

Impact Statement

Siya Sharma, Grade 8

Voices of Change, 2025

Gouache, watercolor, pen, marker on paper, 12 x 18 inches

Piscataway, NJ

Teacher: Yunhua Fang, Independent Study

Unsung Hero: Clara Luper

I want to introduce my Unsung Hero, Clara Luper. Clara was a civic right leader, schoolteacher, and activist. She protested the rampant segregation issues in the United States of America and was most inspired by MLK and his Montgomery bus boycott's. Clara isn't as famous as Rosa Parks or MLK himself, but her story still inspires me as a person. I feel that her most defining trait is her value of education, as prior to her Civil Rights Movement and protests that triggered city-wide sit-ins, she was a schoolteacher who inspired her students to reach for the stars, and she never let people get to her because of her race.

Clara's impact on black history and culture in the United States is real, best known for her 1958 sit in, nonviolent protest movement, which triggered more non-violent protests and sit in movements throughout Oklahoma City in the years of 1958-1964. She represented all marginalized communities, stating her own views "I can represent white people, black people, red people, yellow people, brown people, and polka dot people. You see, I have lived long enough to know that people are people." Clara won multiple awards later on in her life, she was present in MLK's 1963 March on Washington where he gave his famous 'I have a dream' speech. After 1964, she remained an activist but also a devoted educator who focused on desegregation in schools. In 1965, she took part in the Selma to Montgomery Marches and received a cut in her leg on the infamous 'Bloody Sunday,' where over 600 Civil Rights protesters were attacked by law enforcement.

The artistic vision in this work is to represent Clara's origins and actions, I wanted to add her personal portrait along with drawn images of what occurred in her sit-in protests, along with adding her famous quote as referenced above. I wanted to show Clara's sacrifice for all people and empowering those who were otherwise powerless themselves, while at the same time showing who she was as a political activist and a person. I used watercolor pencils, and watercolor paints specifically to highlight her portrait. I wanted to show different perspectives of what exactly her impact was on Oklahoma. Her first and most famous form of protest targeted the Katz Drug Store, as she first wanted to make multiple attempts to desegregate restaurants and stores. For 15 months, she reached out with letters and attempted to convince the store to desegregate themselves but was ignored. This is what triggered the protest as pictured in

the art. On August 19th, 1958, Clara, her son, and many young members of a Youth council went to the store and asked to be served but were denied because of their race. From store opening to closing, they sat outside the store and waited to be served, a reference to MLK's Montgomery bus boycott to which she was so inspired by. This sit-in was the first of the Civil Rights sit in movements. But it would not stop there.

I believe that making this art piece has had an impact on my life. As I researched Clara, I found myself learning new information about the Civil Rights Movement. Before this, I had not known who Clara Luper was, and the only two people I really memorized from the Civil Rights Act were MLK and Rosa Parks, and I think that figures like Clara should be taught more often because she altered Oklahoma City's black culture and rights. I hope that by sharing my artwork, more people know who she is, and how important she was.