



Impact Statement

Julia Thomas, Grade 12

The Quiet Fight, 2026

Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

Raymond High School, Raymond, NH

Unsung Hero: Lois Gibbs

Across from my house where I grew up, an old national Superfund site that was cleaned up in the 1970's was stable and contained, until my town's planning board, despite objections, allowed a housing development to be built on a lot adjacent to ours. These new houses' wells started pulling the contamination back up the hill into our well, which we were using for drinking water. Being far away from the town's waterline and now having high levels of trichloroethylene and other industrial solvents in our well, we were at a loss. Extending the waterline out to our house in the woods would have been prohibitively expensive, and the town never would have spent the money on this fix. My dad relentlessly petitioned elected officials at all levels of government to get attention on our situation. After multiple years of fighting, he caught the attention of our state senator and secured federal funding to connect us to the town's water. Without Superfund legislation already being established, there wouldn't have been any avenue to help my family.

Growing up and hearing my parents talk about this, all the work they put in just trying to get us clean water, me, a young toddler, and my younger brother on the way was intense. It opened my eyes to the environmental damage happening right below our feet. It was something I could always talk about because of my knowledge of my own family's situation. That's why I was immediately drawn to Lois Gibbs' story. I saw parallels to what my own family went through and how hard we had to fight for help. I was raised with the mentality of advocating for yourself, and even growing up, I was a lot like Lois. "As a child, Lois was quiet and shy, and she liked sewing more than playing sports or doing school activities." For me, it was drawing and painting instead of sewing, and I did it almost incessantly. I had heard her name but wasn't very familiar with her story. As I read more, I became obsessed. She was a normal woman, a nurturing mother who had to become a strong and loud advocate. She could have stopped after helping her own children, but instead she went further, advocating for her whole community and beyond. She's considered by some to be the mother of the Superfund.

She is extremely humble and gracious. She was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize and continues to help people just like her. She is a grassroots environmentalist and one hell of an unsung hero. When I looked through past winners and saw that this inspiring woman had never been represented, I knew I had to paint her. I knew her case was delicate; she's a humble but hardworking person. How could I represent her in an authentic way? I wanted to emphasize that she was an everyday woman who had to rise up. Still taking care of her children and putting

food on the table while fighting, I showed the chaos of her responsibilities piling up, on the table and flying through the air, catching the sun's rays. What really pushed her was realizing other children in the town were getting sick too, as she went door to door trying to involve others. Her own kids were getting very sick at the time, and I emphasized that by giving their food and drinks on the table an inedible hue.

And lastly, my favorite quote from her, one that hits close to home and keeps me pushing and sharing my own and stories like mine: "Average people and the average community can change the world. You can do it just based on common sense, determination, persistence, and patience."

References:

<https://www.des.nh.gov/sites/g/files/ehbemt341/files/documents/superfund-mottolo.pdf>

https://www.unive.it/pag/fileadmin/user_upload/dipartimenti/DSLCC/documenti/DEP/numeri/n35/05_Natale_modello.pdf

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lois_Gibbs