

Impact Statement

Vanessa Hoyt, Grade 11.

Martin A. Couney's Show, 2024.

Acrylic on paper, 16 x 12 inches.

San Dimas High School, Glendora, CA

Unsung Hero: Martin A. Couney

Martin A. Couney saved thousands of lives within his life, and so many more through the lasting impact of his actions, and yet it was only a few weeks ago that I first heard of him. It was through sorting through the names of many amazing unsung heroes for this project that I first heard of him. I saw his name and a very brief overview of his work with baby incubators, and I was immediately intrigued. Born in what was at the time German Prussia, he immigrated to the US around 1903. Although much of Couney's background is unknown due to the air of mystery about it, he kept up during his life, what is known is his time spent in the US. There he opened up a highly controversial fairground exhibit, which housed many premature babies in incubators. He and his team of several nurses and a doctor of neonatology worked the exhibit, caring for, and displaying, the prematurely born babies brought to them by desperate parents. Couney was heavily criticized for his infant shows by many medical professionals at the time who claimed his shows were unsanitary and inhumane. Despite the controversy, Couney continued to work with and fight for premature babies, and it is thought that his shows saved the lives of around 6,500 babies. His story was a controversial one, filled with mystery and unknown. That being said, I couldn't help feeling amazed by his perseverance and ingenuity.

Truly what makes Couney such a hero was not only the many lives he personally saved, but also the impact that he had on how people saw prematurely born babies and their health care. Right around the time of Couney's shows, there was a popular ideology going around the United States which in essence was: kill off the weak links. Prematurely born babies were fragile and had an incredibly low chance of surviving, and oftentimes hospitals would not even treat them. People popularly thought of them as burdens to society and lost causes. That is until Martin Couney came into the picture. Through his infant incubator shows, Couney not only brought premature babies—a previously taboo topic due to their high mortality rate—into conversation and public knowledge, but he also demonstrated that those babies could be cared for. Couney cared for and advocated for the babies and their families who were previously considered lost causes. He brought their stories to light. Because of the popularity of his show, baby incubators were implemented into hospitals and premature baby care was revolutionized. Today little over 10 percent of babies in the U.S. are born prematurely and it's estimated that around 13 percent of babies born are put in incubators. Thanks to Martin Couney and his infant show, those babies have a chance at life.

When I began to design my project for Martin Couney, I knew I wanted to try and represent all the good that he did for the prematurely born babies of the U.S. He was, at the time, a controversial figure due in part to his lack of medical license, but he raised awareness for premature babies, and the benefit of care. I tried to have my painting be from a perspective of somewhere closer to the baby looking up at him from his arms. By doing so I hoped to represent all those who he helped. The background is red and white stripes like the big tents at fairs and

circuses due to the importance of his shows to his story. I chose for my painting bright reds, yellows, peaches, and pinks for the hope, life, vitality, idealism, and change they represent. Couney's story is one of hope and perseverance. He pushed through backlash and adversity to bring hope to the families of those babies. Hope for a life past the hospital they were born in. His story fascinates me, and through my art I have tried my best to bring to light his actions to those around me. With my artwork I hope I have captured Martin Couney and the good he did. Couney's work with baby incubators deserves to be remembered and recognized, as does he. I wanted to show the kindness in his actions, and the brightness of his character. My vision was to show the world who Martin Couney was in the eyes of those he saved, because to them he wasn't some carnival man or exploiter, he was a hero. Their hero.