graham peacefully sitting in a streetcar as the police attempt to stop her. As my research continued, I learned that she came from a recognized family. Her father was known for being one of the first Black men to hold a patent as he was a successful tailor and an influential figure in New York’s African American community at the time. Her mother was also a prominent figure in her community, giving speeches about the importance of knowledge, and advocating against slavery and discrimination. Therefore, after her incident of being thrown off a streetcar by the car conductor and police, her family was able to file a lawsuit against the driver and the streetcar company. A year later, she had won her case as the judge claimed that “Colored Persons, if sober, well-behaved and free from disease, had the same rights as others and could neither be excluded by any rules of the company, nor by force or violence.” Her story inspired and sparked conversation surrounding racial equality and desegregation, causing recognition by prominent figures such as Fredrick Douglass, Reverend James W.C. Pennington, and more. However, it was only after ten more years and many more similar cases that segregation of streetcars finally came to an end. Despite this, Graham’s character is admirable as she played a significant role in paving the way toward change and was influential in her persistence when advocating for human rights. Through her side-profile portrait, I hoped to show her perseverance, strength, and courage that I was inspired by.

Creating this piece consisted of many drafts. Composition, color, dimension, and detail were all important aspects that I wanted to ensure were accurately representing her story and who she was. Finally, I came up with a composition that included the main parts of her story that I found most prominent, displaying Graham's role in education, her story of valor in the streetcar, and a detailed portrait of her facial features and expression. However, I came across the challenge of finding a detailed portrait or photograph of her. I resorted to blending my imagination and a single photo of her to come up with a portrait, constructing it so that her expression was full of courage and empowerment, two traits of hers that I came to admire. I think that the blend of colors and the structural component of the piece creates dimension, showing the depth of her story and how her acts were much more than just resisting segregation. Her story is an example for many generations, past, present, and future to refer to and be inspired by. I also focused on the highlighted features of the piece, purposefully using shadows, highlights, and detail to bring the painting to life in hopes of accurately representing her story.

Throughout the process of researching her story and creating this piece, I've been inspired to explore other unsung heroes. I've also learned that so many impactful lives go unnoticed, and I hope to use this experience to further expose stories of those who share similar qualities to Elizabeth Jennings Graham. I aspire to share these stories by researching more about other heroes and creating a collection of visual representations to draw attention to their lives and spread awareness in my community. Additionally, acts against other marginalized groups are still seen globally, so I hope to emulate her ability to use her voice to advocate against discrimination and inequality to make changes in an unjust society. Elizabeth Jennings Graham left a legacy of courage that deserves to be recognized, and I am sure that those who hear her story will be inspired just as I was.

Additional sources used for research and reference photos:

<https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/elizabeth-jennings-graham/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth\\_Jennings\\_Graham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elizabeth_Jennings_Graham)

<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/educational-resources/i-did-not-get-car>