



Impact Statement

Natalia Benitez, Grade 12

Walking the Walk, 2026

Acrylic on paper, 24 x 15 inches

Plainfield Academy for the Arts and Advanced Studies, Plainfield, NJ

Unsung Hero: Annie Bell Robinson Devine

When picking an Unsung Hero to represent in my artwork, Annie Devine was the one who stood out amongst the rest. Just reading her name intrigued me, and her story left me inspired. Annie Devine is a woman whose story is defined by the traits that make her who she is: courageous, hardworking, and determined. She was a woman who recognized the injustice in her community and fought for a change, and her willingness is what I strive to illuminate in my artwork. In 1963, despite 75% of residents being African American, Canton had no registered Black voters. CORE workers would protest for a change, for African Americans to gain the right to vote, and Devine quickly joined the effort on her own time. During this time, Devine worked as a schoolteacher, but after being harassed by a police officer at a meeting, she quit her job and fully committed herself to the movement. She was proud of her position in the movement, was not afraid to admit it publicly in her church group and worked diligently for her cause. The literacy requirement was one of the most challenging obstacles for African Americans registering to vote, but Devine attempted to overcome it by organizing Canton's first Freedom Day protest and supporting individuals in registering. Unfortunately, despite Devine's efforts, no Black voters were registered in Canton. The decision did not demotivate Devine; in fact, she and other activists such as Fannie Lou Hamer and Victoria Gray came together to establish the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP worked hard to be recognized and represent their struggle, and even after the National Democratic Party refused to give the MFDP a seat that Devine would take as a delegate, they took the issue to the House of Representatives. In the winter of 1964-1965, Devine was one of the three Black women who stood on the floor of the House of Representatives and were the voice for African Americans in Canton who were denied the right to vote. Devine demanded that since African Americans weren't allowed to vote, the House should deny the membership to representatives-elect. Devine's courage at the House led to the Congressional investigations of Mississippi voting practices.

Devine's integrity is what enabled her to persevere through all her difficulties, and this is what I wanted to highlight in my artwork. For my piece, I chose the moment that eventually changed voting practices in Mississippi, when Devine boldly stood in the House of Representatives. In that moment, I could imagine that every hardship that she faced and every effort she made, whether she failed or not, were all moments she tightly carried with her. Every moment served as a reminder of what she was fighting for, so I wanted to capture it in my artwork by creating a collage effect in her coat. That collage features protests, Fannie Lou Hamer testifying at the

Democratic National Convention, the MFPD, and its leader, Aaron Henry, testifying to the Credentials Committee above it. The House of Representatives stands behind Devine's confident figure, something that is supposed to represent law and justice but lacks that. The House of Representatives is in a tan color and can even look distorted because there was no justice for African Americans in Canton, and they refused to hear the truth. Devine's presence was crucial in delivering the truth and seeking justice in the face of continual denial.

Devine's determination stayed with me after learning what she experienced, and I was reminded of it when I took part in my first walkout to protest against ICE. Taking the initiative to fight for change can be intimidating, but Devine's experience reminded me that if no one pushes for change, it will never happen. This small reminder is what made me take initiative then when protesting, and it is a reminder I keep now for any goal I want to pursue. I intend to showcase my work at my school's upcoming art show in the hope that Devine's story may inspire others just like it inspired me.