

Impact Statement

Emma Renfroe, Grade 12.

Honoring Alice Seeley Harris, 2019.

Watercolor on paper, 18 x 24 Inches.

Belleville Township High School West, Belleville, IL

Unsung Hero: Alice Seeley Harris

Recognition and fame are contagious diseases that can enable corruption within human intentions. Fame is fueled by actions, actions are fueled by intentions, and intentions, sadly enough, are often fueled by greed. With grayed ambitions, heroes lose credibility, and people can wonder who and where the true heroes are.

It is in this darkness that the unsung heroes of past are illuminated and provide hope. These citizens of humanity are charged by compassion, tolerance, and a passion for life. With pure intentions, not warped by the lure of fame in their lifetimes, these heroes truly deserve the title of “hero,” and should be recognized around the world.

Among these hidden humanitarians, the story of Alice Seeley Harris stood out to me. When exploring the details of her life, I found constant admiration for her actions as a missionary, photographer, and woman of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

While standing behind a camera, and often not receiving credit, Alice captured King Leopold’s exploitation of the Congo through her photographs. With Alice’s documentation she brought a global light to the horrendous crimes living in the Congo. She brought justice to the Congolese.

Alice broke barriers as a woman, fighting as an advocate for those who could not speak- and she deserves recognition for that. After learning her story, I began thinking about how exactly I could depict a missionary like her. Originally, I tossed around the idea of showing her eye just behind a camera lens, but the more I thought about it, I realized that is what she always was... a woman behind the lens... and she was more than that. Then, I found a picture of Alice with a group of the Congolese. She was part of the group, she stood with them.

To me, this picture represented Alice as an angel to that community and I yearned to create it myself. When I began, my goal was to bring color into the stagnant black and white image. I wanted my artwork, while 2D and flat, to show how Alice brought life and hope into the Congo. In keeping the core of my piece gray scale to imitate Alice’s own photographs, the hints of color hold great value. The blue of the Congolese represents trust, responsibility, and freedom. The pink-red of Alice represents compassion, courage, and admiration. The green of the background represents growth and rejuvenation. In whole, the image represents strength.

Studying Alice and the stories of other unsung heroes really enabled me to see the falsity in fame. Specifically looking at the culture of social media, there is an overwhelming concern for having the most likes, the most comments, and the most followers. This pushes individuals to only focus on the image they cultivate online. People serve for a new profile picture, instead of concerning themselves with a real cause for service. Preoccupied with presenting a certain

image or portraying the right look, people lose the value of doing the right things just because they are the right things to do. And when it is all torn through, none of the “likes” matters... our true stardom comes from the deeds we do in the dark.

To share Alice’s story with my public community, I was given the privilege to display my artwork at our public library’s main branch. In setting up the display, I provided the piece as well as a clip-on Alice’s life and an excerpt from my reflection. In addition to this, to share Alice’s story with my high school community, I submitted my work to my school’s literary and art magazine in hopes of making it into the final publication in May. Finally, to share Alice’s story with my future community, I included this piece in my portfolio for college applications. In all of these actions, I hope that just even one person can learn from Alice’s story so that they might shine in darkness.