



Impact Statement

Isabelle Chung, Grade 11

Swinging Toward Freedom, 2026

Acrylic on canvas board, 16 x 20 x 1 inches

Mercer Island High School, Mercer Island, WA

Unsung Hero: Sheyann Webb

In the first semester of my AP U.S. history class, while studying the Civil Rights Movement, we learned about the tragic yet aspiring event of Bloody Sunday. Bloody Sunday was a Civil Rights march in Selma, Alabama where over 600 marchers began marching from Selma to Montgomery with the goal of fighting for their voting rights, which was often ignored in the South. However, during this event state troops began to violently attack these peaceful marchers with tear gas and clubs at the Edmund Pettus Bridge causing many injuries and even deaths. In the long run though, this event became a major turning point as the media captured the brutal violence and helped the public gain sympathy even pushing to stronger federal protection of Black voting rights. Soon after learning about this event, I explored the Lowell Milken Unsung Heroes website and what automatically caught my eye was the Civil Rights Movement category. Because of my deeper learning and understanding of the long relentless fights that individuals within the Civil Rights Movement endured (whether it's marches like Bloody Sunday, peaceful lunch counter sit-ins in Nashville, or bus protests) I felt really inspired and connected with these Civil Rights individuals. In particular, Sheyann Webb, a young 8-year-old girl who was extremely active and involved in marches and protests, really caught my attention. Sheyann Webb had also been one of the marchers at Bloody Sunday and I think this involvement really led to my decision of illustrating Sheyann as my Unsung Hero.

When I first learned about Bloody Sunday, I was shocked and extremely disappointed at how violent and messy this peaceful march had unfolded. Troops began to use violence on individuals, and many innocent families were harmed in such a quick moment which was so heartbreaking. Reading that Sheyann Webb, an 8-year-old girl, a girl that should be running around and enjoying her youth had to firsthand witness this violence truly broke my heart. However, at the same time the fact that she was present there, wanting to help herself and her community despite knowing the possible violence was really admirable as this mindset is not easy to maintain, especially at such a young age. I believe that this persistence and courage is what makes a true hero and Sheyann Webb, often called the "smallest freedom fighter", embodies this perfectly. While many individuals were too afraid to act in any way because of the police brutality and punishments, she stood beside other leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. to fight for her community's justice as she was aware of how unfair the inequality was within society. Individuals like Sheyann are the true heroes who build the growing positive society today, her action and constant involvement helped gain attention and sympathy,

contributing to change. Even after the tragedies of Bloody Sunday Sheyann continued to demonstrate involvement and was not only a huge inspiration for individuals at that time but also continues to be an inspiration for future generations.

My artistic vision for my painting was utilizing a swing to symbolize Sheyann's childhood innocence and movement toward change. With a swing typically indicating playfulness and safety, it highlights her playful nature, yet this contrasts with the courage and serious commitment that she was able to carry further highlighting her heroism. Using the swing metaphorically, I painted her swinging away from the Edmund Pettus Bridge which symbolizes inequality and fear especially with the strikingly muted and dark colors and instead toward a brighter field filled with warm orange and yellow colors representing equality and hope, including signs like "Freedom Now!". I also illustrated Sheyann talking with Martin Luther King Jr. as she got a lot of inspiration and motivation from King's speeches and activism. Along with this, I wanted to illustrate that her actions were just as meaningful as King's actions. Her bright smile and glowing heart symbolize the hopefulness and positivity of equality that is continuing to arise and be more applicable today. Her bright colors and directional movement of swinging forward illustrates her persistence to move towards a more just future. The use of the swing also highlights my hope that the world will become more equal and fairer so many children will be able to enjoy their youth without having to experience such brutalities against them.

While researching and creating this piece of Sheyann Webb, I learned that the dedication and courage to move forward despite hardships is what makes meaningful change. This idea is clearly represented with the metaphorical swing which also reflects my new outlook for my future where I want to be someone who pushes and swings towards positive change especially when taking initiative such as using my own creativity to support others. I hope that through my art, others will be able to find appreciation for the efforts that Sheyann Webb has made towards the progression of equality, and I hope people are able to learn and grow from her uplifting mindset. In the near future, I plan to share this piece to many individuals around me whether it's through my own social media platforms or potential exhibition opportunities. I hope that my effort to strive forward and present my artwork allows others to gain courage and strength from the inspiring story of Sheyann Webb.

References:

<https://www.civilrightsteaching.org/resource/sheyann-webb>