

Impact Statement

Eva Aistė Špokaitė, Grade 11

Scale of justice, 2025

Oil on canvas, 36 x 24 inches

Vilniaus lietuvių namai, Vilnius, Lithuania

Unsung Hero: Ralph Lazo

Every day, I witness acts of willful ignorance. In the streets, people deliberately avoid acknowledging those who need help—even when the suffering is right in front of them, they avert their gaze. Offering help often requires stepping out of one's comfort zone, but many people are so determined to protect their own ease that they choose to ignore even the smallest inconveniences. It's as if they think: "If I pretend not to notice, it's not my problem." I believe empathy and the willingness to help one another are among the most fundamental traits of humanity. Yet few have the courage to extend a helping hand.

The first person who caught my eye on the unsung hero list was Ralph Lazo. He was among the few that helped the Japanese Americans in the beginning of world war II . From the start, I was amazed by his kind-hearted nature and his willingness to help those around him. At the age of 17, Lazo learned that his Japanese American friends and neighbors were being forcibly relocated to internment camps. Though he was neither Japanese nor under threat, Lazo chose to voluntarily accompany them to the Manzanar War Relocation Center, in hopes of supporting his friends during their hardship. He couldn't ignore the injustice of the situation. In my opinion, he was very brave to go to a place he barely knew about for the sake of his friends. The internment camp conditions were harsh, but Ralph pushed through and stayed there for two years. During his time at Manzanar, his humor, empathy, and openness helped build morale, especially for young people trying to stay hopeful in a grim situation. However, not everyone was so compassionate; many others remained silent and indifferent, and some even took advantage of the situation.

Inspired by Lazo's bravery, I wanted to capture his spirit through art. While exploring ideas, I discovered the image of the "scales of justice," a symbol representing fairness and impartiality. Holding them was Lady Justice, who in many ways reminded me of Ralph—someone who, like her, didn't let outside factors such as race or status affect their judgment. After seeing the scales, I was set on drawing them and started sketching around that theme. However, as I began painting on a canvas, I soon realized that most of Ralph's photos showed him smiling and turned sideways. It also didn't help that they were black and white, so much of his face I had to interpret to fit my vision. This piece truly challenged me, because I usually draw from photos or still life. With this painting, though, I had to step out of my comfort zone and rely on my imagination to bring my

vision to life... nevertheless, I enjoyed the painting process, which helped me grow as an artist.

As an artist of modern age, I chose to use symbolism, which is very prevalent in today's art. My aim was to capture Ralph Lazo's sense of justice, which stood out among Americans. In the artwork, I depicted Ralph standing in the middle of a crowd. I used contrast to emphasize his importance by using lighter colors on him compared to the crowd. Ralph is surrounded by people whose eyes are covered by blindfolds. This serves as a metaphor for all Americans who chose to turn a blind eye to the suffering of those in the concentration camps—selfishly keeping their blindfolds on, unwilling to face the truth of the pain that Japanese Americans were enduring. The only person without a blindfold is Ralph Lazo, his gaze fixated on an imbalanced scale—a symbol of the injustice inflicted by the government. In the foreground, a group of Japanese Americans is depicted in a concentration camp, surrounded by shades of grey. This symbolizes how their lives became colorless and devoid of hope after being forcibly relocated, leaving behind the lives they once knew.

Ralph Lazo's story has changed my outlook on life, and like him, I will try to speak up about injustice and not be indifferent to the struggles people face by helping those around me. To influence the people in my life, I plan to share Ralph's story with my family and friends, and exhibit my art at school. I hope this helps them better understand the devastation caused by World War II and realize the importance of helping others and fighting for justice - even when you have to do it alone.

References:

“Manzanar.” *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 6 June 2025, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manzanar.

Overlooked No More: Ralph Lazo, Who Voluntarily Lived in an Internment Camp - The New York Times, www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/obituaries/ralph-lazo-overlooked.html.