



Impact Statement

Eileen Wang, Grade 11

Sunrise of Hope, 2026

Acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

The Overlake School, Redmond, WA

Unsung Hero: Jacob Valentine

Jacob “Jake” Valentine II, a wildlife biologist and environmental activist, is an unsung hero whose work helped save an entire species, the Mississippi Sandhill Crane, from extinction. He was instrumental in the creation of the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge, which helped grow the crane population from fewer than 30 cranes to over 100 today. With his efforts, Valentine preserved an entire ecosystem for future generations.

I chose Jacob Valentine because of his consistently selfless nature and lifelong commitment to serving others. Even before his work as an environmental activist, Valentine demonstrated exceptional bravery and compassion. As a soldier, he received a Silver Star for risking his life multiple times to rescue and carry wounded comrades to safety. This same selflessness carried into his later work. While advocating for the Mississippi sandhill cranes, he worked tirelessly with the survival of the species in mind. Through countless days of giving speeches, writing articles, and testifying before others, Valentine became a powerful voice for creatures that could not speak for themselves. I am inspired by his strong sense of responsibility and his willingness to fight for something he cared about, even in the face of obstacles.

Valentine’s impact on both environmental conservation and society is very impactful. In the 1970s, while working as a regional wildlife biologist along the Gulf Coast, he became aware of the critically endangered Mississippi sandhill crane. He quickly realized that the species was on the brink of extinction due to habitat destruction, hunting, and its inability to migrate outside its specific environment, the wet pine savannas of the Gulf Coast. The construction of U.S. Interstate 10, which was planned to cut directly through this fragile habitat, posed an even greater threat. In researching his life, I found a quote that represents Valentine’s drive to save the cranes: “These last wet pine savannas are beautiful, wondrous places, but without the cranes, they would have lost their soul.” Recognizing how harmful this would be to the cranes, Valentine decided to take action.

Through extensive advocacy, Valentine worked to raise awareness about the cranes’ situation. He delivered speeches, wrote articles, and testified before government officials to push for the protection of their habitat. His efforts ultimately led to the designation of approximately 2,000 acres of land as protected territory, resulting in the creation of the Mississippi Sandhill Crane National Wildlife Refuge. This refuge became a critical factor in the survival and gradual recovery of the species. Without Valentine’s

persistence and determination, it is likely that the Mississippi sandhill crane would not have survived.

In my artwork, I depict Valentine doing what came naturally to him, caring for others. I used acrylic paint to create vibrant colors, to highlight the life and hope he brought to the cranes and their habitat. Valentine is shown standing at a pedestal, representing the many times he gave testimonies and spoke on behalf of the cranes. On the pedestal, I included jars filled with elements of the savanna to symbolize his advocacy for protecting not just the cranes, but their entire ecosystem. A stack of papers represents the speeches, articles, and testimonies he prepared throughout his work. I chose to paint the sky as a sunrise to symbolize new beginnings and hope for the future of the cranes after the refuge was established. Behind Valentine, cranes are taking flight in the sky, symbolizing the renewed life and future made possible by his efforts. With the cranes, I decided to incorporate a transition from drawn outlines of cranes into fully realized and rendered birds. This represents how Valentine helped transform the cranes' from being on the verge of disappearing into mere memories or illustrations in a book, to becoming a living, thriving species once again.

Learning about Jacob Valentine's life has taught me about responsibility. His story has shown me that just one person who is willing to take action can lead to a better world. I hope to carry this mindset into my own life by being more proactive in supporting causes I care about and by using my voice for those who cannot speak up for themselves. I also plan to share my artwork with others to spread awareness about Valentine's contributions and the importance of conservation. I hope that in doing this, Valentine life and my artwork will be able to inspire positive change.