

Impact Statement

Chelsi McKeal, Grade 12.

Blue vs. Brown, 2016.

Colored pencil, graphite on paper, 16 x 20 Inches.

Collinsville High School, Collinsville, IL

Unsung Hero: Jane Elliott

"We don't need a melting pot in this country, folks. We need a salad bowl. In a salad bowl, you put in the different things. You want the vegetables- the lettuce, the cucumbers, the onions - to maintain their identity. You appreciate the differences" - Jane Elliot. The day after Martin Luther King Jr. was shot, she conducted an experiment for her third grade class to, "show all white students a walk in the moccasins of colour (Jane Elliott)." I didn't think the experiment would be taken seriously by a class of third graders, but instead of seeing it as a game, they saw it has a life lesson that truly inspired me to chose Jane Elliot as my unsung hero.

In 1968, Elliott announced to her third grade students that they would be separated by eye colour. The idea was to separate them by a hereditary characteristic that they cannot control. Elliot told her class that since she has blue eyes, the blue-eyed students were superior to the brown-eyed students. The brown-eyed students were asked to wear collared shirts so they could be identified from a distance to further test this experiment.

Some of the rules to this experiment correlate closely to the way people of different skin colors were treated, such as the children of the opposing eye color were not allowed to play with one another at recess. The blue-eyed children were allowed 5 extra minutes of recess while the brown-eyed children had to stay in. The blue-eyed children were allowed to drink out of the water fountains at the school while the brown-eyed children were to drink their water out of paper cups instead.

Some of the kids tried to argue this by saying that their parents had brown eyes and were still very smart and just as good as blue-eyed people. The teacher would bring up past occurrences when the children had said that their parents had kicked them or yelled at them. This brought the children even further to believe that Ms. Elliott was right about brown-eyed people. The children began to say that a blue-eyed parent would never do such a thing, providing enough proof for them that blue-eyed parents were better than brown-eyed parents.

At recess that day, a brown-eyed child struck a blue-eyed child in the gut for calling them "brown eyes". Ms. Elliot asked the child what was so wrong with being called "brown eyes". The child responded by saying that it meant they were more stupid than the other child. They even went so far as to compare it to a colored person being called derogatory names. She asked the blue-eyed student why they had called the other child "brown eyes", adding that the student had brown eyes the day before and the student never felt the need to call them "brown eyes" then. The blue-eyed child would come to admit that it was just a way to be mean towards the opposing colored eye child.

The next day at school Ms. Elliot would change the rules of this experiment, and the results were very interesting. She told the kids that she was wrong the day before, and that brown-eyed people were actually superior to blue-eyed people. The same rules applied; blue-eyed children could not play with the brown-eyed children, blue-eyed children had to wear collars, blue-eyed children had to drink from paper cups, and brown-eyed children got five more minutes of recess than blue-eyed children. The blue-eyed children were about to get a taste of their own medicine. Or were they?

That day at school, no blue-eyed children were called names by the brown-eyed children and no blue-eyed children were discriminated against. The brown-eyed children had felt the pain of discrimination and did not wish to put that pain onto the blue-eyed children. An interesting statistic of this experiment was shown by testing the children's performance in the classroom using a phonics card pack. While the brown-eyed children weren't as good as the blue-eyed children it took them longer to do the game, but when it was their turn to be better than the blue-eyed students, it was the blue-eyed students who seemed to lack in performance in the game. Elliot observed that the more superior group always did better and had more confidence, whether that be on the playground, or in their school work. If a teacher were to carry out this sort of experiment in the present they would surely be criticised and likely fired as a teacher. Ms. Elliott continued to do speeches about discrimination, inspiring others to do the same exercise in their own classrooms.

In my portrait of Jane Elliot I incorporated the Blue Eyes- Brown Eyes experiment by having two children on one side of her and one child on the other side. I wanted to represent the discrimination factor by having the single child standing on his own on the right side of Elliot with brown eyes, and the two children on her left with blue eyes. I decided to have both black and white children, even though the exercise was used with only white students, because the idea of the exercise was to have the blue eyes and brown eyes represent black and white people. Jane Elliot has a brown and a blue eye to show that she was on both sides and does not discriminate against one or the other. I chose to use graphite pencil to have the artwork in black and white so the coloured pencil on their brown and blue eyes stands out.

What inspires me the most about Jane Elliot is her hate for all discrimination, from homosexuality to racism. I can relate a lot to her because I strongly believe in equality and have always wanted to change people's perspective in a way that Jane Elliot did. Her third grade class, and the many others she taught, grew up with a different view on discrimination than they would have if it weren't her. Not only did she impact their lives but she impacted mine, making me believe that there is hope for ending discrimination and even though you can't change the entire world and society all at once, you can come pretty close.