



## Impact Statement

Grace Li, Grade 10

***Look How Far We've Come***, 2026

Acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

Lakeside School, Seattle, WA

Unsung Hero: Olaudah Equiano

Imagine standing face-to-face with your younger self, a child unaware of all the struggles and triumphs that lie ahead. What would you want them to know about the person you would eventually become? For Olaudah Equiano, that imagined moment represents a life of courage and change.

I first encountered Olaudah Equiano's story when I read his autobiography last summer after finding it in a local public library. What was initially meant to be simply an insightful read about the injustices of slavery in the 1700s became a powerful experience that changed my perspective on what it means to be a resilient person, and I became compelled to learn even more about him. In researching Olaudah Equiano's life, I was amazed by how he transformed his own adversities into advocacy for the growing abolitionist movement in Britain, whether by participating in campaigns, giving speeches, or even working alongside other reformers to push for the end of the slave trade. Furthermore, by sharing his story in writing, Equiano allowed people to see enslaved individuals as human beings with voices, families, and aspirations. In doing so, Equiano became a catalyst for collective change, making an impact that extended far beyond his own life.

Olaudah Equiano was born into the Igbo community of Essaka, a village in modern-day Nigeria. As a child, he and his sister were kidnapped and sold into the transatlantic slave trade, an experience that would abruptly alter and ultimately define the trajectory of his life. Yet, rather than succumbing to a despairing fate, Equiano endured the brutal Middle Passage and years of enslavement. He eventually learned to read and write, which were skills both rare and even dangerous for enslaved people at the time. Finally, after years of strenuous labor and careful saving, Equiano purchased his own freedom in 1766. This moment could have marked the end of his struggle, but instead, it became the beginning of a mission he would pursue for years to come. He traveled extensively, worked in various trades, and became deeply involved in the abolitionist movement in Britain. His autobiography, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano", published in 1789, was groundbreaking. It offered one of the first firsthand accounts of the horrors of slavery written by a formerly enslaved person, effectively bringing a perspective that was once overlooked to light. The book was a huge success, and it played a crucial role in the end of the British slave trade in 1807.

While reading Olaudah Equiano's biography, one line struck me in particular. After describing the horrors he encountered in his early life, Equiano reflects by writing, "I still

look back with pleasure on the first scenes of my life, though that pleasure has been for the most part mingled with sorrow.” As I read, I imagined just how proud his younger self must have been, from a child torn from his home to a respected author whose words would help change history. I sought to encapsulate this idea in my painting by painting a fateful encounter between Equiano and his childhood self. I knew I wanted to include Equiano’s younger sister in my piece as well, as it was clear she played a significant role in his life, as he often spoke fondly of her in his autobiography. In the background, I blended the beauty of two worlds that shaped Equiano’s life under the same delicate sunset, the lush landscape of Essakawhat and the bustling harbor of London, creating a sense of harmonious contrast that reflects his past and future. To emphasize the theme of freedom, I painted birds soaring across the sky and included a broken chain in the scene to represent Equiano’s hard-earned liberation and his efforts to help others achieve freedom as well. At the center of the painting, the adult Equiano gently hands his younger sister a copy of his newly published book. In that moment, he looks back with a bittersweet expression just as described in his autobiography, embodying both pride in how far he had come and sorrow for all that had been lost from his childhood. The book becomes a symbol of hope, acting as proof that even the most painful experiences can be overcome and lead to success.

After learning about Olaudah Equiano, I found myself asking: how can I use my own voice, even when faced with setbacks, to address the issues I care about? Recently, I encountered a situation where I faced hostility for my Asian American identity. At the moment, I felt nervous and unsure of how to respond. However, remembering Equiano’s ability to speak out against injustice, I became inspired to do the same. Instead of responding with anger or remaining silent, I decided to use this as an opportunity to spread awareness in my community in hopes that others would not experience a similar uncomfortable moment. So, I became a leader for my school’s middle school East Asian affinity group, using my personal experiences to open conversations with students younger than me. I also attended a diversity leadership conference, connecting with students from schools across the country to discuss ways to address issues around discrimination in the classroom. I even designed bubble tea-themed stickers that read “Stop Asian Hate” and distributed them to members of my school community. Finally, to bring Equiano’s often underrecognized story to light, I am currently advocating to include *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano* in my school library and potentially even in my history or English classes.

Just like Equiano, I want to be a person that my younger self can look at with pride. I want to be someone who does not submit to hardships and continues fighting for what is right, not just for themselves but for those around them as well. Through my essay and artwork, I aim to honor Olaudah Equiano’s impact and inspire others to fight for justice, for both themselves and others.