

THE MAYA LIN STORY

BY JOSHUA GUILD

What would you do if somebody told you that you couldn't do something because you were too young, or because of your gender? How would you react if people questioned whether you were good enough or smart enough for something because of where your parents were born? When she was just 21 years old, a woman named Maya Lin had to face just such a situation. Remarkably, she was able to overcome the negativity directed at her, using her talent, courage, and strong vision to become one of the most respected architects in the world.

Maya Lin grew up in the town of Athens, Ohio. Her parents were born in China and had both immigrated to the United States. Her father, Henry Lin, was an artist and her mother, Julia Lin, a poet. Both of Maya's parents were professors at Ohio University.

In school, Maya was a good student who excelled in both math and art. She was accepted to Yale University in Connecticut, where she hoped to study sculpture and architecture. Unfortunately for Maya, she had to choose one over the other. She decided to pursue architecture, though she always maintained her love for sculpture.

In the fall of 1980, a national competition was announced seeking designs for a new monument that was to be built in Washington, DC. Nearly 1,500 artists entered the contest to design a monument to honor soldiers who had fought in the Vietnam War. An expert panel of judges sorted through the many entries. In the end, they selected a unique and remarkable design that was unlike any other monument in Washington.

The winning design was not submitted by a famous artist, but by an unknown 21-year-old student named Maya Lin. Maya's proposal featured a long, V-shaped wall made out of polished black granite. The names of the 58,000 Americans killed or missing in action during the Vietnam War were written along the wall. The design was meant to make the viewer think of a massive book. Maya had created it as part of a class project at Yale.

Before the monument was actually built, a group of veterans organized to protest Maya's design. They had hoped for a more traditional monument made out of white marble with statues of soldiers. Many thought that the design's black color symbolized defeat or other negative feelings about the war. People also attacked Maya personally. Some protesters even used sexist and racist slurs, believing an Asian American woman was not capable of creating an appropriate monument for the war.

Throughout all of the controversy, Maya stuck to her vision. Maya defended her design and her ideas about the monument. She believed in herself and her dream. Eventually, with some compromises, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was built according to her design.

Soon, veterans and people who had lost family members or friends during the war began visiting the monument. Seeing all of the names etched in stone brought tears to many visitors' eyes. Maya Lin was praised for her moving and original design. Today, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is one of the most visited monuments in the United States.

Following her triumph with the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Maya became a highly sought-after designer. Several years later, she was hired to create a memorial for the Civil Rights Movement in Montgomery, Alabama. She has also designed works for universities, museums, and a train station.

Throughout her career, Maya has withstood criticism and stayed true to her vision in order to achieve her goals.