

Impact Statement

Shannon Chen, Grade 10.

Behind the Camera Lens, 2018.

Acrylic paint on wall, 14 x 17 Inches.

Land O' Lakes High School, Land O' Lakes, FL

Unsung Hero: Lewis Hine

My Unsung Hero is Lewis Hine, a photographer in the 1900s whose work played a role in forever changing the child labor laws of America.

A former teacher turned photographer/activist, Lewis Hine had proven time and time again his dedication towards social reform and education. Growing up, Hine was forced to financially support his family at a very young age due to his father's death, and experienced first-hand the exploitation of young workers. In 1910, around two million children under fifteen worked in industrial jobs for wages. The vast majority suffered from malnutrition, diseases, and fatigue due to the profit-hungry business owners. This experience pushed him to seek a higher education and to speak out against such horrid abuse. After becoming the photographer at a school he taught at, Hine quickly realized the power of photography as an educational tool.

Hine soon began his social work with documenting the influx of immigrants to the United States, promoting respect for the newcomers. After publishing several articles and attending more schooling, Hine eventually became a freelance photographer for the National Child Labor Committee (NCLC), where all of his most influential work would be done. Taking pictures of the exploited children in coal mines, textile mills, canneries, etc. took extreme courage and skill since his discovery would mean immediate punishment. Often times Hine would disguise himself in order to get into the factories located all over the nation. The pictures he took at these locations went on to be published in magazines, books, and pamphlets, raising public support for the NCLC, eventually pressuring the government to create and enforce laws against child labor.

The idea that children my age and younger were risking their lives each day, suffering extreme abuse with almost no compensation, is almost unconceivable to me. Many of the comforts and securities I take for granted today are partially in thanks to Lewis Hine's selfless work. His compassion, bravery, and dedication for his work serves as such a huge inspiration to me, and therefore deserves to be recognized as such.

Lewis Hine believed in photography as a way to record the truth. His photographs were not "romanticized" in any way, rather, he had his subjects look straight at the camera, which forced the direct attention of anyone who viewed the photograph. It was a brutal, honest depiction of poverty, of how these children lived. That is why I chose not to put any unnecessary flourishes in my piece. It pays tribute to the victims of exploitation first – by depicting them in the truthful manner Lewis Hine intended – and then honors Hine himself in the camera lens through which he photographed said victims. For the children in my drawing, I selected images Hine himself took as a reference. Every single portrait leaves a haunting impression as the children gaze at the viewers in various stages of disarray, which is what I attempted to capture in my drawing.

The child laborers are then depicted within a camera lens, which I referenced using a picture of the actual camera Lewis Hine used, a 4x5 Graflex Crown. This is to show the diverse demographics of children affected by exploitation through Hine's perspective behind the camera.