



Impact Statement

Zainab Belgaumi, Grade 11

We Managed the Best We Could, 2026

Oil on canvas, 16.5 x 11.5 inches

Dubai College, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

Unsung Hero: May Edward Chinn

Histories of medicine typically begin with the remembrance of an institution. Dr. May Edward Chinn is a reminder that some of the most important work was done by those shunned from those institutions. Her father had escaped a Virginia plantation at eleven years old, and her mother was of Chickahominy Native American Descent, whereas Dr. Chinn herself grew up in New York City. Constantly faced with various forms of erasure, she became a doctor anyway, not despite the challenges she faced, but because of them. She had a methodical, unhurried determination that was far more effective than dramatic acts of defiance.

The detail that first stopped me in my tracks when I was researching her was the fact that when Dr. Chinn first began her internship at Harlem Hospital in 1926, the male doctors who worked with her despised her presence so viciously that she had no choice but to begin riding out with the ambulance crews on emergency calls simply to get out of the building. The dangerous streets of Harlem at night were somehow still safer for her than the place she had trained and deserved to work in. She was the first woman of any race to ride with ambulance crews. The fact that this was largely due to necessity is what matters to me. It tells a clearer story of the costs of being a pioneer.

Her impact was almost as structural as it was personal. When she graduated, only 65 of the 150,000 working doctors in the United States were Black women. At the time, black people were banned from practicing in almost every New York City hospital. She refused to accept this as a boundary and instead built her life around it. Instead, Dr. Chinn treated patients in their homes, practicing procedures on kitchen tables because the operating room simply was not an option. She eventually joined the Edgecomb Sanitarium, which was a small hospital run by seven Black doctors as an alternative to the segregated system they were living in. A quote from her autobiography particularly resonated with me, as she described how they worked by stating, 'We managed the best we could.' Five words that seem deceptively simple, yet they will not leave my brain. There is somewhat of a quiet vagueness within the phrase, undermining the effects of systematic racism and exclusion. This reflects how normalized her struggles had become, and it erases individual agency and instead suggests that survival during this time was reliant on external factors rather than meritocracy, as believed.

Another rarely discussed layer of her story is the fact that her light skin and last name Chinn led to many people assuming she was Chinese or white. This ambiguity stayed with her throughout her career to the point that some Black hospital workers treated her

with unkindness for the opposite reason that their white counterparts did. She was caught between both sides, and it was a losing game no matter what she did. That feeling of never fully belonging anywhere is something I wanted to incorporate into the composition of my piece. She stands by herself in the frame, in her own light. She is not in the ambulance, but she is also not away from it. She is in the space between where she spent most of her career.

The painting is oil on canvas. I chose the medium specifically because it carries a historical power of being used to commemorate a subject worth preserving. A woman who received zero recognition during her lifetime was definitely worth preserving. The composition is built around a 1930s ambulance, which is rendered largely and closely. Red is the most significant color of this piece as it reflects almost everything. The red represents urgency and emergency in the way that Dr. Chinn was able to defy all odds and treat her patients. Against the dark, melancholy background, Dr. Chinn is painted in warm browns and ochres. She is the source of golden light in the composition, and she is not looking at the viewer. She is already on the move. Remember: urgency and emergency.

On the wall behind her, I wrote the phrase from her autobiography. 'We managed the best we could.' I considered many options for my choice of words, however this one felt the most honest. It isn't victorious or triumphant. It is the language of someone who did extraordinary things, under difficult conditions, and who described those things very plainly, almost as if they were the bare minimum. The repetition of the words across the wall is intended to act as texture. Up close the phrase is readable, but from far away it seems like part of the wall: something the building is made of.

I relate to Dr. Chinn's experience in ways I could not possibly anticipate when I first started this piece. The concept of being underestimated on every single front simultaneously is something I recognize. I also recognize the exhaustion of having to manage others' assumptions about you as a person before you can even begin working. My key takeaway from her story is that persistence trumps everything else. She didn't pretend her obstacles were gifts or pretend the hostility she faced wasn't real. She acknowledged all of it and just kept practicing. She kept going out on ambulance calls. She kept treating patients. She knew what she wanted to be and what she wanted to do and that is exactly what she did. That is the type of persistence I think is worth painting.

Dr. May Edward Chinn died in 1980 at 84 years old. She had spent 50 years as a doctor at this point, and she was only just beginning to receive formal recognition. There are people working today to get her face on a commemorative postage stamp. My hope is that this painting becomes part of a larger effort to make her name as permanent as it deserves to be.