



## Impact Statement

Jean Lee, Grade 11

***Still, He Stayed***, 2026

Gouache, acrylic, colored pencil, pen on paper, 16 x 20 inches

Marlborough School, Los Angeles, CA

Unsung Hero: Carl Wilkens

Courage, just seven letters, yet it holds such a big meaning. Courage is a principle that has been instilled in me from a young age. I remember being told that to display courage is to stand up for those who don't have a voice, to be loud, to be heard. I was told that standing up against a school bully was the best example of courage. However, as I read about Carl Wilkens and his story on ARTEFFECT's page, I've come to realize that courage isn't always loudly heard; sometimes, it's quiet and steady, like a friend in your corner. I was deeply inspired by Wilkens as he undoubtedly displayed bravery, but while displaying this bravery, he held a strong moral compass. Throughout all the violence he faced, he stayed true to himself and his morals, never losing sight of what was important to him.

In the 1994 Rwanda Genocide, where more than 800,000 people suffered deaths, Carl Wilkens was the only American who chose to bravely remain behind for those who had no one left. He had the opportunity to evacuate, he wasn't obligated to remain in Rwanda, yet he stayed for the orphans because he believed that leaving would mean abandoning those who needed him the most. He actively worked to help vulnerable kids, especially orphans who had no one left. Working with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA), he delivered food, water, and medical supplies to an orphanage in Kigali that housed over 400 children. On top of these deliveries, Wilkens drove through militia-controlled roadblocks and negotiated safe passages to try his best to guarantee safety to these orphans. And even though Wilkens' own family evacuated, leaving him behind, he made the hard choice to stay behind in Rwanda to help make a difference, which he most definitely did. Later, he wrote his memoir, *I'm Not Leaving*, which captured why he decided to stay behind and showed what he believes to this day. Carl Wilkens' impact lies in, of course, his actions during the genocide to help the hundreds of children, but also his influence today. At the age of 68, he speaks at schools and universities about his experience in Rwanda, encouraging others to stand up against injustice and question polarization. He has also founded a non-profit with his wife called "World Outside My Shoes," where, through storytelling, they educate people about polarization and unnecessary conflict. I truly believe that his actions impact our lives today, even if he is not well-known, as he reshaped heroism. Heroism isn't loud, and it most definitely is not performative; it isn't defined by grand gestures meant for recognition. Instead, heroism lies in consistent, compassionate choices made in the face of fear quietly seen and felt by those whose lives are changed by the choices.

My 16x20 inch artwork for this competition was made with colored pencils, paper, and gouache. I made sure to make his portrait the focus of the piece, yet off to the side instead of the center, to symbolize his selflessness. His actions were never about recognition or making his face well known; it was about helping the orphans who needed someone by their sides. The reference picture I used for his portrait was from when he was giving a sermon about his time in Rwanda, as his experiences are a vital part of him and the message he shares. Yet, even during this sermon, his gaze is turned down toward the children because he is a protector and caretaker. I placed him next to the orphanage, as he stayed next to the 400 children during the genocide. These children that he stayed behind to protect are surrounded by food, water, medical supplies, and shelter, which are all things Wilkens risked his life providing. The orphanage stands for refuge and responsibility, both of which Wilkens took on. I also made the conscious choice to color the "1994" and "Rwanda" with the colors of the old and new flags of Rwanda to allude to the historical context of the fact that the country created a new flag after the genocide. Wilkens' story is serious. It's violent. It's why most of the art pieces are in grim colors, but I still added a few bright colors as a contrast to show that hope is there even in violent times. I didn't place Wilkens to the side to show he was not a distant hero, but someone who was present and made a real difference for these children.

Researching Carl Wilkens and creating this artwork has reshaped how I understand courage and responsibility. Before this project, impact and recognition mattered if it was loud or large, but Wilkens' story really challenges that understanding. Despite the danger and opportunity to leave, his decision to stay back in Rwanda showed me that true courage is choosing to act when it's easier not to. I've seen the world around me with a new lens as I've learned about Wilkens. Especially in a competitive environment where many people my age are focused on building college resumes and presenting measurable impacts, there's this pressure to make actions sound bigger than they are and contributions seem more meaningful. However, I've been brought back to narrow down what really matters through Wilkens' story. I've come to terms with the fact that impact shouldn't be defined by how it's accepted, but by the intention behind it. I've become more aware of the small everyday moments in which I can help others, no matter how small the action is. I am so fortunate to have learned about Carl Wilkens through ARTEFFECT, and I hope that through my artwork, others will come to learn about his story: A story that reminds us that even in the face of violence and fear, still, he stayed.