

Impact Statement

Catherine Kerns, Grade 12

The First Line Forward, 2026

Acrylic, graphite, marker, pen, collage on illustration board, 26 x 18 inches

Stratford High School, Houston, TX

Unsung Hero: Jackie Ormes

I chose American cartoonist Jackie Ormes because her upbringing and life story caught my attention, especially as a girl looking to pursue a career in animation and cartooning in the film industry. Living during a period where racial divide and prejudice was still a lingering and present issue, Jackie's determination to break through the barriers of societal norms that prevented women - particularly women of color - at the time from pursuing their dreams really inspired me to do the same in my own artistic career. As a half Korean girl working to pursue my dream of being an animator, a field that often lacks representation of women, Jackie's work resonated with me. Reading about her love for cartooning and passion for speaking up about social issues of her time reminded me of how I love to use my art both to express myself and to comment on similar issues.

Jackie Ormes brought a fresh perspective into a world where women were often given secondary, unimportant roles in media, and where Black people were misrepresented or mocked. Ashawnta Jackson's article, "The Groundbreaking Work of Jackie Ormes," states: "Nationally syndicated black cartoonist Barbara Brandon-Croft says that Ormes' characters and stories were real—at a time when blacks were typically portrayed in a derogatory fashion. 'Black women were always fat,' she says. 'Had bandannas on their heads, you know. Had large lips. Were always porters. We were servants. Think of *Gone With The Wind*, you know. We didn't speak clear English.'" Determined to make a change, Jackie was among the first to portray Black people in a more truthful and dignified light. "The characters of Patty-Jo 'n' Ginger — another Ormes comic—ran counter to that stereotype. Ginger was an attractive, college-educated woman, drawn in a pinup-girl style. Her younger sister, Patty-Jo, was sharp and opinionated." The characters that Jackie created were first of their kind, allowing Black women to be seen as complex, intelligent, admirable role models to be looked up to - something extremely rare at the time.

Born in Pennsylvania on August 1, 1911, Jackie grew up in a world where segregation was persistent in everyday life and created large racial and economic divisions in urban areas around Pennsylvania. Despite this, Jackie worked as a reporter for the Pittsburgh Courier, where she was eventually able to secure a spot for her first comic strip series: Torchy Brown in Dixie to Harlem. This series was groundbreaking for her time. Not only did it bring attention to the lives and successes of African American citizens, but it made Jackie the first African American woman to have a nationally syndicated comic strip. This set a precedent for the future

of women of color in cartooning, and showed that their voices, stories, and art had the power to be seen and valued.

In my piece, I wanted to highlight Jackie's love and talent for cartooning. Every photo of Jackie was in black and white, but I wanted to paint her in color to give her a life-like look that matched her cartoons. For the stylized elements, I went for a very graphic, newspaper-inspired comic strip approach with screen tone shading and flat colors to reflect her work. I especially admire the way Jackie portrays women in her illustrations, so I made this piece very centered around her female characters, including Torchy Brown, Patty-Jo, and Ginger to name a few. In the composition, I wanted to emphasize Jackie's progressive thinking that was far ahead of her time, so the composition features both Jackie and her cartoon persona facing to the right, which is often associated with looking towards the future. Along with this, the composition is intentionally designed to follow a circular motion, representing the artistic process of cartooning: beginning with a sketch, moving to line art, then finishing with color/value. Additionally, I chose to show the blend between Jackie's work and her identity by adding semi-realistic shading on the cartoon persona, and traditional screen tone shading on parts of the portrait, creating a subtle unification between the two styles but still allowing them to stand out in their individual respects.

I chose to combine many different mediums both to challenge myself and to show the versatility of cartooning and the different skills needed to master that form of art. I used newspaper clippings to create a collage for several comic panels of Jackie's done with marker over top, along with a combination of different panels from a variety of her works arranged in the background, done in pen. Finally, I used graphite to sketch out some more characters on the bottom left to balance the composition and add to the creative process motif.

After learning about Jackie's story, my outlook on my own future has become much more positive. It was so inspiring to see another woman of color who shares my interests not only succeed in her field, but change the world with her art. I hope that one day I can do the same by sharing my stories with the world without worrying about my race or gender being a setback. Along with this, I hope my art can bring attention to Jackie's life and accomplishments, because her story is so unique and inspiring, but very overlooked. My piece is meant to honor her legacy and creations and further bring attention to the messages she hoped to spread with her work, which still holds value in today's society.

References:

Comics Crusader: Remembering Jackie Ormes

<https://www.npr.org/2008/07/29/93029000/comics-crusader-remembering-jackie-ormes>

JSTOR Daily: "The Groundbreaking Work of Jackie Ormes," <https://daily.jstor.org/the-groundbreaking-work-of-jackie-ormes/>