Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes
ARTEFFECT

Impact Statement

Aleena Rafi, Grade 12
Listening, 2026
Acrylic, mixed media, pastel, watercolor, pen on paper, 27.5 x 19.5 inches
British International School Riyadh, Riyadh, SAUDI ARABIA
Unsung Hero: Dr. May Edward Chinn

When I was looking for an Unsung Hero, I wanted someone whose life cared for other people and was creative at the same time. I found that in Dr. May Edward Chinn, a Black female doctor who cared for the people of Harlem when hospitals wouldn't let her practise, and whose name is still barely known today.

What I admire most about May is her persistence and her quiet courage. Her father had been born into slavery and escaped when he was 11. Her mother worked as a housekeeper and saved her earnings to send May to boarding school. Her childhood poverty meant that May was never able to finish high school. Regardless, she took the entrance exam for Columbia Teachers College and started there in 1917. She first studied music, but after dealing with a racist music professor, and being praised for a scientific paper she wrote, she changed to science. May did not let other people's limits become her own, and that is why I chose her.

In 1926, May became the first African American woman to graduate from Bellevue Hospital Medical College. Even then, no hospital would let her practise, because African Americans were not allowed into hospital residencies or research posts in New York. The Rockefeller Institute seriously considered her for a research fellowship until they found out she was Black. Harlem Hospital was the only place in the city that offered her an internship. She became the first African American woman to intern there and to go out on ambulance calls.

Even Harlem Hospital refused to let her practise there, so she had to bring medicine to her patients instead. She opened a private practice, saw patients in her office and carried out procedures in their own homes. Many of her patients were Black people who would not otherwise have been treated in white hospitals. This experience led her to earn a master's degree in public health from Columbia University in 1933. In 1940, Harlem Hospital finally gave her admitting privileges. The Strang Clinic then hired her to research cancer, and she stayed there for almost 30 years. She was a strong believer in early cancer screening, which has now become a normal part of medical care. In 1975, she set up a society to help African American women get into medical school, opening the door for the doctors who came after her. She kept her own practice going until she was 81. Her impact reached the many Harlem patients she treated, the people who benefit from early screening, and the Black women she helped become doctors.

My vision was to show May's life as a piece of music. Before she became a doctor, she was a pianist. Even after she moved to science, she taught piano to children and worked as Paul Robeson's accompanist for four years in the 1920s. Her story has the same shape as a spiritual: deep sorrow, carried with strength, moving towards hope. I built my artwork in layers of various mediums, because her life was built in layers too. On top of a brown watercolour wash, I drew the sheet music for "Nobody Knows de Trouble I've Seen" in pen. This African American spiritual came from the time of slavery, and Paul Robeson recorded it. I chose it for three reasons. First, it links to May's music career and her time playing for Robeson, the path she was pushed away from. Second, it is a song born from slavery, which connects to her father's escape and the history her family carried. Third, the title embodies May as an Unsung Hero: she faced trouble that almost nobody saw, and her story is still barely known. I used a pen for the music notes in the background to demonstrate how the music runs behind everything, reflecting the way music stayed with May all her life. I drew May and her patient in oil pastel. Oil pastel is rich, warm and blendable, so I could build up layers of skin tone and show human warmth. The pastels cannot be fully controlled, which reflects how May didn’t let racial and societal boundaries prevent her achieving greatness. The marks of my hand stay visible, which reflects the hands-on, tangible impact May had with her patients. I chose to draw this picture of her, with the child, because I thought that this photograph had beautifully captured a moment of genuine happiness and care.

May's story has fundamentally changed how I approach daily life. When the whole world shut doors on her and worked against her, she did not stop. She found another way. I want to carry that attitude into my own life, especially when things feel unfair or out of my control. She also taught me that art and science are not opposites. May was both a musician and a doctor, and both were part of who she was. This inspires me, as someone who loves being creative whilst also being deeply passionate for politics and economics and shows me how successfully one can continue both sides.

I plan to display my artwork in my school and share May's story with my classmates, so more people know her name. I also hope it reminds people how important early health screening is, since she believed in it so strongly.