

Impact Statement

Catherine Gruen, Grade 10.

***For Our God, Our Country, and Our Oppressed Brothers*, 2023.**

Digital art, 12 x 12 inches.

Sage Oak Charter School, Chino Hills, CA

Unsung Hero: William H. Carney

At the end of a book, past the point where most people stop reading, in the author's note, William H. Carney was briefly mentioned. Army Sergeant William H. Carney was the first African American to receive the medal of honor, the book said. It gave no explanation as to how, why, or when. It was the first time I had heard of such a man. I was curious. I looked for him online and found an article on NPS. In the 54th Massachusetts Infantry-led attack against Fort Wagner, the color bearer was killed. Noticing the falling flag, Carney rushed to catch it. Throughout the whole charge and despite being severely wounded, Carney kept the flag from touching the ground. At the edge of the fort, he collapsed, but held on to the flag. And crawling to the battalion that would rescue him, he said, "The old flag never touched the ground." He was awarded the medal of honor.

Carney exemplified patriotism and courage. He was persistent in the face of adversity, something that came throughout his whole life. But what made him most inspiring to me is his faithfulness - to his God, to his country, and to other human beings. Carney was born into slavery and secretly learned to read and write. Historians debate whether or not his father bought William's freedom or if he escaped through the Underground Railroad. Either way, he ended up in Massachusetts, free and planning to be a minister. It was then, however, in 1863, that word came out: black soldiers were allowed to enlist in the army. In a letter, Carney wrote, "I had a strong inclination to prepare myself for the ministry, but when the country called for all persons, [I knew] I could best serve my God by serving my country and my oppressed brothers." My research of Carney went beyond NPS. I found books at the library and other articles that touched on his life. I found pictures of him, young and old. I found primary sources from himself and other people who knew him. But throughout all my research, Carney's letter stood out to me the most. So, my ultimate goal was to express all of Carney's attributes - faithful, brave, and patriotic - while still incorporating the quote in the background of my picture.

The final result is a portrait of William H. Carney in the foreground. Wearing the Union uniform and carrying a flag in his hands, he stands before a sepia-toned background. He bears a serious expression and stands proud and erect. In the background is the quote from his letter. Also in the background is a silhouette of himself. He is carrying the flag to Fort Wagner. The goal of my artwork is to show other people that even beyond his courage, his patriotism, and his heroics, he is utterly human, striving to be faithful and to be good.

I've already begun sharing his story with others - my family and my friends. It is a fascinating story, so I'm not surprised that it brings a 'wow' out of every person who hears it. Even if for a brief moment they remember their own faith and patriotism and courage, that is enough. For myself, having been immersed in the culture and era and life of William H. Carney, it will be a

long time before I forget him. Keeping Carney's life in mind will help me to try to be more faithful
- to my God, my country, and my brothers. I hope it will do the same for you.