

Impact Statement

Jordyn Sledge, Grade 8.

Heartstrings Unraveled, 2024.

Acrylic, pastel, gold leaf, cardboard, and wood-burning on wood panel, 21 x 21 x 1 inches.

Ida B. Wells Academic and Performing Arts Complex, Jackson, MS

Unsung Hero: Vivien Thomas

I initially learned of Dr. Vivien Thomas and his work from a comedic Black History Month special. While the portrayal was meant to be ironic, the story really spoke to me for a variety of reasons. The resilience Dr. Thomas showed inspired me, and his work in medicine as an African American is something I can somewhat relate to. The story of Vivien Thomas is one that speaks to me because my mother is an African American doctor, and my sister is working to be a physical therapist. Neither of them would have been able to attain these positions if not for the work of Dr. Thomas.

Despite his measly pay as a janitor and meager position as a laboratory assistant, Vivien Theodore Thomas designed a surgical procedure that saved the lives of many infants and paved the way for African Americans in the field of medicine. He secured a job as a laboratory assistant at the prestigious Vanderbilt University under the tutelage of Dr. Alfred Blalock. Thomas ascended to the work of a postdoctoral researcher despite only being paid and classified as a janitor.

For the next eleven years, Dr. Blalock continued to work with Thomas at Vanderbilt; their work led to Blalock being offered the position of Chief of Surgery at Johns Hopkins University. Dr. Blalock requested Thomas come with him, and they continued performing surgical research. Later, the issue of cyanotic, or blue-skinned infants came to their attention; this condition is caused by Tetralogy of Fallot, four different heart defects that result in deoxygenated blood. Thomas designed a shunt that would connect the pulmonary artery to the subclavian, effectively improving blood flow.

The most important part of Dr. Vivien Thomas' story, the element most expressed in my artwork, is the procedure he is most known for and how it impacted his patients. Before his procedure, infants with Tetralogy of Fallot would pass away within a few months of being born, never getting a chance. Even though during the initial surgery, Thomas stood behind Dr. Blalock, directing him on how to perform the procedure he designed, Thomas never received credit or recognition in any medical reports. His surgical skills were phenomenal; his ability to complete complex procedures perfectly amazed his coworkers. The stitches he made were nearly impossible to see, which Dr. Blalock referred to as "something the Lord made." This quote is represented by Thomas' needle, creating stitches in a floating heart surrounded by a halo. Vivien Thomas was truly admirable because of the great things he did despite the multitudinous hardships he faced.

The vision behind my piece was the expression of the lifesaving work he did in both his youth and old age. This work expresses the heroic nature of Vivien Thomas with the use of imagery and symbolism. In one hand, Thomas can be seen holding a needle connecting to a heart

above his younger and older self. The two vastly different media represent the changes in time, but they still connect to his life's work: the heart. The floating heart is an evident representation of the procedure designed by Dr. Thomas, and the positioning above both the younger and older versions of himself symbolizes the way his work almost ascends beyond one man, as it saved the lives of so many more. The older Vivien Thomas on the right is holding an infant clad in a hospital gown, showing the moments immediately after the life-changing surgery. In the creation of this piece, I focused mostly on visual symbolism regarding Dr. Thomas' procedure and the impact it had on those who received it. I wood-burned and wood-stained the back layer of his younger self and layered with an oil pastel portrait of his older self with one of the infants he cared for, and a cardboard relief sculpture painted with acrylic and gold leaf and adding details in embroidery and braided thread to represent his impact beyond himself.

From my research on Dr. Vivien Thomas and the designing of this piece, I learned that despite the hardships you may face, your work will speak for itself, meaning that I will always work hard to achieve greatness. Vivien Thomas constantly faced discrimination because of his race both in and out of hospitals. Nevertheless, he continued his lifesaving work instead of allowing himself to be held back, which truly makes him an inspiration. After the initial surgery, Dr. Thomas wasn't given credit for his work, which is an injustice that I will right. Along with displaying my artwork at the end of year show and on our website, I have presented his story to the elementary school children in my school district to spread awareness of Vivien's story; hopefully it inspires them to achieve their dreams as well, regardless of the difficulties they may face.