

## Impact Statement

Abraham Kim, Grade 10

***Staying Unchained***, 2024.

Acrylic, colored pencil, and pen on paper, 17 x 12 inches.

Northern Valley Regional High School at Old Tappan, Harrington Park, NJ

Unsung Hero: Elizabeth Jennings Graham

From kindergarten to high school, I have read biographies, watched documentaries, and listened to history teachers about Rosa Parks and her protest against segregation. I firmly believed she was the first to protest segregation in transportation until I came across Elizabeth Jennings Graham. Elizabeth who was going to church, was barred from entering the streetcar because of her skin color, similar to Rosa's case. What separates Elizabeth from Parks was in which period they lived. Elizabeth not only saw segregation but also slavery, something she could not be a bystander to. She actively demonstrated against slavery, leaving herself vulnerable to violent mobs and unconstitutional laws. Additionally, she taught at a school for formerly enslaved children, supporting their experience of freedom and liberty. After her incident on the streetcar, she shared her story with the New York Daily Tribune newspaper, run by abolitionists Horace Green and Frederick Douglass, and caught the nation's attention. With support from her father, Elizabeth went on to sue the Third Avenue Railroad company which was responsible for the streetcar. The courts ruled, "Colored persons if sober, well-behaved and free from disease, have the same rights as others and could neither be excluded by any rules of the company, nor by force or violence", prompting desegregation of cars in New York. Although her life became unknown afterward, her commitment to fighting against discrimination in a period where half of her country enslaved her people helped inspire me to memorialize her. But what strengthened my inspiration was her boldness to stand up in court and win her case as a black woman, especially since women and blacks were treated fairly. Her qualities as a person shaped my view of her story and her legacy.

Elizabeth's qualities were awe-inspiring for me because they happened to be traits I yearned for. Elizabeth at ten, gave a speech, "On the Improvement of the Mind," to the Ladies Liberty Society. She shared her story with the New York Daily Tribune" and won a case against a private corporation Jennings v Third Ave. Railroad. Meanwhile, I struggle with giving presentations in class. Sometimes, I feel highly discouraged by peers before speaking in discussions. I fear the possibility that my friends will someday oust me for what I stand with or say. Certainly, determination and courage were personalities I could not envisage possessing. But with her story, I realized my unwavering fear of talking was nonexistent. I may not be Rosa Parks or Elizabeth Jennings Graham, but I can still voice my opinions like them. My fears are only baseless thoughts that hold me back. Elizabeth's story enlightens the importance of voicing our

opinions and undoing our fear of being vulnerable. While vulnerability leads to potential danger, our true selves should govern what results in our actions. Otherwise, no one would be real with each other.

In my artwork of Elizabeth Graham's story, I portrayed the events that led to the Jennings V Third Ave. Railroad case. The streetcar where the notable incident occurred, The New York Daily Tribune, the newspaper that garnered the nation's attention, and the court, where the ruling desegregated street cars in New York. I added chains around the background to emphasize the discriminatory culture in society that held back most Black Americans. It attempts to chain Elizabeth as well, however, it fails to employ its chains in the light of justice, as Elizabeth would win. While the Civil War overshadows her victory, the achievement that Elizabeth holds is undeniably significant. It symbolized a black victory was attainable in an America where half of the states don't exempt black people from having a right to sue. It gave hope to African Americans that their fight for equality was achievable. Even as a small victory, unmentioned in the history books, it contributes to the big cause of equality. Landmark victories are backed by smaller wins and widespread hope of success. Other than the main points, I also included a little school in the background. I felt this was important as Elizabeth treasured it. As a schoolteacher, she advocated education for black children to be taught the freedoms and equality they deserved. By educating the new generation, hope for an equal world is closer to reality.

Elizabeth Jennings Graham was difficult to paint, as her only genuine photo was fuzzy and had only two colors. Black and white. While I was accustomed to painting with multiple colors, I decided to use these colors as they represented the period she lived in. A black-and-white color scheme is usually associated with the 1800s-1900s, and for that reason, I applied only those two colors. While limited, I became familiar with incorporating multiple shades to exhibit shadows and the perception of multiple colors. The buildings were also complicated, specifically the windows. It was a learning curve, and I admit that the buildings could have been straighter and more detailed. Despite the uncomfortableness of using a nonconventional style, the experience of painting in a unique peculiar way was refreshing, but also humbling. It advanced my ability to adapt to new fundamentals. But I also came upon the realization that I need to branch out more into different styles of art.

While many students appreciate black figures like Martin Luther King and Harriet Tubman, little is known about the other contributors. Students are not at fault, however, figures like Elizabeth Graham are slowly being forgotten. When the build-up towards the Civil War was taught in my AP US history class, there were no mentions of Elizabeth Graham. Only 3 abolitionists were mentioned, only to be barely acknowledged. Only through this contest did I learn about Elizabeth Jennings Graham. Like many of the other unsung heroes, Elizabeth Graham deserves recognition for the impact and significance she brings to history. In a world where teens and children are afraid to be vulnerable and be true on social media, I want to spread awareness for Elizabeth's actions and bravery, to inspire generations to stay unchained and be true to themselves.