

Impact Statement

Xinyue (Emily) Ren, Grade 11

The Courage to Stand In Solidarity - Ralph Lazo, 2025

Colored pencil, graphite, marker on paper, 14 x 17 inches

BASIS Independent Silicon Valley, San Jose, CA

Unsung Hero: Ralph Lazo

When one hundred eight civilian exclusion orders were posted across the west coast of the United States announcing that all Japanese American residents, citizen or not, were to be moved into internment camps for a “temporary” but unspecified time, nobody knew what to bring. After all, how does one pack their whole life away? Some Japanese Americans were promised furniture and brought none of their own, but found they were to live in spartan wooden barracks in dusty horse stalls. Others were told that every piece of clothing would need to be marked, only to later realize that it had been a hoax to sell out the supermarket’s supply. The mad rushes and deceptions in preparation had only been the start of their injustices; by November 1942, under threats by armed US Military forces, almost 120,000 Japanese Americans had stowed their belongings away into suitcases... and then themselves into America’s internment camps. For the others along the West Coast, life went on as normal, albeit with a few hiccups. Maybe the local grocer was missing, the store was understaffed, or there were a couple of empty desks where a Japanese classmate once sat. Yet, for Ralph Lazo, the anti-Japanese sentiment was nowhere near enough reason for him to turn a blind eye to the forced imprisonment of masses of Japanese Americans.

While others directed their thoughts away from the uncomfortable idea that American citizens were being imprisoned in Manzanar and convinced themselves that it was for the common good, Ralph made his way onto a train himself. Despite not having any Japanese heritage, he was let into the camp where he would stay for the duration of the next three years. The summers were as blistering as the winters were freezing, and the alkaline, salty soil meant a lack of vegetation that would only exacerbate the situation. In the face of hardship, Ralph tried his best to brighten the situation. Others around him noted his enthusiasm and penchant for finding beauty born in struggle with contraband cameras. Together with others stuck at the camp, Ralph planted trees in common spaces. Others around him noted his enthusiasm and penchant for finding beauty born in struggle with contraband cameras. He also helped deliver mail, hosted holiday parties, and helped to entertain and excite crowds at sporting events—through his activities, he brought the spirit back to the camp in little pieces.

I find Ralph Lazo inspirational because he fought for justice, despite the injustice never directly affecting him. As the sole non-Japanese American that voluntarily entered into an internment camp, he sent a message across the United States that not all Americans

would willingly sit down and accept the injustice of the imprisonment of part of their community—not all Americans would support Executive Order 9066 against the words of the Constitution and the fundamental beliefs that America prides itself for.

Among my peers, I commonly hear that they do not concern themselves with “the abortion debate” or “LGBTQ things” because it is of little interest to them and they are not part of the group that is being oppressed. Some of them will never be able to give birth or never plan to seek gender-affirming care. As is the case with them, deliberate ignorance of the stripping of rights from American groups has not been eliminated with time. Ralph Lazo is my role model because he did not stand idle while others were oppressed, deciding that someone else would take care of it. Instead, he set precedent of action for those still shielding their eyes from the assault on others’ civil liberties.

In my art, Ralph stands strong as the central figure, with photographs of a life in the Manzanar War Relocation Center fluttering around him. In one photo, he stacks water bottles in the sand with another young Japanese teen; in another, two young boys stare outside of the fence, perhaps wishing to be in the cars driving into the visible town of Independence, California, instead of having to return to their own barracks. There are photos that are a mix of moments that are carefree and painful or bittersweet, a tangible proof of the dignity and humanity that the Japanese Americans had embodied and the brightness that Ralph would have captured with his contraband cameras despite horrid circumstances. Meanwhile, the dehumanizing posters announcing the forced imprisonment of Japanese Americans are impaled and torn on the barbed wire fence, left behind as a stark reminder of the cost of fear and injustice that Ralph Lazo had tried to bring to light.

Ralph Lazo’s actions have inspired me to not keep quiet about the suffering of others as well. As a Chinese-American resident of the United States, I have been taught throughout my life that it is most “dignified” to put my head down and struggle quietly and not involve myself in the struggles of others. However, Ralph Lazo’s story has presented to me the grace of courage in fighting for justice, both for myself and for others, and reshaped my definition of “dignity.” I plan to share my artwork in local community spaces and online platforms in order to highlight both his story and to spark conversations about standing up for marginalized voices and resisting injustice, no matter the form it’s in. His willingness to stand alongside those who were unjustly imprisoned, despite not being targeted himself, challenges me to step beyond my own silence and comfort.