

Impact Statement

Ethan Hong, Grade 11

***One of Us: When Conscience Crossed the Fence*, 2025**

Gouache on paper, 10.5 x 15 inches

Cornerstone Collegiate Academy of Seoul, Seocho-gu, Seoul, Korea

Unsung Hero: Ralph Lazo

I chose Ralph Lazo as my Unsung Hero because his story connects deeply to my personal history. As a Korean, I understand the pain of occupation more than most. During that era, even my grandfather was taken away to camps. I grew up hearing about their suffering and loss, whether at school or during family gatherings. These experiences not only developed a negative view of Japan's history, but more importantly, taught me a deeper lesson that I am able to live comfortably today because they persevered through unimaginable hardships.

When I learned about Ralph Lazo, I felt a strong connection between his story and my family's past. Although Ralph was not Japanese, he voluntarily entered a Japanese American internment camp during World War II to stand with his friends. At the time, he was about the same age as I am now. However, he made his decision without hesitation, guided by pure loyalty, courage, and a sense of justice. I was impressed by the fact that he went to camp not because he was forced to, but because he truly believed it was the right thing to do.

Ralph's actions influenced not only his friends but also society as a whole. After the war, he continued to advocate for justice by supporting the reparations movement for Japanese Americans. His story shows that countless unnamed individuals, like my own ancestors, endured oppression but never surrendered their sense of righteousness. Through Ralph, I honor both a personal and collective history of resilience and resistance.

When I created my artwork, I wanted to emphasize the tension, silent courage, and also "fear". The train behind Ralph symbolizes the irreversible journey toward the unknown of the internment camps. A barbed-wire fence in front of him represents the final boundary beyond which there is no return. Armed soldiers guarding the fence add the atmosphere of dread. Ralph with a neat suit that symbolizes his dignity, morality, and the youthful purity of a student stepping into adulthood. His friends stand behind him, gazing at him with admiration and gratitude. I used heavy, muted tones to express the somber mood, while subtly illuminating Ralph to highlight his quiet heroism. I researched historical photographs of Japanese American internment camps and listened to family stories to create this piece authentically. Although Ralph thought his

decision was the right thing to do, he was still young, and it is natural that he felt fear too. Yet he chose what was right over what was easy.

Through this project, I want to honor Ralph Lazo and countless other heroes forgotten by history. While I live an ordinary and peaceful life today, for them, stepping into the camp must have felt like entering a living nightmare. This artwork is my small tribute to their spirit and endurance. Ralph's story taught me how important it is to uphold loyalty and courage even in the face of fear. I hope to share this piece through school exhibitions and social media, inspiring others to remember the sacrifices and strength of those who came before us. In honoring Ralph, I also honor the hidden strength that runs through my own bloodline.