

Impact Statement

Lauren Kim, Grade 11

Vivid Resilience, 2025

Acrylic, clay on wood panel, 15 x 14.5 x 2.25 inches

Horace Mann School, Bronx NY

Unsung Hero: Clara Luper

Segregation did not end because of Martin Luther King's dream alone. The outlawing of segregation in 1964 was a collective, momentous effort that largely came into being through the persistent action of grassroots organizations and the persevering will of the people. Clara Luper, a civil rights activist famous for her sit-ins and nonviolent protests, was a trailblazer in Oklahoma's fight against segregation. Something I really admire about Clara Luper and her story of civil rights activism was not only her unwavering will to fight for her rights, but also her role as an educator. Some of the people who have impacted my life the most have been my teachers, especially (like Luper was), my history teachers. As educators whose job is to teach about the past and what has molded our realities thus far, history teachers are constantly learning alongside us—something I find quite inspirational. Luper was able to realize her role as a high school teacher through teaching her students how to make changes, not only how to learn about it. Through her activism, she was not only able to influence Oklahoman legislators, but she was also able to influence the next generation: the students that she taught and protested with. Luper was able to shape the world that her students would grow up in and also showed them how to stand up for their black heritage.

As an activist primarily during the late 50's and early 60's, most photos of Clara Luper are in black and white. Since the era that Luper lived in was so distinctly monochromatic, not only photos but also in real life, I also wanted the use of color to break some of that one-dimension-ness and express the vibrancy with which she lived. Something I also wanted to include in her portrait were sunflowers, since they often symbolize light, warmth, and hope for a better future. Luper was celebrated as a beacon of resilience in spite of oppressive segregation, and I wanted the sunflowers to reflect the hope she represented. Additionally, the use of bold and lively color is a motif that is often present throughout black art, such as in African American murals, or even in African patterns on clothing. For centuries, African American art has used color as a tool, specifically as a form of protest against the silencing of black voices. As a piece that represents Luper's protest against segregation, as well as the celebration of her "unsung" voice in history, I believed that it would only be appropriate to incorporate color in a similar way. However, this piece is also intentionally faded in some areas, as to depict the gradual shift towards equality that Luper represented. Her story was not part of a dramatic or rapid progression towards the world we live in today—rather, hers was a slow and effort-filled journey to show people that pigment was beautiful. I did my best

to portray this through my use of acrylic paint in a manner which mimicked watercolor so that the vibrant colors emanating from Luper would permeate into the rest of her environment.

Luper's most famous quote was an answer to a question of whether she, a black woman, could represent white people. She responded simply, "Of course, I can represent white people, black people [...] polka dot people. You see, I have lived long enough to know that people are people." When researching Luper, I resonated with the quote the most, and I found it still so relevant to our modern day. Especially as a student who loves history, art, and culture, I am constantly reminded that in order to coexist, we must always take our time to learn about the people. Who are the people who represent this beautiful art and culture? Who are the faces behind this historical movement? Humans are social, empathetic beings—something which Luper recognized, and sought to communicate to others. Although it might have been the white police officer that she fought against while kicked out of Katz Drugstore, her words were a commitment to color-based discrimination everywhere. As I go into the real world, I hope to similarly commit myself to a motto of empathy and resilience as she did. As people continue to fight for a better world, I hope that I will too.

References:

"African American Art: A Celebration of Creativity, Heritage, and Cultural Resilience." *Berj Art Gallery*, www.berjartgallery.com/news/african-american-art-a-celebration-of-creativity-heritage/.

"Civil Rights Act (1964)." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act.

"Clara Luper." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 5 May 2025, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clara_Luper#Early_life_and_education.

Jones, Jonathan, and Mee-Lai Stone. "Ghost, Angel, Martyr: The Brutal Brilliance of George Floyd Murals from Syria to Belfast." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 5 June 2020, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/gallery/2020/jun/05/george-floyd-murals-worldwide-street-artists.

"Oklahoma Historical Society." *Oklahoma Historical Society | OHS*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=LU005.

"Oklahoma Historical Society." *Oklahoma Historical Society | OHS*, www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry?entry=SE006.