

Impact Statement

Alyssa Knapper, Grade 11.

Jar Of The Known Truth, 2024.

Ceramic, plaster, tissue paper, coffee, watercolor, acrylic, fake moss, 10.5 x 9 x 8 inches.

Coweta High School, Coweta, OK

Unsung Hero: Irena Sendler

Irena Sendler really is just an inspiration to humanity. I came across her story when I was researching war heroes and her determination and grit just stood out to me. She went through both mental and physical struggle just to carry the people safely out of harm's way from the Nazi's.

Irena Sendler was a Polish woman who worked as a social worker during the time of World War II. What is unique about her is that when the Nazi's came to Poland to kill all impure races, the majority being Jews, she helped smuggle Jewish children out of danger and into Polish homes to escape Germany's notice. She smuggled these children away by hiding them in toolboxes and secretly leading them through tunnels. She and her friends made fake papers of identification for the children when they were moved to Polish homes, but she saved their real names and the identity of their parents, placing these names in jars so after the war they could return to their parents. These jars she hid under an apple tree in front of a Nazi building thinking they'd never check there. She was right. Even when she was caught, they never found the information. She was beaten and tortured, then sentenced to death for not giving away the information. Fortunately, some underground activists were able to rescue her and pay for her release.

My research over Irena consisted of finding out about her as much as I could, I researched over many platforms just looking for the most descriptive and in-depth story that had been written about her life. After all my research, what I've decided I really wanted to show about her from her story was her resistance to giving up the information on the children she saved. The best way I could think of doing that was by representing the "Jar" in which she hid all the truths of the families' children she saved, so when the war ended, they could return to their family. The thing I admire most about Irena is her persistence in saving the children as well as her belief that what she was doing was not anything special, but what any person would have done if they could.

My piece represents Irena in a way that is personal to me and really brings out her story in my mind. The base of my artwork represents the tree, where she hid the Jewish families' identification away from the Germans. On the base, which is a stump, is an imprint of an apple symbolizing the apple tree she hid the names under. This stump was made from plaster and carved by hand, by setting the plaster in a two-gallon Ziplock bag and shaping in my own way to show the tree. Sitting on the stump is a milk jar in which she hid the true identities of the Jewish children and their families. Across the jar, I put one of her favorite quotes from her father, which states, "I was taught that if you see a person drowning, you must jump into the water to save them, whether you can swim or not." This quote reminds me of how everyone should put each other first when they see a person who is struggling. Along the jar there are cracks and breaks,

which represent to me the age of the jar but also all she went through to keep the secrets in the jar safe from the Nazis. Each crack, each break shows the torture she endured just so that those children could live and have a chance to be reunited with their parents. Inside the jar there is tissue paper with names to represent the actual names on the tissue paper she hid during the invasion of Poland.

While I worked on showing who she is through my artistic view, I realized that she was a very noble woman and there isn't any reason as to why she should be unsung. She inspires me and could inspire anyone with just her story of surviving torture without telling any of the information just to keep others safe. Not many would do that and that just shows how strong she was—they couldn't break her spirit no matter how many times they beat her or broke her physically.

Throughout the process I had a hard time portraying her story in the best light. I wanted to give her story the justice it deserved while presenting her life through my style and mediums. After researching Irena I've come out with a different outlook on life, as I see how she was strong for others, and I want to have the courage and tenacity to help others just like she did. Overall, Irena Sendler was an amazing heroic person, she fought as an activist to save the lives of Jews and she never let anyone stop her from continuing that work. My sculpture will be viewed in the display case in my high school and possibly entered into an art competition. I, or my teacher, most likely will post on social media to tell Irena Sendler's story through my eyes.