

Impact Statement

Katy Wang

Candy Hope, 2025

Colored pencil, marker on paper, 11 x 14 inches

Independent Study, Saratoga, CA

Unsung Hero: Col. Gail Halvorsen

About two months ago, my afterschool art teacher introduced the Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes to me. When I read through the preparation materials, I was particularly interested in Col. Gail Halvorsen. I had a couple of questions: How did he come up with such an idea? Why would dropping candy make him a hero?

Since I was born in 2014, WWII is far away from me, and I Googled to learn more about Berlin in 1948-1949. I learned that Berlin people suffered hunger and fear due to the Soviet Union's Berlin Blockade. It is very hard for me to truly understand the desperation and fear that Berlin people felt at that time, but I tried to imagine living in a dark city, full of uncertainties leading to hopeless and helpless feelings.

Col. Gail Halvorsen was a U.S. Air Force pilot flying supplies to Berlin as part of the Berlin Airlift. One day, he met a group of children standing quietly by the airport fence. He gave them the only candy he had — two sticks of gum — and saw how much it meant to them just to have a tiny taste of sweetness (Smithsonian Air & Space Magazine). Halvorsen's idea started small — dropping a few pieces of candy tied to little handkerchief parachutes — but it quickly grew into something much bigger. Soon, other pilots joined him, and people from all over America sent candy and handkerchiefs to help. His project became known as "Operation Little Vittles" (Wikipedia), and it dropped more than 23 tons of candy to the children of Berlin. From my readings, I am impressed by Halvorsen's response in one interview article: "The small things you do turn into great things."

My learnings about Halvorsen's story answered my question above and showed that you don't have to do something huge to be a hero. That is why my artwork is based on two main ideas that I learned about Col. Gail Halvorsen: (1) Small actions of kindness can deliver hope, no matter how dark the world is, and (2) You don't have to do something huge to be a hero — one person's small, brave action can change the world.

For my project, I used colored pencils and markers because I wanted to show both soft details and strong bright colors. I drew a grey sky in the background to show the pain and sadness that war leaves behind. I made the candy and the main character — representing Col. Gail Halvorsen — in bright colors to show how hope, kindness, and happiness can shine through the darkness.

I did research online and found real photos of the planes used during the Berlin Airlift around 1945. I also looked at pictures of candies that were popular at that time. I chose to draw mostly hard candies and chocolate for two reasons: first, because they symbolized the kindness and care coming from Americans to the children of Berlin, and second, because they were practical — sweets that could last a long time, stay preserved, and give kids energy during times of hunger and fear. Through the parachutes, candies, and colors, I wanted my drawing to show the magic and bravery of what Col. Gail Halvorsen did.

Working on this project helped me see that being a hero isn't about being famous or powerful. You don't need to be a superman/superwoman to spread hope and make a change to our world. I learned that I don't have to wait to do something big — even little kind things, like welcoming a new friend or helping someone who feels left out, can make a big difference in someone's life.

I hope to share my artwork with my school and with my family and friends. I want them to know about Col. Gail Halvorsen's story and small things can make big difference. I will try to share my artwork online (e.g., Instagram, WeChat friend circle) and possibly work with my father, who is a software engineer at Adobe, the largest creative software company in the world - to share it in the creator's community. If my drawing helps even one person believe that they can make a difference, then I will feel like I have shared the message of the Candy Bomber. To summarize my statement, Col. Gail Halvorsen showed the world that small acts, fueled by kindness and bravery, can heal even the deepest wounds. His story will always remind me that hope can come from the sky — and from our own hearts.

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