



Impact Statement

Lydia Xu, Grade 8

Observing, 2026

Colored pencil, graphite, marker, and pastel on paper, 14 x 11 inches

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Unsung Hero: Will Counts

For my Unsung Hero, I chose Ira Wilmer Counts Jr, known as Will Counts. He was a photojournalist of the 1900s, most famously known for his photographs of the desegregation at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. Counts did not develop his passion for photography until his junior year of high school. This passion was sparked when he saw an advertisement for a camera in a magazine. Although his family couldn't afford to get that specific camera, his mother gifted him with a cheaper Kodak camera. Throughout his college years, Counts relied on photography to pay his way. After graduating college, Counts became a photographer for many newspapers such as the Arkansas Democrat.

His most famous photograph depicts Elizabeth Eckford being heckled on her way to school by the white students following the integration of schools. I find Will Counts to be inspiring because he knew that what was happening was wrong and he stood up and spoke out against it, even if it was on paper and not in the form of words. He helped to bring attention to what was happening and show how wrong it was. He used something he was passionate about to bring about a change in the world. Using his camera, Counts was able to convey a very important message to the world. He saw the faults with what was happening and was able to use something he loved to bring attention to it, in hopes of being able to change it for the better. His photographs were able to help make the lives of hundreds of African Americans better. They brought attention to the dreadful reality of integrating schools. This publicity and attention are what began the movement to right the problem of racism. If people were unaware of what was happening, no one would be able to make it better. Will Counts's photography and work changed the lives of many African Americans in a truly positive way.

In my work, *Observing*, I have illustrated Counts photographing an instance of racism. His eye, filled with visions of the newspapers announcing the integration of schools, represents the newspapers that his photographs would eventually end up on. It represents his hope for the future and his wish that his work will someday be just as impactful as those headlines declaring the desegregation of schools. His camera, which captured an African American man getting attacked, represents the violence that is happening in the world right now and Counts's effort to publicize it so it can be changed. My use of graphite pencil for the camera portion creates contrast between a couple of things. Firstly, it is different from the rest of the art piece that is colorful. Second, and more importantly, it highlights the difference between the white men and the African American man in the scene.

Will Counts was able to silently bring attention to an issue in the world through a method that he was extremely passionate about. Similarly, I have done the same by introducing Counts and his achievements through my love and passion for art. Will Counts's actions have taught me that I can make a change in the world, and notably that I can do it quietly and without words. His achievements have inspired me to stand up for what I know is right and fight for those rights. He has changed my outlook on life in a way that will forever affect me. He has inspired me to fight for everything I believe is right. I hope to share not only my artwork, but also the lessons I have learned from Will Counts, with my friends, family, and community. I believe that through communication as simple as speaking, I will be able to spread the vital lesson Will Counts has taught us-that fighting for your rights is one of the most important things you can do in your life.

References:

"Counts, Will." Encyclopedia of Arkansas, 20 October 2025,
<https://encyclopediaofarkansas.net/entries/will-counts-470/>. Accessed 20 April 2026.