

Impact Statement

Martha Sungkono, Grade 12.
His America, 2018.
Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 Inches.
Duluth High School, Duluth, GA
Unsung Hero: Ralph Lazo

There once was a young man known as “the voluntary prisoner” of a Japanese internment camp. When I read this title, I was overcome with utmost curiosity and confusion. Who could possibly submit himself to waste his life in a secluded niche? What reason is good enough to sacrifice one’s time in an oppressive environment like an internment camp? 17-year-old Hispanic Ralph Lazo’s initial decision sent my brain in a whirlwind of uncertainty, but his righteous intent and reasoning struck a chord in my heart.

At news of Theodore Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 for all Japanese Americans, regardless of citizenship, to be forcibly moved into internment camps, Lazo leapt onto a train to be with his Japanese friends. Despite having zero blood or ethnic relations to the Japanese, he insisted that he had a place in the internment. His existence among a different group of people emphasized an effort to display empathy and a call to recognize that the Japanese were not collectively at fault. War hysteria brainwashed Americans to look past the unethical reasoning behind Executive Order 9066, but Lazo clearly recognized this discrimination and placed himself where he didn’t belong. Touched by a “quilt” of cultures since he was born, Lazo perceived America to be a land where people of all different backgrounds deserve to be treated fairly. Like Lazo, I too have been caressed by the wonderful influences of cultures, but in a small community called Duluth, Georgia. I cannot imagine my America as a vanilla nation, but I feel as if I have taken the diversity of where I was raised for granted. I do not think I would have been able to place myself as Lazo, nor do I believe any average teenager would have been particularly gleeful about being a voluntary prisoner. However, seeing photos of Lazo’s eyes crinkle with his infectious smile among the others in internment made me equally grin eye-to-eye when imagining his delightful positivity and the joy he must have brought to his fellow prisoners. I realized that, in order to support people of all different kinds, I too must learn to place myself in the shoes of fellow minorities facing modern racial issues. In addition to Lazo’s unlikely altruism, his humble choice to not openly speak of his act quite loudly speaks of his genuine intent. Lazo’s tenacious spirit and beliefs deserve to be shed through modern times, for his youth serves as an optimal model of acceptance and faith for young people of all kinds.

Thus, in my piece, I strived to portray Lazo as a gleeful young lad in the center of the painting contrasted against a rather dismal and simplistic background. I thought about adding detail to the barbed wire of the internment camp, however, I withdrew from that decision, as I thought that adding detail would add emphasis on the divide between the people inside the internment camp and the people outside. That is not what I wanted to focus upon. The lack of detail in the fence is purposeful because I want to show the transience of internment camps. Japanese Americans never stopped being Americans just because they were isolated from the rest, despite how much the rest of America wanted to believe that. I added barely distinguishable

silhouettes of people behind the fence to show the overwhelming number of people that actually sided behind Executive Order 9066 due to being plagued by war hysteria.

The limited amount of people I drew in the internment camp is to emphasize how isolated the Japanese prisoners must have felt despite being Americans. They are in colorful shapes because Lazo's America was a "patchwork" of cultures, that the color of someone's skin should not determine privilege. Additionally, the bright contrast of the main people against the garish background shows how life inside the camp was only bearable due to the connection that people had together. Lazo brought color in his prison, brought hope and joy. I painted him with a fist against what appears to be an American flag due to the 13 stripes. However, I decided to use multiple colors in making where the 50 stars should be on the flag to further represent Lazo's ideally diverse America.

I didn't have a lot of references to choose from when it came to painting Lazo, but in all of the photos, I was moved by his never-ending smile. I really hope I captured the gaiety of that unique smile of his in my painting. In a situation like that, I don't know if I could have smiled as bright as he did, but I'm glad he was there to make his Japanese friends smile as well and make them have hope. People like Ralph Lazo are rare to encounter in life, and few young people can muster the thought and action of imprisoning themselves for a cause. His name often projects from my mouth when I talk with my friends. I ask them if they would send themselves to an internment camp to justify a cause. I've never really gotten a yes. Some of my friends call him stupid, but I always say there's a fine line between stupidity and courage. Lazo certainly has the latter. Despite sharing the same age of when he first leapt onto that train with his friends, I commend him and look up to him. He hid his identity in order to shed light upon the importance of others' identities in this world. The compassion and sacrifice of this unsung hero stretches across several other heroes waiting to be discovered. For the humble and truly heroic people like Lazo, it is best for us to continue their stories so that history and the future do not forget these honorable people.