



Impact Statement

Aleena Rafi, Grade 11

Breach of Peace, 2026

Ink pen on paper, 12.5 x 18 inches

British International School Riyadh, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Unsung Hero: Dion Diamond

As a British-Pakistani Muslim, I feel intensely about issues of racial inequality and systems of racial superiority. Through studying my own heritage, wider history, and literature, I constantly recognize such issues.

This awareness inspired me, when scrolling through the lists of unsung heroes, to choose Dion Diamond. In a world full of oppressors and bystanders, Dion, from a young age, repeatedly chose to stand up to injustice and resist the systems that enforced it, and that's what makes him the epitome of an unsung hero. His courage, despite being largely unrecognized in mainstream narratives of the civil rights movement, undeniably shaped history.

His story resonated with me when looking through his iconic photographs. He appears as a young black man, smiling whilst surrounded by members of the American Nazi Party, in the presence of its founder, George Lincoln Rockwell. That defiant smile, to me, is the most striking thing about him. Through my artwork, I want to immortalize the spirit seen in those pictures.

I chose to recreate his Jackson, Mississippi mugshot because this single image encapsulates the injustice of his arrest during the Freedom Rides - yet rather than looking irritated, his composed and dignified expression speaks to everything he stood for. He transforms joy and dignity into forms of resistance, therefore representing hope and the belief in a better future. He knew that segregation was wrong, and acted on that conviction from childhood, through actions like walking into white-only restaurants and refusing to leave.

One of the things that inspired me most was his commitment to non-violence as a tactic. His moral compass never wavered, despite the people and society that surrounded him.

His social impact, though largely unsung, was great; he played a key role in the desegregation efforts in Alexandria, Virginia, contributing to rapid and meaningful change. He was a freedom rider and joined the continuation of rides after the bus bombing in Anniston, Alabama, undeterred by his politically motivated, unjust arrests under claims like 'breach of peace', having been arrested roughly thirty times, with every arrest in service of the civil rights cause. To this day, he continues to extend his activism into institutional change by acting as a consultant in race relations and helping companies diversify.

My artwork is a stippled diptych recreating the front-facing portrait and side profile of Diamond's mugshot from the Jackson, Mississippi Police Department, exactly as they were taken upon his arrest on May 24, 1961. I reimagined the mugshot as a portrait of heroism.

His smile is the centerpiece of this artwork - it is this expression that best captures who he was: a man who smiled through hatred and refused to be diminished. The entire figure of Dion is constructed from thousands of individual ink dots, built up painstakingly through stippling with a single black pen. The patience required for the deliberate placement of each dot reflects Dion's own patience. Day by day, he acted out the change that he wanted to see. Alone, each dot is insignificant, but collectively they form a powerful image. This mirrors Dion's approach to activism: through each small act of resistance, like sit-ins, arrests, and freedom rides, a larger picture of social transformation is created. Behind and around him, prison bars fill the composition, and within the dark spaces, white ink text fills every gap, words and phrases representing everything that Diamond fought for, the notable events in his life, the values he stood for, and all that he fought against. The white ink of the interwoven words literally fills the darkness, reflecting how Dion's activism exposed injustice. They serve as a stream of consciousness, inviting the viewer to lean in and discover Dion's story embedded in the artwork itself.

Only two pens were used in the entire piece: one black, one white. I deliberately chose these materials to mirror the binary world of segregation that Dion strove to dismantle. The prison bars represent the broader cage of segregation that confined an entire race - whilst Dion's figure pushes through and beyond those bars, refusing to remain contained by a flawed justice system.

The medium and composition of my artwork explicitly serves as a rejection of segregation by embodying the integrated future Dion believed in. Black and white ink are equally essential in the construction of my artwork and must collaborate to do so. I wanted to emphasize the idea that we are all constructed of the same material, and that the divisions imposed by segregation are therefore superficial and artificial, so I did this by using thousands of black dots to create his portrait. I believe that only from an integrated, multicultural and diverse world can culture, art, and freedom thrive, and this is one of the key messages my artwork represents.

Dion's story has inspired my further exploration to learn more about figures like him, who changed the course of history through their bravery and determination. This led to my immersing myself in literature like Mandela's 'A Long Walk to Freedom' - an autobiography written in remarkable detail, naming figures like Nyathi Khongisa, Ahmed Kathrada and Walter Sisulu, and hundreds more whose stories I had never heard about despite their pivotal roles in the subversion of apartheid. Stories like these are a big reason why I aspire to become a journalist. I want to expose the stories of people like Dion to the world, to inspire others and increase awareness of modern racial inequality, among other forms of injustice. The problems Dion fought persist in modern society, exemplified by the need for BLM protests in 2020.

I hope to share my artwork through my school's social media platforms, allowing alumni, teachers, and students to see it, learn about Dion, and give him the recognition that he never asked for but entirely deserves.

Through this platform, and if exhibited by this competition, my artwork becomes an act of the generational activism that Dion champions, passing his story onwards to an audience who would never have encountered it otherwise.