



Impact Statement

Hannah Cha, Grade 8

***Broken Chains of Prejudice*, 2026**

Acrylic, graphite on canvas, 11.5 x 16 inches

Blue Valley Middle School, Stilwell, KS

Unsung Hero: May Edward Chinn

The Unsung Hero I have picked is Dr. May Edward Chinn. Dr. Chinn was an outstanding African American physicist whose life was a perfect example of how strong people can be. She rejected barriers that were being put up against her and broke through all obstacles set up by racism and sexism. May Edward Chinn became the first African American woman to complete her medical studies at Bellevue Hospital Medical College (now NYU Grossman School of Medicine). She also became the first African American female to get an internship at Harlem Hospital. This is already remarkable in itself, but is even more incredible given the high levels of discrimination against women and people of color at that time.

I chose Dr. Chinn because her story epitomizes courage that is soft yet impactful. Dr. Chinn did not demand to be widely celebrated during her life, but dedicated years to caring for medical patients in Harlem who were refused treatment in White hospitals instead.

What truly inspires me about Dr. May Edward Chinn is her refusal to give up, no matter what life threw at her. It leads me to think about how I should handle challenges in my own life. Even when a racially motivated music professor discouraged her from following through with the arts, she transformed that pain into purpose, ultimately reshaping early cancer detection as we know it. She faced racism in both the medical field and the music industry, and went on to carve a path where neither existed. Chinn shaped her pain and the prejudice against her into flames that she used to blaze through society's expectations about her, and rose higher. She did not think of rejection as failure, but as redirection.

Dr. Chinn's impact is nothing to sneeze at. She had phenomenal effects in the fields of early cancer detection, women's health, and medical access for minority communities. Dr. Chinn became the first woman to ride alongside the Harlem Hospital ambulance team after earning her degree in 1926, a phenomenal feat that shattered gender barriers and revolutionized emergency care.

Afterward, she spent her entire life providing health services for the people of Harlem, where she took care of those who could not be treated in the racially segregated hospitals. Many of those patients who sought treatment from her had diseases in advanced stages because they were so often denied medical treatment.

Her greatest contribution was her progressive work in early cancer screening, including helping to develop the Pap smear, a cancer testing method that saved millions of lives by catching early

cervical cancer. In Dr. Chinn's era, cancer was poorly understood and not taken as seriously as it is today. However, she believed that early detection could change not only test results, but lives. Additionally, her story is woven into Harlem's cultural history. Before finding her calling in medicine, she was a talented pianist who accompanied singer Paul Robeson, connecting her to the Harlem Renaissance. Her diverse background enabled her to handle situations where she was not welcome.

For this project and statement, my research was sourced from medical archives and databases, as well as historical biographies. These sources highlight her impressive duality as both scientist and artist, a woman who connected worlds who barely made space for people like her.

My artwork focuses not only on her sensational accomplishments but also on the prejudice she faced in achieving them. I centered the artwork on the Harlem Hospital Center, using the 20th-century logo from Dr. Chinn's era. There are fragmented chains within the logo, representing the barriers she shattered, racially and gender wise. Additionally, the element of pianos wrapping around the piece represents her artistic side, leading to the science-focused era of her life, which would later change millions of lives. I included broken chains in her eyes, representing what she saw versus what others around her in her time saw. They saw her as a product of pure luck, while she knew she was working hard to prove everyone around her wrong and to break the expectations set for her the minute she was born. To add, the cervical cancer ribbon wrapped around her shoulders represents her achievements in pioneering early cancer detection. She truly saved millions of lives. The background creates a dynamic by darkening near the bottom, mirroring musical dynamics. The stethoscope resting around her neck reflects her emergency medical work and her achievement as the first woman to ride with the Harlem Hospital ambulance crew.

The medium for this piece is acrylic on canvas, allowing for visual depth. I used coloring techniques that also create visual dimensions. My process began with research. I read about her childhood, medical career, and the events that led up to it. I sketched many designs focused on visually combining music, medicine, and injustice. The final design uses semi-realistic portraiture and symbols that represent her life. As I have worked on this piece, learning about her story has been very inspiring in many ways. One lesson from her is that being rejected does not mean being a failure; it simply means being redirected. Another lesson is that dreams change, rather than being extinguished.

This story inspires me to fight against oppression by doing what is right with whatever skills I have and by lifting those who are down in life. In addition, I hope to make my work public through my artwork, which addresses topics such as unsung heroes, all forms of discrimination in healthcare, and the importance of early cancer diagnosis. This will be done by participating in several exhibitions at my school and in other parts of the community. Through art and literature, the story of Dr. Chinn can be told to acknowledge her contributions over her long life by paying tribute to her for seeing people in ways others couldn't. Fully, thoughtfully, and without fear.