



Impact Statement

Grace Li, Grade 10

A Path of Her Own, 2026

Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 20 inches

Lakeside School, Seattle, Washington, USA

Unsung Hero: Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte

The Omaha people call themselves *Umo'ho'*, meaning "Those Who Go Against the Current." I chose my Unsung Hero, Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte, because every defining moment of her life was exactly that: an act of swimming against the tide. Long before she became the first Native American physician in the United States, she was already living up to the meaning of her people's name. Every step she took, from pursuing an education when few women could, to returning home to care for her community, to confronting injustice through medicine, was another journey against the current.

Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte was born on June 17th, 1865, on the Omaha reservation in Nebraska. As a member of the Omaha tribe at a time when Indigenous injustice was widespread. Dr. Susan was pushed to assimilate into Western culture. As a young girl, she witnessed the death of an Omaha woman after a white physician refused to treat her because the patient was Indigenous. This moment exposed the devastating consequences of indigenous discrimination, and it became a turning point in Dr. Susan's life. She decided that if the current injustice could not be stopped, she would simply become the force pushing against it. So, Dr. Susan set out to do what was largely considered to be unimaginable for an Indigenous woman at the time: pursue a medical degree. At the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, she continued to face numerous challenges as a woman of color in a white, male-dominated field. She persisted nonetheless, graduating in 1889 at the top of her class.

While Dr. Susan could've easily pursued a more secure life away from the reservation, she chose to return to the Omaha Reservation to begin her practice instead, becoming the sole doctor for her community by travelling to the homes of over 1,240 patients across 1,350 square miles of open prairie on horseback. She was also an active activist in her community, speaking out on issues such as food safety, alcohol addiction, and child and maternal health. Her activism extended beyond the Omaha people as well, as she fought for Native American rights and reform at conferences across the country. Finally she established the first hospital on an Indian reservation with the hope of providing care to Native Americans, which is known today as the Picotte Memorial Hospital and still serves as a reminder of her legacy.

Throughout history, valiant portraits of heroes (often white males) on a stallion have often been portrayed as symbols of Western exploration and expansion. I intentionally borrowed that familiar image in my painting to reshape its meaning and honor my hero, Dr. Susan, and her pride in her identity despite pressure to assimilate. In my artwork, Dr. Susan sits confidently on her beloved horse, representing the countless miles she traveled to reach patients who had no one else to care for them. Dr. Susan rides forward carrying both a medical journal and a stethoscope, as well as symbols of her Omaha identity, such as garments inspired by traditional Omaha beadwork. This shows that she never had to abandon one part of herself to embrace the other, as she was able to receive an education in Western Medicine to support her community. Additionally, the wings symbolize Dr. Susan's ability to rise above the current of her time. Rather than allowing societal expectations to determine her path, she reached beyond the limitations imposed upon her.

As I painted, I thought of the countless individuals who were previously denied treatment because of their Indigenous background. With Dr. Susan's efforts, no one on the Omaha reservation would ever have to suffer alone and without care. So, I included admiring and thankful families and the hospital she helped establish in the background of my piece, as well as her hospital, to stand as a reminder of her impact on her community to this day. Finally, the rising sun behind Dr. Susan not only helps to create a dynamic and dramatic composition of the piece, but it is also a symbol of hope. Even when prejudice, discrimination, and hardship pushed against her, Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte continued moving toward a future that did not yet exist, paving "a path of her own" to create a better future for all.

Every generation faces its own current, whether it's prejudice, indifference, or the temptation to remain silent. Even now, healthcare inequality is still a pressing issue that impacts thousands worldwide, and people are still being denied treatment due to their identity. As someone who wants to work in the medical field just like Dr. Susan, my hero's story taught me that advancing healthcare is not only about treating disease, but also about asking who is being overlooked and how I can better serve the communities around me. I began to think about how I can turn something I love into advocacy that helps others. So, in addition to working on my painting, I've been researching Alzheimer's disease this summer, exploring how accessible lifestyle factors may help reduce its risk and progression. My research aims to better support individuals who may not have access to costly Alzheimer's treatments or therapies, just like Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte's commitment to making healthcare more accessible to underserved communities. I also intend to share Dr. Susan's story with others through both my painting and by encouraging conversations about healthcare equity and Indigenous representation at my school.

Dr. Susan La Flesche Picotte's story is one of resilience, and her drive to do the right thing even when it seems nearly impossible is what truly inspires me. The currents I face may look slightly different from hers, but the choice remains the same: to be swept along by it, or to turn against it and help change its direction. Susan chose to turn against the current. Now, I hope to do the same.