



Impact Statement

Satomi Giedeman, Grade 12

Silent Perseverance, 2026

Watercolor, colored pencil, pen, collage on paper, 9 x 6 inches

Chief Sealth International High School, Seattle, WA

Unsung Hero: Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga

My mom is the strongest person I know. The moments of her greatest strengths often don't have an audience: childbirth, racism, trauma, having to persevere. Her family is no different. Built off immigrants and a military family they all had to fight to find their communities. Both her and her family never get enough credit for the trials they've overcome nor is it talked about enough how they are not alone in these struggles. Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga is no different.

Aiko Herzig-Yoshinaga was a Japanese American born in 1924 in Sacramento, California. Her childhood and young adult life was heavily impacted by World War II leading her to a concentration camp per President Roosevelt's Executive order. She was unable to graduate from her high school despite being two months away from graduation, she gave birth in the camps, and watched her father die there. After leaving the camps, she dedicated her life to bringing justice to all Japanese Americans for what they had endured at these camps. She worked with numerous non-profits, moved to New York and D.C., and surrounded herself with diverse people who fueled her activism.

It was the years she spent in libraries relentlessly researching the concentration camps that brought forth the change that she had been fighting for. Aiko lived a complicated personal life influenced by three husbands and residual racism following World War II. Yet she stayed for up to 50 to 60 hours of the week for years looking at archived records of the government agencies involved in the camps and was able to overturn wrong accusations of Japanese Americans falsely accused under the government's own prejudice and racism. She forced the military to look at their wrongdoings and was able to provide evidence to help support her cause and change lives whilst advocating for herself and her culture.

For my piece I wanted to encapsulate the tedious and ritualistic process that Aiko must've gone through in her work. In Japanese culture, or at least what I have practiced with my family, folding a thousand paper cranes grants you a wish. I wanted this long and repetitive process to symbolize Aiko's experience in her research, with her diligence in achieving her goal/wish to help Japanese Americans. The paper motif is amplified by having the medium of the piece being a collage of colored paper cut out with a knife adding to the meticulous aspect. In the piece I have the paper of the cranes being made of the files that are in the cabinets behind her, further reinforcing how the crane's intimate attention to fold is like the care Aiko put into combing through these files. The cranes piling out of the file that Aiko is holding are both white and

shaped like wings, this composition is to show how she is bringing an idea of freedom from being a savior figure, like an angel.

The red circle behind Aiko's head represents the Japanese flag's red sun. The flag represents how her culture drives her work, always looming behind her and being her light source in her dimly lit room/environment. The background is a dark blue to further show the dim atmosphere and how isolated she is—how she holds no audience for the work she is doing. The blue, red, and white, also being the United States colors showing the duality that Aiko faces in being a Japanese American, how she coexists in both environments. This further highlighted as the flying cranes from her wings blend into the sky alluding to the United States' flag with the white stars on their blue background showing the intersectionality of her identity.

Lastly, her face was carrying an angry expression. Aiko did not have an easy life; her life was driven by a past of injustice and having to strive for better. In Japanese culture we are told to retain a calm composure, to assimilate, to not stir a problem. But if it weren't for her taking initiative to her feelings, stepping out of her own safety, she wouldn't have been able to reach her achievements. She had to endure the racism of the government, go through multiple marriages, and become a young mother. Although most photos of her are her smiling, there should also be recognition for the strife she had to overcome, the moments not shown on camera. The hours that she spent alone researching, the work that she obviously isn't given enough credit for it. I wanted to show how she should be allowed to be angry, how the anger fueled her long white wings and cranes that brought forth the impact she had.

I chose Aiko because I saw my family in her. My mother is a teacher, and every day gets involved in children's lives, teaching new ways to view the world and to question it, in ways that she didn't get to in her youth. Likewise, how Aiko was able to question, criticize, and stop the government from concentration camps continuing despite the impact already inflicted on her. She wasn't vocal in her words, going on stage or advocating as a leader like many other popular historical figures. Her work was done quietly, just like my mother. In our lives there are so many people who impact us and who don't get to be celebrated for the work they do. Whether it be a mother, a teacher, a friend, or a stranger. Aiko shows how strength isn't always loud; it's the perseverance we don't see.