

Impact Statement

Jennifer Zheng, Grade 10

Unveiling 9066, 2024.

Oil on canvas, 18 x 14 inches.

Palm Harbor University High School, Clearwater, FL

Unsung Hero: Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga

The American government was founded on the pillars of justice and equality and out from the ashes of prejudice and years of misrepresentation. While these founding principles helped lay the foundations of diversity in our ever-growing world today, the reality remains that these same ideas were not always maintained. As someone who is deeply invested in how equality has shaped events in history, I believe that there holds great value in confronting the hidden truths of our previous generations, even the grim and disgraceful aspects. Upon searching for an unsung hero, I was actively looking for themes of injustice and discrimination, as those are arguably society's most dire issues. As I skimmed through the list of approved Unsung Heroes, I kept returning to the story of Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, a Japanese American activist whose pivotal research helped win many lawsuits regarding reparations for Japanese Americans who endured internment during World War II. I felt especially drawn to Aiko's strong sense of unwavering commitment to seek justice, even decades after her own experience with Executive Order 9066. Through her research, she found successful and ground-breaking ways to ensure that those who suffered are fairly compensated by amplify the cries of injustice from the voices of Japanese Americans.

I began my research at the root of her inspiration for activism and catalyst for her confinement in the Japanese internment camps, namely, Executive Order 9066. Honors student Herzig- The words of Aiko's principal forever changed her life as she recalls her principal saying, "You don't deserve to get your high school diplomas because your people bombed Pearl Harbor". In just a few words, Aiko along with many other Japanese students were sent to Manzanar, an internment camp in California Owens Valley. Adding to Aiko's already piling struggles was the fact that she was pregnant and had to give birth at Manzanar. Conditions in the internment camps were harsh, often characterized by overcrowded living spaces and limited access to necessities. Despite facing such torture, Aiko's determination never faltered. Even decades after the inhuman experiences of Executive Order 9066, she continued to battle the scars of wartime discrimination and illustrated this by beginning research on Japanese American incarceration and looking into National Archives records. Aiko was later hired by the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians as a lead researcher, where she continued Japanese reparation efforts by unearthing one of her most significant findings, a copy of the "Final Report" draft, which included information on intelligence sources agreeing that Japanese Americans were not a threat to the national security. Aiko's findings exposed the lies of Executive Order 9066 and provided evidence that the policy was likely a product of racial prejudice. Aiko's relentless research and uncovering of government documents like the "Final Report" played a vital role in CWRIC's report, Personal Justice Denied, which included the darkest truths behind the incarceration of Japanese Americans. After reading Aiko's heart-felt biography, I was even more admired by Aiko for her driving strength and her belief in the timeless nature of positive change. I felt even more inspired by her ongoing determination and courage to expose the

injustices committed to her and her people, even in a government tainted with forces that seek to silence unwanted voices.

My piece commemorating Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga aimed to capture the essence of her story while also incorporating visual cues to the tragic Japanese American incarceration. I wanted to evoke a mixed sense of mood, one of melancholy and solemnity, and to do so, I first printed and glued on copies of newspapers and pamphlets with headlines “EXCLUSION” and “JAPANESE”. These were purposely arranged to enforce one of the themes of my art piece, namely, prejudice against Japanese Americans. Next to the collage of pamphlets is a close-up portrait of Aiko wearing a warming smile and a gentle expression. Although not positioned in the center, Aiko’s portrait is still easily the focus of my piece as she is painted in color and appears larger than the other elements of my piece. Furthermore, on the bottom left are two Japanese siblings dressed as if they were leaving to some place. The bag next to them is a vital symbol of personal identity, since their family name “Mochida” is engraved on it. Both siblings have an identification tag attached to them, which aims to de-humanize them and illustrate the bleakness of Japanese Internment camps. To balance the melancholy atmosphere, I decided to incorporate the report, Personal Justice Denied, right behind the younger portrait of Aiko, which aimed to display change and equality across time. To further stress the significance of the report and Aiko, I painted them in color while the rest of my piece in monochromatic. Most importantly, I positioned the elements in a meaningful way so that on the left, the injustices of Executive Order 9066 are being contrasted to the equality represented by Aiko and her work on the right.

Creating this artwork has allowed me to recognize the importance of activism in the face of injustice while also deepening my respect for the various change-makers of our world. Aiko’s story of resilience is a constant reminder that unwavering dedication and relentless pursuit of the truth are just some ways we can instigate change. I intend to further amplify Aiko’s spirit by providing aid to the local, underprivileged community and continue to advocate for the creative expression of ideas. So let us continue to shed light on the tainted aspects of history, as it is not only a respectful gesture for those who have endured hardships beyond our imagination but also serves as a constant reminder of society’s most vulnerable characteristics of ignorance and hypocrisy which could easily be prevented through public awareness and inclusivity.