Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes
ARTEFFECT

Impact Statement

Gautam Makhija, Grade 12
The Man Behind the Moon, 2026
Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 18 inches
Independent Study, Cupertino, California, USA
Unsung Hero: Gene Shoemaker

The hero I chose was personally inspiring to me in how he dealt with major setbacks in life and still chose to make an impact. His is a story that many have never heard, but he was the quiet hero behind some of the most important work in space exploration. This is Gene Shoemaker, the geologist who helped establish the field of astrogeology and transform the field of planetary science. He was the one that helped choose where Apollo astronauts would walk - changing the face of what we could achieve.
I chose to translate his story through my art because he wasn't just someone who transformed the study of space and what we could do - his triumph came through his own setbacks. In 1948, Shoemaker became fascinated with the geology of the Moon and began studying the origins of its craters, which were still widely debated at the time. He wanted to be the first geologist to see this for himself and prove it. He trained for many years to become an astronaut but unfortunately, a routine physical exam discovered that he had Addison's disease, which caused NASA to disqualify him from a space mission. When he could no longer reach the Moon himself, he found another way to help others reach it. Despite what he must have felt, he continued to train other astronauts - training the Apollo crew to read rock layers, recognize impact sites and collect data like geologists so the findings could be as scientific as possible. We all remember the first space mission without realizing who the power behind that mission was - making him my choice of unsung hero.

Another contribution to the study of craters was his work with Edward Chao in 1960 at the Barringer crater in Arizona, where they proved that the crater was formed by a meteorite strike rather than a volcanic explosion. Later in his career, he discovered, along with his wife Carolyn Shoemaker and David Levy, the Shoemaker-Levy comet in 1993. This comet was historic for its collision with Jupiter in 1994, making it the first "celestial collision". This made the world aware of the risks that meteorites and comets might present to the Earth. He went on to found the US Geological Survey's astrogeology research program which still trains scientists to study other planets. He died in 1997 while in Australia searching for impact craters. He further became historic for the little known fact that NASA carried a capsule of his ashes to the moon making him the only human to have his remains commemorated in space. This was like a full circle moment, finally getting him to the moon - something he wasn't able to do while alive.

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I tried to capture these transformative moments that changed the field of astrogeology through my art. I intentionally made Shoemaker much larger than the astronaut to represent how his influence extended beyond his physical presence in the mission. He made the first moon mission a possibility - The US flag a symbol of his triumph despite his own personal setback. Behind him is Jupiter - filling the sky and the comet that illuminates his face, both important in their contribution to how we understand the solar system in a completely different way. The small symbolic plaque represents the commemoration of his ashes on the moon. It reminds us to never forget the quiet force behind the world of astro-science and a reminder that there are always ways to contribute to the world, even if the one you planned does not work out. The craters covering the foreground are a deliberate nod to Shoemaker's research into impact cratering and one of the scientific questions that shaped his career. I used acrylic paints to emphasize the contrast between the warm glow from the comet and the darkness of outer space. The colors helped me show his inner glow from having made the mission he is watching over a success. The textures of the paint and canvas helped me capture the craters best - also something that took a lot of time to get right. I researched this a lot before I started to paint them. I researched photos from NASA archives and the Apollo Lunar module to get those details right but I spent the most time perfecting the illumination of Gene Shoemaker's face so I could do justice to the light he shined on a field he was instrumental in discovering.

His story really inspired me - not just as a student who wishes to pursue a career in science but as someone who has dealt with setbacks myself that have kept me from participating in activities and sports I was deeply passionate about and trained for. It helped me see that there is more than one way to contribute to work you love. As I worked on it this summer, it helped me reflect on how my own actions could be shaped. I hope to share this artwork through the ARTEFFECT competition and in my community, using it as an opportunity to introduce others to Gene Shoemaker's story and the idea that setbacks do not have to prevent us from making an impact.

References:

Eugene Merle Shoemaker – Wikipedia — birth/death dates, cause and location of death, Addison's disease disqualification, Barringer Crater proof with Edward Chao, Apollo astronaut geology training, Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 co-discovery, ashes carried to the Moon on Lunar Prospector

Eugene Shoemaker – The Planetary Society Eugene Shoemaker (1928-1997) – NASA JPL Eugene Shoemaker Ashes Carried on Lunar Prospector – NASA JPL
Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 – Britannica