

Impact Statement

Clarissa Sun, Grade 12

Cleared for Takeoff, 2026

Ceramic sculpture, 7 x 4 x 4 inches

Castro Valley High School, Castro Valley, CA

Unsung Hero: Jerrie Cobb

I chose Geraldyn “Jerrie” Cobb to be represented in my ceramics artwork because her story represents perseverance, courage, and quiet impact. Ever since I was a little kid, learning about Neil Armstrong landing on the moon, I found flying and space exploration fascinating and wondered about what it took to get them there. However, the real struggles and injustices behind it that people like Jerrie Cobb had to go through never truly occurred to me. Cobb was undeniably qualified, extraordinarily accomplished, and deeply passionate about her dreams, yet she was denied recognition and opportunity simply because she was a woman. What inspires me most about her is not just her talent as a pilot, but her resilience in the face of unfair barriers and determination to challenge social norms, not allowing rejection to define her and proving that heroism doesn’t always come with historic “firsts.” I admire Jerried Cobb because of her willingness to speak out and take action, and want to represent her impact in my art because it deserves greater recognition.

Geraldyn “Jerrie” Cobb, was an aviator whose achievements through adversity paved the path for the future of space exploration, particularly for women, despite never getting to travel to space herself. Born in Norman, Oklahoma in 1931, Cobb fell in love with flying at just twelve years old, inspired by her father, who was a pilot. Driven by her passion to fly, she earned her pilot’s license at seventeen, and was flying military planes across the globe by twenty-one, an extraordinary accomplishment for a woman at the time. Despite facing discrimination after World War II, Cobb persisted, breaking three world aviation records before the age of thirty. In 1959, she was selected by NASA to participate in astronaut testing as America’s first group of women to undergo the same rigorous evaluations as male astronauts. Cobb was a part of the thirteen women who passed the tests, later known as the First Lady Astronaut Trainees (FLATs). However, NASA refused to allow them access to military jet training, effectively blocking them from completing the program. Recognizing this unfairness as capable women, Cobb traveled to Washington, D.C., where she testified before Congress to advocate for gender equality in NASA’s space program. Although not winning her case, she drew public attention to the issue and opened the doors for future reform where in 1999, Eileen Collins became the first woman to command a space mission, an event where Collins publicly honored Cobb and the FLATs. Despite her journey to space ending, Cobb continued her passion by conducting humanitarian aid missions to communities in the Amazon rainforest, where she became known as the “Flying Angel of Amazonia.” Her legacy is one of service, advocacy, and lasting change, and I wanted my piece to honor this legacy.

My ceramic sgraffito jar, lid, and saucer are designed to visually narrate and represent Jerrie Cobb's journey and life's impact. The saucer represents Earth and aviation, featuring planes circling the globe to reflect Cobb's early career as a pilot and her global humanitarian missions. The jar itself serves as a transition between Earth and space, illustrating movement. Imagery of planes rising in the sky and transitioning to rockets but not being able to go past the barrier represents her role in opening opportunities for future generations but not reaching space herself. Finally, the lid represents space, featuring thirteen stars that symbolize each of the FLATs, with an astronaut helmet handle to honor the dream Cobb was denied. My color choices of blue and black underglazes and contrasting carvings reinforce the themes of sky, space, and discovery, with the sgraffito design helping to highlight elements such as the stars.

This ceramic artwork is meant to honor Jerrie Cobb not only as a pilot or activist, but as a symbol of perseverance and determination. By working on this piece and learning more about Cobb's story, I realized how influential one's passion can be and how far it can take you. It inspired me to take my passion and focus on achieving my goals and dreams for it, overcoming any struggles that may come my way like Jerrie Cobb did. Her life encourages me to speak up, be courageous, and use my skills to serve others, and I hope I can communicate this idea with others through my art.

I want to share my artwork to my community to spark more conversations about gender equality, the origins of space exploration, and the stories of unsung heroes, such as Jerrie Cobb. To accomplish this, I plan to showcase my piece at my school's library ceramics exhibition as well as a description of Cobb's impact, aiming to educate others about Cobb's contributions. I also plan to share my art to my town's newspaper and on social media to extend the reach of my project beyond my immediate community. Ultimately, my goal is for my artwork to inspire others, especially young people, to recognize the power of persistence and the power they have to shape the future like the many unsung heroes of the past.

References:

Arrighi, Robert S. "Aviator Jerrie Cobb Trained in NASA's Gimbal Rig in 1960." NASA, 13 April 2023, Accessed 6 January 2026. <https://www.nasa.gov/centers-and-facilities/glenn/aviator-jerrie-cobb-trained-in-nasas-gimbal-rig-in-1960/>.

Smithsonian Institution. "Geraldyn "Jerrie" M. Cobb Papers." National Air and Space Museum, 2017, Accessed 6 January 2026. <https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-archive/geraldyn-jerrie-m-cobb-papers/sova-nasm-2017-0035>.