

Impact Statement

Vanessa Rea Rojas, Grade 12

Ka Mo'omeheu o ke Kai: Remembering the First Lady of Limu, 2025

Digital Art, 11.6 x 8.3 inches

Pickerington High School Central, Pickerington, OH

Unsung Hero: Isabella Aiona Abbott

From the first moment I read her name in the pre-approved list, 'Isabella Aiona Abbott', I knew I needed to read more about her. Rarely do I encounter moments when my instincts keep my attention gripped to a person, or concept like Dr. Abbott, and when I finished reading her biography, I had already cracked open a sketchbook and allowed my ideas to flow. I'm always fascinated with people who have done extraordinary work but were never fully appreciated by the wider public. Dr. Abbott felt like one of those people to me.

What inspired me about Dr. Abbott wasn't just her monumental work in the scientific field of ethnobotany, it was her career full of love, passion, and dedication toward Pacific seaweed and to her people. Her mark on the world is undeniable: from having a genus of algae named after her to earning the title "First Lady of Limu" from the Hawaiian people, she revolutionized the understanding and conservation of Pacific marine plants. Additionally, her extensive work of published books and papers on Pacific limu has been regarded by taxonomists as being some of the most important that have been made. But beyond accolades, her character is what shines the most. As Celia Smith, a colleague of Abbott pointed out in a tribute to her, Abbott was a practitioner of classic philosophies of Hawaii, she carried a responsibility to her science and local community, bringing people together, and doing what was needed. Abbott made it clear she wanted to demonstrate the vital link between Hawaiian culture and Hawaiian flora in her seminal book, working with the elders of Hawaii, remembering the priceless knowledge her mother passed down, the overlap between organism and culture was palpable in Hawaii, and she worked hard to preserve indigenous generational knowledge, while advancing science.

For my piece, I was very moved by what Abbott lived for, and I wanted my artwork to be a celebration of her life. I made her the center of my composition and added a dynamic ocean wave that grew in intensity with every stage of her life, circling around her. Illustrations of key moments of her life were included at the beginning of the wave, such as her mother passing down the knowledge of limu to Abbott, and the beginning of her career as a young ethnobotanist, the memories are connected to a growing piece of algae that sprout at the center of the piece. A detail that I was delightful to add were the marine animals that indirectly benefited from her work, such as the Hawaiian Green sea turtle and Blue Dragon nudibranch, which are fauna that rely deeply on algae —

symbolizing how her work reached beyond human sustainability, but to marine life as well. Finally, I referenced her original research materials from her books and studied algae species in designing the forms and textures.

The making of this piece was a deeply emotional journey from me, not only did I learn about an amazing woman who has further inspired me to pursue my dreams in Data Science focused on the conservation of Wildlife and Biodiversity, it made me reflect on importance of perseverance, community, and dedication — all traits that Dr. Abbott exemplified effortlessly. Her story has made grow as an artist and offered me an opportunity to remember a truly marvelous scientist, and to honor her life.

I hope to share my artwork beyond the contest with my friends and family members, as well as people in my local and school community, sharing the knowledge of Indigenous people and environmental stewardship. My goal is to inspire people of my age, and to appreciate hidden figures such as Abbott, and to remind people that the greatest heroes are usually the quietest.

References:

Abbott, Isabella Aiona. *Limu: An Ethnobotanical Study of Some Edible Hawaiian Seaweeds*. Bishop Museum Press, 1978.

“Species Search · Inaturalist.” *iNaturalist*, www.inaturalist.org/taxa/57774-Rhodophyta.

“Tribute to Dr. Isabella Abbott.” *YouTube*, University of Hawai‘i Alumni, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPvpmg7flA.