



Impact Statement

Asilia Ferdinand, Grade 12

Breaking the Headlines, 2026

Acrylic, charcoal, colored pencil, marker, pastel, watercolor, paper on canvas board,
20 x 16 inches

Benjamin Franklin High School, New Orleans, LA

Unsung Hero: Jackie Ormes

My name is Asilia Ferdinand, a current junior at Benjamin Franklin High School. My chosen Unsung Hero to celebrate and recognize is Jackie Ormes. She was a brave example of an innovator and was the first nationally recognized Black female cartoonist in the United States of America. I decided to focus my project on her considering her story is not widely known, but her influence is still relevant today. Ormes used her art not only for entertainment, but also to spread awareness about racism, sexism, and political injustices globally. African Americans, much less women, were rarely given a platform, and Jackie Ormes utilized her platform in a meaningful and impactful way. She confronted instead of conformed, and broke boundaries and barriers restricting creativity and freedoms.

Jackie Ormes used comic strips to make an impact, her most famous being Torchy Brown from the Harlem Post. Her characters reflected intelligent, charming, and lively personalities of Black women rarely shown in the media at that time. However, though a lot of her comics aimed to be fun and entertaining, Ormes did not stray away from commentating through her art. Working with the Chicago Defender, the humorous character of Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger was created to speak on serious issues such as segregation, economic inequality, and Cold War politics. Expressing open opinions about controversial topics allowed accusations to meet Jackie Ormes and open investigations for suspected communism, a common occurrence for civil rights activists. In the face of these obstacles, Jackie continued to create as well as advocate. While digging deeper into how she handled prejudice while maintaining the quality of her work, I became more and more impressed with Jackie's resilience.

The idea behind my art is focused on breaking through barriers to create a new world, a new standard. The canvas is covered in created headlines representing the kind of accusations and criticism civil rights activists including Jackie Ormes dealt with at that time. These headlines attempt to confine and define her and them. However, across this bland, monochromatic surface, bursts of color are seen. The spray paint and streaks symbolize disruption. They represent Jackie Ormes' voice cutting and bleeding through silence, her creativity refusing to be hidden. This shows how her unapologetic influence could not be restricted by the narratives imposed on her. Her figure literally breaking through alongside her famous Torchy Brown shows defiance and unwillingness to be passive throughout her life against prejudice.

Jackie's work and impact continues to surround us today. The inclusion of black faces in retail and children's toys represent Ormes' unwillingness to let the younger generation generate a narrative of white supremacy and a limited narrative. Through her work, she expanded what was possible for black people and women.

I hope, through my piece, to capture that same act and mindset of breaking through. As a young Black and Asian American woman, I want to show how creativity has the power to redefine the label others may cut out for you, and you can go beyond those confines to color your own narrative.