Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes
ARTEFFECT

Impact Statement

Iyla Lada, Grade 10
Tendrils of Legacy, 2026
Colored pencil, graphite on paper, 24 x 18 inches
Palo Alto High School, Palo Alto, California, USA
Unsung Hero: Vivien Thomas

An unseen hero, Vivien Thomas, worked behind a literal curtain to save lives. His unheralded research saved not only soldiers in World War II but countless children suffering from congenital heart disease. I was drawn to Thomas because his passion and dedication, particularly without deserved recognition or reward, inspired me. While my life challenges pale in comparison to that of Thomas, I strive to embody similar perseverance and commitment to others and quite possibly, to medicine in the future. While much of today's world supports the fortunate and highlights the loud and flashy, Vivien Thomas shines as an impactful surgical pioneer who sought scientific advancement and humanitarian benefit by way of hard work, sacrifice, and focus.

Born in Louisiana to a carpenter father, Vivien Thomas was seemingly destined to work with his hands. His training in woodworking would not only lead to practical employment, but establish a foundation in understanding tools, structures, and spatial awareness that would inform his future surgical work. With a strong interest in the medical field, Thomas worked carpentry jobs to save money for medical school and joined pre-medical education. The Great Depression unfortunately cut short his educational dreams, but Thomas remained steadfast, securing a position as an assistant at Alfred Blalock's research laboratory at Vanderbilt University.

Given his skilled hands and hard work, Thomas quickly came to assist Blalock in complicated orthopedic and vascular research procedures. Soon, Thomas was completing surgeries independently with skill that Blalock said looked "like something the Lord made." His passion for medicine extended further into the publication of co-authored groundbreaking papers on traumatic shock that led to life saving interventions for soldiers in World War II. Yet despite his post-doctoral level work, due to his race, Thomas was considered and paid as a janitor. Thomas moved to Johns Hopkins University with Blalock, where he began seminal research on congenital heart disease. Following extensive animal modeling, independent tool creation, and technique invention, Thomas assisted Blalock in the very first successful corrective surgeries on children with Tetralogy of Fallot, or "blue baby syndrome." Thomas's critical efforts helped establish modern day pediatric heart surgery and save the lives of many children since.

My artwork emphasizes Vivien Thomas's passion, perseverance, humility, and willingness to put his own ego aside for the greater good. I brainstormed ideas that would convey how his impact was much greater than the recognition he received. I wanted to highlight Vivien Thomas's extraordinary story by depicting Thomas surrounded by his achievements. I drew the humble Vivien Thomas in the center of my piece using modest pencil and graphite to create contrast against the colorful foreground and background. In the piece, Thomas's trained hand is almost holding, but not quite touching a heart. Thomas guided and developed the procedures and was the backbone of many surgeries, even though he was not allowed to be the person physically performing operations. The heart begins as blue and gradually becomes red as it gets closer to Thomas' hand. The blue represents the babies suffering from "blue baby syndrome," while the red symbolizes the life and passion that Thomas brought them.

Coming from the heart are tendrils that begin blue and gradually turn red. These symbolize how Thomas's knowledge and work spread outward, transforming suffering into healing. I also wanted the tendrils to represent his lasting influence. Although Thomas may not have received the recognition he deserved, the impact of his work continued to reach patients, doctors, and future generations. The tendrils connect the heart to a mop, which represents his early identification as a "janitor" and the beginnings of his career. In addition, the children symbolize the lives of the babies and patients who benefited from his work, as well as the future generations who gained benefit from the medical advancements he helped develop. I further included a World War II helmet to symbolize Thomas's work helping develop treatments for shock and trauma during the war. Finally, at the bottom of the piece, I drew turbulent water to

represent the obstacles Thomas had to overcome, particularly discrimination, the Great Depression, and his lack of access to formal education.

What started as an interesting summer art project evolved into a real exploration of curiosity, resolve, and even injustice. Diving into Vivien Thomas's world, I saw foremost the potential impact of one's passion and drive. Thomas inspires me to not only dream and create but to remain steadfast in what I believe in and committed to discovery and helping others. His life story reframes my own challenges and models attitudes I can work to emulate to overcome personal obstacles and societal pressures. For what truly matters, Thomas demonstrates we do not need "likes" or "followers," but rather self-motivation and a collective effort. In this vein, I plan on continuing my own journey in art and science with a newfound spark.

I plan further to share the story and inspiration of Vivien Thomas in a number of ways. Certainly, I will display this art piece at school or a community art center with links to information about his life. Second, in my roles as a leader in Youth Community Service and a member in the Palo Alto Art Center Teen Leadership program, I will highlight Thomas and the concept of "Unsung Heroes" to inform the development of future group activities and projects. Deserved recognition is never too late.