

## Impact Statement

Deepika Menon, Grade 9

***President, How Long Must Women Wait for Liberty?*, 2025**

Oil on wood panel, 11 x 14 inches

Palo Alto High School, Palo Alto, CA

Unsung Hero: Inez Milholland

When I was younger, I was obsessed with princesses. Yes, much of my intrigue stemmed from the beautiful gowns and sparkling tiaras, but even as a little girl, I loved Disney princesses for something deeper: the stories they told. I admired Cinderella's unwavering grace in the face of cruelty, Mulan's fearless devotion that challenged tradition, Tiana's disciplined resilience that turned dreams into action, and Moana's empathetic leadership rooted in her connection to the world around her. Over time, these stories blended into a new, personal definition of what it meant to be a princess – not just someone defined by a crown, but by strength, resilience, kindness, courage, and an unshakable sense of purpose.

To me, Inez Milholland embodies what it truly means to be a princess.

Inez Milholland was the sheer definition of a powerhouse. Despite facing barriers, like being denied entry to several colleges simply because of her gender, she persisted and eventually earned a law degree. During her college years at Vassar, she secretly organized women's rights meetings, even facing suspension for her activism, driven by a belief that overpowered her fear. After graduating, she was admitted to the bar and began her career at a New York law firm. In one of her first assignments, she insisted on personally interviewing prisoners, defying norms that barred women from speaking with male inmates. What amazed me is that her request was purely to gain an understanding of their suffering, even going as far as handcuffing herself to a prisoner. Long before she became a central figure in the suffrage movement, she also fought passionately for labor rights and social justice through her work in journalism. Inez is perhaps most remembered for leading the iconic Woman Suffrage Procession of 1913. Famously mounted on a white horse and dressed in flowing white robes, she led 8,000 women down Pennsylvania Avenue, creating a breathtaking spectacle of peace and power. Yet the procession was not without struggle; mobs of men violently protested, spitting, cursing, and throwing cigars at the marchers. Even so, Inez remained composed, and her presence became a symbol of resilience, dignity and bravery for the entire movement.

Painting Inez felt overwhelming; it is so incredibly difficult to capture the full depth of her journey. Yet, it also filled me with a deep sense of purpose and excitement. It was her striking pose in her 1913 march that first captured my attention and I knew I wanted to

center my painting around that powerful image. I wanted to portray Inez as the vehicle for the movement, depicting the horse running to represent the incredible strides she was making. I chose to leave out the saddle or reins to represent Inez's fearless leadership and freedom from societal expectations and traditions. Across the sky, small vignettes trace her story: a portrait of her speaking with fierce determination, a train to represent her relentless cross-country travels, a newspaper, jail bars symbolizing the suffragists' imprisonment, and finally, a ballot box and marching women to honor the legacy she helped secure. The background fades from night into light, inspired by her 1911 banner reading, "Forward into the Light," illustrating how she led generations toward a brighter future. In the foreground, Inez reaches toward the shadow of a young girl, symbolizing her lasting impact on future generations. Behind her, several women protest alongside her, a reminder that the movement was never here alone. It was carried by all who dared stand beside her. I chose a dreamlike style for the painting, almost like a Disney princess film. I used purple, gold, and white a lot because they are the three colors in the suffrage movement.

I chose to title my painting "Mr. President, how long must women wait for liberty?" because those were Inez's haunting final words before collapsing mid-speech in Los Angeles. Despite battling exhaustion, opposition, and failing health, she never stopped fighting for justice. While her beauty often drew attention, it was her courage, determination, and relentless heart that truly left a mark in history. Her last plea was not just a cry for her own generation, but a timeless call to action, one that continues to echo today. I wanted my painting to honor both the urgency and the enduring power of her message.

Even after her death at just 30 years old, Inez became an enduring symbol for the suffrage movement, inspiring countless others to continue the fight. And just four years later, women finally won the right to vote – a victory built, in part, on the sacrifices she so bravely made.

When I first chose to learn about Inez Milholland, I never expected to connect so deeply to her story. But after days of research, watching documentaries, and reading everything I could find, something about her spirit gripped me. I normally find historical figures interesting but distant, yet Inez felt alive to me. She was not just a symbol, but a fighter, a champion, a pure leader.

Growing up surrounded by strong women, in a tight-knit all-girls middle school, within my family, and among the role models around me, it sometimes felt easy to forget there was ever a time when women's voices were silenced. It's easy to take our rights for granted today. Learning about Inez reminded me that every right we enjoy was hard-won through struggle, sacrifice, and extraordinary bravery and that it is our responsibility to remember that fight and make our voices heard. Although I am just 15, I am excited for the day I'll have the opportunity to vote and make my voice heard in local and national elections. Inez's story has shown me the power of fighting for what you believe in and the responsibility to take action, even when it's hard. I hope to share my artwork of Inez through local art exhibitions and by creating stickers that can help spark

conversations, raise awareness, and generate funds to support women's organizations. I will continue her legacy to inspire action and change.