

Impact Statement

Grace Zhang, Grade 8

Bus Ride to Equality, 2025

Gouache, graphite on paper, 17 x 14 inches

Jericho Middle School, Jericho, NY

Unsung Hero: Irene Morgan

I've always wondered about those in history whose stories were never told; or at least, not widely known. I pitied them, knowing that their actions may never be known and celebrated, which explains why the Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Hero's ARTEFFECT competition spoke to me so deeply. After thoroughly searching through the list of candidates for me to research and create an artwork on, one in particular stuck out to me. Irene Morgan, who was a passionate advocate for civil rights and was a key figure in the fight against segregation.

"If something happens to you which is wrong," she said, "the best thing to do is have it corrected in the best way you can. The best thing for me to do was to go to the Supreme Court." This quote from Irene Morgan shows her determination and views when it came to enacting change. Her perseverance is one of her most admirable qualities which contributed to my decision. Although many did not end up following the Law that was passed due to her, it was a big step forward when it came to the civil rights movement and fighting for equality.

Irene Morgan had recently suffered a miscarriage when the altercation on the bus occurred, which took a toll on her mental and physical health. She had been sitting on the bus with another black woman when she was told to leave her seat. Although the bus they were traveling on did not have specific spots for whites or colored people, they enforced a rule that stated that a colored person was not allowed to sit across from or adjacent to a white person. When a white couple arrived, the driver told Irene and her seat companion to move so that they could sit down. Her companion moved but Irene Morgan refused, which led to the driver finding a sheriff to arrest her. When presented with an arrest warrant, she ripped the paper to shreds and threw it out a window, showing her defiance. The sheriff attempted to grab her, and upon being touched, she kicked him in the groin. After this encounter, she was arrested and taken into custody, where she took her case all the way to the Supreme Court, with help from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. During *Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, my Unsung Hero's case was argued by a man named William H. Hastie, with Thurgood Marshall from the NAACP as council. They argued that the segregation on buses violated the Interstate Commerce Clause of the U.S. Constitution and won the case.

When in the process of creating my piece, I began using new and different processes compared to those I had used in the past. While I mainly worked with mediums such as colored pencil, pen and ink, and oil pastel, I'd only used gouache once or twice before. I was especially challenged with the large size of the paper I worked on and was worried that covering the surface would be too time consuming. However, after continuing on in my process, I found that the large size of the paper made painting details a lot easier than if I'd done it on a smaller scale.

Although at first glance, my artwork may seem mostly very direct, there is actually a lot of symbolism and details within it. For example, doves are commonly known as a symbol of peace, love, and new beginnings. Irene Morgan glancing at the doves represents her main goal, to achieve equality and peace, and how her dreams and goals ended up "taking flight." At the base of the painting, you can see people sitting on a bus, looking out at the windows, which depicts Irene Morgan's story, which can be seen as the people of the present and future looking back at her story. Another more direct symbol is the clasped hands, which represents the peace between races that she dreamt of and worked to achieve.

Irene Morgan's impact on the civil rights movement has been overlooked but was very crucial, helping launch the Montgomery Bus Boycott and inspiring figures such as Rosa Parks to act against segregation. In the future, I'd like to help better educate others about Irene Morgan and the struggles she went through as a discriminated against black woman who stood up for equality and rights. My artwork will be displayed in my school lobby for my peers to view, and I hope they will be able to gain new knowledge from my art and impact statement.

References:

"Archives of Maryland (Biographical Series)." *Irene Morgan Kirkaldy*, MSA SC 3520-15242, 2025,
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