

## Impact Statement

Abigail Dement, Grade 12

***Ralph Lazo: Prisoner by Choice***, 2025

A Colored pencil, graphic, pen on paper, 18 x 14.5 inches

Holton High School, Holton, KS

Unsung Hero: Ralph Lazo

Never had I heard of such a display of selflessness before I learned of Ralph Lazo's story. He intentionally pretended to be a different race thereby becoming imprisoned for two years all in the name of love. He made a stand. He would not quietly observe childhood friends as they were taken from their homes and forced into relocation camps. Their crime was simply being descendants of the enemy country. Instead, Ralph Lazo chose to be brave. He was more than brave; he was bold. He was not afraid to oppose what everyone else believed. He was a true leader. Unfortunately, his actions went mostly unnoticed. But they didn't go unnoticed by me.

Ralph Lazo was born Mexican-American and lived in the racially diverse part of Los Angeles. Ralph had lots of friends, but the majority were Japanese. When the President announced that all Japanese would be relocated to the Manzanar War Relocation Center, Ralph was infuriated. Those were his friends, and he wasn't going to let them face this injustice alone. Ralph could have chosen apathy and lived a typical teenage life. He could have ignored what was happening around him, just like everyone else. But he didn't. In 1942, Ralph boarded a train and would not return until many years later. Ralph Lazo became a prisoner by choice. While a prisoner, Ralph chose to immerse himself into Japanese culture by learning how to read and write in their language. He planted trees, delivered mail, and even threw traditional parties. Anything he could do to make life easier for his friends, he did. His selfless act of devotion is what made him a hero. This is what made him stand out to me. Once the war was over, Lazo went on to raise funds for a class-action lawsuit to win reparations for Japanese-Americans interned during the war. This eventually resulted in a law signed by President Reagan that awarded each surviving internee \$20,000. But Lazo got no recognition for these reparations. Bravery was finally recognized when Lazo won a bronze star for bravery during the war. And while this star was not for what he did in high school, it represented who Lazo had been all along.

Through my artwork, I wanted to show Ralph Lazos story from start to finish, rather than just one snapshot. I struggled to come up with a way to do this. At first, I wanted to show a multitude of different snapshots of Ralph's life rather than one. I reasoned that if I depicted Ralph through others' eyes, I could highlight all the different hats Ralph Lazo wore. I chose to use both color and black and white to make certain aspects stand out. In the top right corner, there is a phrase written in Japanese. It translates as: "prisoner

by choice.” This is the phrase I thought best described Ralph’s story. One of the most important details of my piece is the flag in the top left corner. The flag is a powerful, respected image of unity. The flag I depicted is a combination of the Mexican, American, and Japanese flag. These were all the nationalities Ralph Lazo represented. This flag was to show that all these nations could work together as one. Discrimination should not be tolerated. Just because someone happened to be born in a different country, speaks a different language, or even has a different skin color, we are all human. This is one of the most important statements Ralph wanted to make. Lastly, I included a sentence from the S.1009 of the 100th Congress, the law manifesting from Ralph Lazo’s actions. When I first read his story on the Lowell Milken center website, the article ended with one sentence that really stuck out to me: “But Ralph Lazo... could have told you that.” I knew I wanted to add this into my piece as it symbolized Ralph's true determination and beliefs. In this way, I believe I was able to display the full picture of who Ralph Lazo really was.

I believe this story has the power to change the current racial division in our nation. Ralph's story is a powerful message of unity and love. I was deeply moved by the self sacrificial actions demonstrated by Lazo and believe others will be too. In March, I was given an opportunity to share Ralph’s story with my community and school. My piece was displayed in a local youth art show. Part of my impact statement was posted under my piece so that everyone could discover Ralph Lazo: Prisoner by Choice.