

Artist Statement

Most young kids dream of having superpowers. Some want the ability to fly, others strength, and some invisibility. In 2020, I fully realized my superpower. Who knew that my artistic ability, together with my hard work and communication skills, would garner the attention of the world?

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered my classroom instruction. As a highly engaged learner, I had to quickly adjust to a newly implemented educational environment. My school district was woefully unprepared for online school when the pandemic began. For weeks, I received less than one hour of instruction each day. As a result, I began to experience a growing sense of loneliness due to my isolation.

To combat the boredom, I decided to embark on a personal project to academically challenge myself and creatively develop my artistic talent. Inspired by my travels to 32 countries, my goal was to create hand-drawn pictorial maps of every United Nations-recognized country and post each one to my Instagram account (@jacksonkelly_art). For months, while the rest of the world seemed frozen in time, I worked diligently. Each posted map depicted a country's borders, landscape and historical sites, in each geographic region. I began with posting maps of countries in Southeast Asia.

Surprisingly, my Instagram account quickly attracted new followers with each post. People from the countries I illustrated commented enthusiastically, pointing out the cities and villages where they lived. Later, I began posting maps of countries in Southwest Asia, then Europe, Africa, Oceania, and ending with the United States. People commented proudly about their homeland and culture and what it meant to them for an American artist to depict their country in a positive light. My growing family of Instagram followers soon attracted the attention of other influencers on social media such as Geography Now, West African Community and the Canadian columnist and YouTuber J.J. McCullough.

I completed the project in just over nine months, posting maps of 195 countries. Hundreds of followers posted messages and comments expressing their gratitude for representing their people and culture. The global connections I made and conversations I had transformed me into a healthier, more gratified person. My greatest sense of pride is the dozens of people who began creating their own maps, inspired by those I had posted, to showcase their homelands and heritage. Without realizing it, I had created a movement of pictorial cartographers, many of whom are counted among the 14,000 Instagram followers I have today.

Informed by this experience, I enrolled in Advanced Placement courses in high school to expand my knowledge and understanding of history, geopolitics, and international relations. I have gained critical skills in communication, entrepreneurship and leadership, as well as a greater desire to serve others. Though I continue to post pictorial maps on Instagram, my goal has shifted from illustrating every country to documenting and understanding history as it happens in real time. Over the past two years, I have focused on documenting the ongoing wars in Gaza and Ukraine. I engage with my future major, Political Science, and career daily, preparing myself for the rigor of higher education.

Inspired by the world I have experienced through travel and media, I am ready to leverage my unique background and talent in pursuit of a Political Science degree in a highly respected, academically challenging institution.

Through accomplishing my goal and continuing to hone my skill, I know diligence, hard work and passion help achieve influential things inside and outside of the classroom. On an August morning in 2025, I can't wait to take on the challenges and opportunities I have forged for myself through my work and dedication. With superpowers at my fingertips, I am ready to proudly share my gifts and talents with the world.

Medium

Cartography painting as pictorial maps.

Biography

Ever since I was little, I have been fascinated by history. The stories we tell across centuries are the greatest link between time and place. My inspiration for map-making originally came from the awe of the human story. My artwork inspires people to look deeper into their personal heritage and to rediscover their place in history. Born and raised in South Carolina, I am currently a 17-year-old junior at Wheeler High School and reside in Marietta, GA.