



Impact Statement

Meimei Zhang, Grade 7

Drifting Among the Corals, 2026

Colored pencil on paper, 14 x 11 inches

Luckie Art Studio, Lexington, MA

Unsung Hero: Isabella Aiona Abbott

I created this piece to honor Isabella Aiona Abbott, a pioneering marine botanist who dedicated her life to studying algae and coral reef ecosystems. Although her name is not as widely recognized as many other scientists', her contributions to marine biology, taxonomy, and environmental awareness have a lasting impact on both science and Indigenous representation in STEM. I chose Abbott as my Unsung Hero because she perseveres and respects nature. She is a Native Hawaiian woman working in a field known to be dominated by Western male scientists. She achieved many goals in her career while also still loving her culture and respecting the environment.

Abbott's impact extends beyond the lab. She was the first Native Hawaiian woman to earn a Ph.D. in science and became a leading expert in marine algae. Through decades of research, she identified and classified hundreds of species of seaweed, significantly expanding scientists' understanding of coral reef ecosystems. Algae, often overlooked or thought of as insignificant, are actually the foundation of ocean life. They produce oxygen, provide food, and support the health of the coral reefs. Without algae, coral reef ecosystems would collapse. Abbott's work helped scientists better understand coral reef biodiversity and the balance required to sustain marine environments.

While working on this drawing, I researched Abbott's career, including her teaching at Stanford University and later returning to Hawaii to teach at the University of Hawaii. She connected Western science with her Native Hawaiian knowledge of limu (seaweed), proving that Indigenous practices held valuable ecological knowledge long before modern marine biology. Her work not only advanced taxonomy but also gave many more insights on Indigenous knowledge, influencing scientists and students.

My artistic vision was to portray Abbott immersed in her work. Rather than placing her inside a laboratory, separated from the ocean, I chose to draw her underwater, surrounded by coral reefs, fish, and algae. This removes the "barrier" between her and her studies. This shows that she is not observing nature from a distance but is part of the ecosystem she studies. By drawing her underwater, it shows her passion and dedication, and that her research is connected to her experience and the environment.

I intentionally drew microscopic algae in the upper corner of the piece to symbolize that the smallest things have big impacts. Many people overlook algae because they are small and look ordinary, yet they hold the ecosystem together. This can also mirror Abbott's own story as an unsung hero—someone whose impact is very important but is overlooked by many. The contrast between the microscopic algae and the massive coral

reefs and schools of fish shows that life interconnects. Even the smallest organisms influence the vastness of the ocean. In addition, Abbott's focus through the microscope represents her attention to detail and her respect for even the smallest forms of life.

I used colored pencils to create my drawing, to be able to create detailed renderings of each element in the artwork. I also used layered shading and pressed down harder to create depth and realism. I made the ocean blended to make it look flowy and softer, while making the coral and algae sharper and more detailed to show the complexity of reef systems.

Creating this artwork has changed my perspective on what it means to make an impact. Abbott's story shows that influence does not always come with fame. Sometimes the most important contributions happen quietly. Her work encourages me to look more closely at things that are overlooked.

Ultimately, this piece is a reminder that the smallest things in life can have a big impact. Through this artwork, I hope her story continues to be noticed by many others, just like the ecosystems she devoted her life to studying.