



Impact Statement

Emily McAuliffe, Grade 12

Instructions to all Persons of Japanese Ancestry, 2026

Graphite on paper, 17 x 14 inches

King School, Stamford, Connecticut, CT

Unsung Hero: Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga

My Unsung Hero is Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, a Japanese American activist and researcher whose work helped expose the truth behind the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. I chose Aiko because her story represents a different kind of heroism, one rooted not in public speeches or dramatic protests, but in patience, persistence, and truth. She was not widely known, yet her work reshaped American legal history. What drew me to her story was a sense of curiosity and responsibility. When learning about Japanese American incarceration, I realized I had heard about Executive Order 9066 and the camps, but I had not learned about the people who later fought to correct that injustice. Aiko's story stood out because she was incarcerated as a teenager, yet instead of allowing that experience to silence her, she dedicated her life to uncovering hidden government documents that proved the incarceration was based on racism and political failure, not military necessity.

What I most admire about Aiko is her integrity and resilience. She spent years carefully researching in the National Archives, often unnoticed and unpaid, combing through boxes of government files. Her discovery of key documents directly contributed to reopening Supreme Court cases and to the eventual redress and apology from the U.S. government. Her life continues to matter because it reminds us that justice is not automatic; it requires ordinary people to demand accountability. Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga was incarcerated at Manzanar and later at other camps during World War II after President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. Like over 120,000 Japanese Americans, she and her family lost their freedom and property without evidence of wrongdoing. The government justified this action as a military necessity, but decades later, Aiko helped uncover documents proving that officials knew Japanese Americans did not pose a security threat. In the 1980s, while working as a researcher for the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC), Aiko discovered a suppressed government report by the Office of Naval Intelligence. This report directly contradicted the claims used to justify the incarceration. Her findings were used in the coram nobis cases that reopened the convictions of Fred Korematsu, Gordon Hirabayashi, and Minoru Yasui. Ultimately, her research contributed to the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which formally apologized and provided reparations to surviving internees.

The people impacted by her actions were not only former incarcerates and their families but also future generations of Americans. Her work reshaped how history is taught and strengthened civil liberties protections. To understand her impact, I consulted articles from

Densho and historical summaries of the redress movement. I also reviewed background information about Executive Order 9066 and the coram nobis cases. These helped me see that Aiko's work was not just about the past, it was about correcting the historical record. My research shaped my artwork by emphasizing documentation and hidden truth.

My vision for this piece was to represent Aiko not only as a person, but as a force of truth emerging from silence. Instead of creating a simple portrait, I designed my artwork to show layers, both visually and symbolically. I incorporated imagery of European eras of art to interpret Japanese culture, symbolizing the suppression and narrative western societies have enforced onto minorities at the time. I composed the figures of Japanese Americans rising from the bottom of the page to symbolize their movement out of injustice and confinement toward dignity and recognition. Their gradual ascent into a lighter, almost angelic space represents how Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga's work helped lift the weight of discrimination, allowing truth and justice to elevate their place in American history. I chose graphite because it connects directly to documentation and research. Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga's activism was built not on protest signs but on careful study of government records. The graphite (pencil based) medium reflects the quiet but powerful act of uncovering truth through written evidence. The composition places Aiko slightly off-center, emphasizing that she worked behind the scenes rather than in the spotlight. I intentionally used the contrast of dark shadows in the background of the clouds billowing down to show the principle of emphasis on the main subject of Aiko in the foreground. I applied the principle of movement by arranging the figures in an upward diagonal path that guides the viewer's eye from injustice toward freedom and justice. Through these artistic decisions, I wanted viewers to feel the real strength in her persistence and emphasize her contributions to American history. The piece is dramatic, it is complex, it is nuanced, much like the situations Aiko had found herself in. Thus, more of a reason to shed light on how she has helped pave the way for Asian American minorities.

Learning about Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga has changed how I think about leadership and courage. Before this project, I often associated heroism with bold, visible action. Now I understand that leadership can also mean dedicating years to research, accountability, and justice, even when recognition is unlikely. This project has also deepened my understanding of civic responsibility. Aiko's work shows that democracy depends on citizens who question government decisions and demand transparency. Her story reminds me that history is not fixed; it can be revisited and corrected. In the future, I hope to carry forward her example by paying attention to overlooked voices and standing up for fairness in my own community. Even small actions, asking questions and speaking thoughtfully can contribute to larger change. I hope viewers of my artwork feel inspired to learn more about lesser-known individuals who shaped history. I want them to recognize that justice often depends on people working quietly but persistently behind the scenes. If even one viewer leaves curious about the redress movement or motivated to stand up against injustice, then my artwork has created its own ripple effect. By honoring Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga, I am not only recognizing her contributions but also participating in the ongoing work of remembering history accurately and responsibly.

References:

<https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/executive-order-9066>

<https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-67/> [https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Coram nobis cases/](https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Coram_nobis_cases/)

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/442>.