



Impact Statement

Flor Medrano, Grade 10

Displaced Hero, 2026

Pen on unstretched canvas, 20 x 16 inches

East Side High School, Newark, NJ

Unsung Hero: Chief Joseph

My name is Flor Medrano, I am originally from El Salvador, and I am a student at East Side High School in Newark, New Jersey. As soon as I heard about the opportunity to participate in this competition, I decided to research Native American leaders, as this group lacks sufficient representation in history and in the media. Upon reading the story of Chief Joseph, I was deeply impressed and knew immediately that I wanted to base my drawing on this historical figure. What I admire most about Chief Joseph is his intelligence and his strategic ability. He was a brilliant leader who fought to protect his people from forced displacement. During conflicts with the United States government, he demonstrated exceptional skills by devising strategies that allowed his people to hold out in multiple engagements.

In addition, I deeply admire his courage. Despite lacking the resources and weaponry possessed by his opponents, Chief Joseph defended his territory and his people with determination. His leadership was grounded not only in warfare but also in his commitment to the dignity and survival of his community.

Chief Joseph was born on March 3, 1840, in the Wallowa Valley, in what is now known as Oregon. Following his father's death in 1871, he became the leader of the Nez Perce at a time when the U.S. government was attempting to force them to abandon their lands. In 1877, during the Nez Perce War, Joseph led his people on a long retreat, attempting to reach Canada to escape the U.S. Army. Ultimately, he surrendered near the Canadian border and expressed his desire for peace in a famous and moving speech, in which he spoke of: The lack of food and blankets, and the fact that the young leaders were either dead or had fled. Joseph asked for time to search for his children and described his heart as being "sick and sad." At the end of his speech, Joseph uttered the phrase that defined his entire address: "I will fight no more—forever."

After his surrender, he spent the remainder of his life advocating for the rights of his people until his passing on September 21, 1904, at the Colville Reservation in Washington, leaving behind a legacy of resistance and leadership.

Chief Joseph's impact is significant, both in the annals of American and World History, and in the lives of many individuals. His struggle embodies the resistance of indigenous peoples in the face of injustice and displacement. Although he was ultimately forced to surrender, his famous

speech reflects his humanity, his sorrow, and his desire for peace. His story has inspired generations to reflect upon the rights of indigenous peoples and the importance of justice.

Chief Joseph helped raise awareness regarding the treatment of Native Americans, leaving behind a legacy of strength, leadership, and resilience. While we clearly are a long way away from recognizing the rights of indigenous people in the United States, thanks to Chief Joseph's legacy, there is now a greater awareness in the United States regarding the injustices faced by indigenous peoples. His story helped open a dialogue about the importance of justice, respect, and human rights, contributing—over time—to the country's progress toward a more just and inclusive society.

For this piece, I decided to portray Chief Joseph as the hero he truly was. My goal was for his portrait to convey a strong and respected image, highlighting his role as a leader. I also wanted to ensure that his tribal affiliation was clearly understood, so I included the name "Nez Perce" on his attire. As for the background, I wanted his story to be visually comprehensible, even without words. For this reason, I incorporated elements such as battle scenes to represent the conflict with the U.S. Army, including two figures—a Native American and a soldier—both engaged in combat.

However, I did not wish to depict him solely as a warrior, but also as a leader of his people; therefore, I added elements of daily life—such as traditional dwellings—to reflect his culture and community. Through these artistic choices, I sought to represent both his struggle and his humanity.

Regarding the materials for my piece, I opted for using a canvas sheet, as I felt it would yield a higher-quality finish. Regarding technique, my specialty—and the area in which I possess the greatest mastery—is drawing with pens, ballpoints, or charcoal, characterized by shading and the interplay between light and shadow.

Ultimately, I decided to take on the challenge of employing a technique with which I had little prior experience: pointillism. I had previously created only one small drawing using this method. Given my limited experience, I devoted a couple of weeks to practicing it. Once I had attained a sufficient command of pointillism, I began the artwork.

This project has helped me at two levels. At the level of art making skills, it helped me to discover a technique that I want to continue to explore, and at the content level, it has influenced the way I view history and the importance of giving visibility to figures who often do not receive the recognition they deserve. The story of Chief Joseph has taught me the value of leadership, resilience, and standing up for justice. Finally, his legacy taught me that accepting defeat can, at times, be the most heroic and dignified act a person can perform. Although he fought bravely, in the end—just as he was on the verge of reaching Canada—he surrendered with dignity to prevent further loss of life among his tribe members. This teaches me that acting on impulse is not always the right course of action, and that, in some cases, accepting defeat can be the best decision if it serves to protect others.

I hope to share my artwork with others as a means of educating people about Chief Joseph and the history of the Nez Perce. By exhibiting my work or, in this instance, presenting it in this

prestigious competition. I wish to raise awareness regarding the struggles and resilience of indigenous peoples.

References:

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