

Impact Statement

Daniel Kim, Grade 9

***Would You Listen to My Story?*, 2024.**

Digital art, 20 x 16 inches.

The Nueva School, Menlo Park, CA

Unsung Hero: Olaudah Equiano

There is nothing more human in this world than to have the courage to speak and the power to inspire. As an immigrant, my experiences have taught me nothing, if not the profound impact sharing our individual stories can have on preserving our identities and shaping the perceptions of those around us. The efforts and hopes of so many before me in my communities have allowed me opportunities that were once viewed as unattainable on the basis of racism and discrimination. Their voices calling for equality reflect that of my Unsung Hero, Olaudah Equiano, a man who turned his despair into liberation for all. He was a symbol of resilience who found a way to fight one of the greatest atrocities in human history and stand for equality in a time when it seemed infeasible. Having been kidnapped and forced into slavery and surviving the horrors of the Middle Passage, he was still able to, through his entrepreneurial skills, buy his freedom at a time when slavery felt like an inescapable fate. Despite accomplishing what some believed impossible, Equiano did not rest on his laurels but raised his voice for the people suffering as he had, sparking passion in hundreds of people as a British abolitionist. His autobiography titled "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano" led to a significant push in British public opinion and was instrumental in the movement towards the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. His entire life is a shining example of the power each voice has and the change that can come from just one person.

In my reading of Olaudah Equiano, I was moved most by Equiano's determination throughout his entire life and the strength it took to continue his efforts in activism. Despite experiencing firsthand the abuse and tortures slavery inflicted, Equiano managed to turn a living nightmare into a powerful tool to drive change and create a better future for not just himself but for his entire community. His entrepreneurial skill led to so much success that he achieved freedom purchased by his own hand. Yet, he decided to forgo that path for a life of activism, using his life experiences in a biography to dismantle the pro-slavery views that propagated this era. Even after his literary success, he continued building the foundation for a movement that would continue to amplify the voices of activists to this day, helping in the fight for universal equality. Thus, the central idea behind my artwork was to convey the essence of Equiano as a person and as a revolutionary. By depicting his harrowing experiences and most significant successes, I wanted to show him for everything he was: a fighter, a writer, and a leader.

In creating this portrait, I aimed to capture those elements by presenting the narrative of Equiano through a chronology that depicts his resilience and continued influence today. I wanted this piece to not only portray Equiano's journey but also the profound impact he left on the world—a message I believe is of utmost importance in our current age. This is why I placed two young children in the foreground, on either side of Equiano. These children, representatives of the future generations he tirelessly fought to protect and inspire, wear expressions brimming with the optimism and hope Equiano envisioned for the future—hope that he inspired. This intentionally hopeful mood in the foreground contrasts sharply with the darker mood of the background, which delves into the tribulations of Equiano's past. There, I have depicted the harrowing experiences that marked the early life of Equiano, starting with his kidnapping alongside his sister and their separation from their family. This moment marked the onset of a long and brutal journey through the darkness of slavery, an ordeal that molded him into the staunch advocate we recognize today. The stark contrast from the hopeful beginning to this oppressive reality highlights the severe adversities he overcame. On the other side of the background, behind his right shoulder, Equiano is shown amidst his battle against the institutionalized evil of slavery with pen and paper. His autobiography brought this problem to the forefront of civilization, consequently challenging the foundations of its justification and resulting in a radical rethinking of human rights. Like his autobiography, I designed this portrait to be more than a mere depiction of historical events; it serves as a reminder of the enduring impact of individuals like Equiano, who championed change. By encapsulating his struggles and triumphs, the artwork pays homage to his legacy as a pivotal figure in the fight for human rights, inspiring ongoing dialogue and action toward justice and equality.

Researching Olaudah Equiano has been eye-opening. Like many others, I was told as a child of the limitless potential we as individuals possessed, but witnessing the change one man's story can bring for the better is frankly inspiring. Thanks to this project, I learned about a man whose actions I had never heard about in a classroom setting. I could read firsthand the words of a survivor who stood up and made an impact, a true leader and a hero. This realization has made me rethink my perspective about the rarely talked about portions of history and the importance of amplifying these overlooked heroes. Going forward, I am excited to share this artwork with my community through school exhibitions, presentations, and social media pages. This journey has motivated me to read further into history and seek out other unsung heroes whose efforts have contributed to shaping our modern world. By sharing my artwork here and the story behind its creation, I hope to inspire others to appreciate these often-forgotten people and their influence on our shared human history.