

Impact Statement

Lukas Heinz, Grade 12.

A Man of the People, 2017.

Ink watercolor on paper, 18 x 12 Inches.

Collinsville High School, Collinsville, IL

Ungsung Hero: Ralph Lazo

Ralph Lazo was a truly compassionate man. He was an American hero whom all should aspire to be more like; and yet, if one was to ask a random participant from the street if they had heard his name before, they would most likely receive a blank stare in response. Ralph Lazo's story deserves much more recognition than it currently receives, if not sheerly for the inspiring principle it sets.

Ralph was a Mexican-American boy born in Los Angeles, California. His mother died at a young age and his father was often absent due to his work schedule, so Ralph grew up in large part with his neighbors. Ralph was raised alongside friends and neighbors of various ethnic backgrounds; this is why, as Ralph watched his companions he had grown up with like family be shipped off to Japanese internment camps during World War II, he could not stand idly by and watch this injustice happen without taking a stand against it. In 1942, under the pretense of going to summer camp, Ralph voluntarily boarded a train headed to Manzanar internment camp.

The camp did not boast luxury accommodations; armed guards, cramped quarters, public latrines, searchlights, barbed wire fences, and extreme temperatures made it difficult to keep morale high for the camp's residents. Ralph did the best he could to raise the spirits around the area. He planted trees, riled the crowds during sports competitions, and organized bands and shows regularly. Ralph was the embodiment of hope and the American spirit in Manzanar. He was drafted by the United States Army in 1944, where he served for the rest of the war and received a medal of bravery, but the residents of Manzanar would forever remember him as a man who stood up for what was right against insurmountable odds. Ralph spent the rest of his life teaching and encouraging Hispanic students to vote and pursue their educations. He died as a humble man in 1992.

My work tells Ralph's story through its use of panels. The first panel implies his upbringing in a diverse and crowded environment with its bustling traffic and Mongolian restaurant in the foreground. The second panel shows the grim reality of the relocation with a crumbling building once inhabited by Japanese-American residents. Ralph is gazing up at a piece of racist graffiti with a bleak sky and dead tree, which reflect the decaying environment. The third panel is a train station at Manzanar with relocated citizens pouring out of a train. Most of their faces are fully displayed to create compassion for these characters and show their stories and inner turmoil. The armed guard remains faceless to represent the cold establishment that unsympathetically put these people in camps due to fear. Ralph's face is in panels one and three, with his head slightly bursting out of panel one to show his rebellion against the grain. Ralph's eyes are obscured so he blends in with the crowd; he has assimilated into the society of the camp to prove a point.

Ralph Lazo was a good man. He was, and remains to be, an excellent role model for anyone looking to stand up for what is right, even at great personal cost. Ralph will not be forgotten, not by me or anyone he affected in his life. His legacy will continue as the spirit of peaceful protest forever. Ralph Lazo showed us that sometimes, remaining humble has a monumental impact.