

Impact Statement

Salome Skinner, Grade 11.

Queen of Hearts, 2017.

Acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 Inches.

Yarmouth High School, Yarmouth, ME

Unsung Hero: Helen Taussig

The story of the hero, Helen Brooke Taussig, started on May 24, 1898 in Cambridge, Massachusetts. When she was nine, she and her mother both contracted tuberculosis. Taussig remained ailing for years after, but her mother passed away tragically. The disease left Taussig ravaged, making school work even more difficult on top of her severe dyslexia. Despite all this, she succeeded and even flourished in her studies at Cambridge School for Girls, Radcliffe College, the University of California in Berkeley, Harvard Medical School, and Boston University. But none of these schools, however prestigious, allowed her to earn a degree. Why? For the crime of being born a woman, of course. But Helen Taussig was not meek, or scared, or stupid like men said she was. She was finally accepted at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine as a full degree candidate. She earned that MD degree in 1927 where she also did her pediatrics internship and cardiology fellowship.

When I first read about Helen Taussig, I just knew I had to paint her story. Of course there were many other Heroes who deserved to be recognized, celebrated, cherished, but her story truly resonated with me and that is something that I needed in order to represent the story of a hero in my full capacity - to let her travails inspire my vision. The true reasoning behind my decision to capture Taussig's story is that this year I have been in great contact with hearts as well. I spent three days with a cardiologist and over those three days I saw well over three dozen patients. With every patient, with every failing, ailing, dying heart, I became more and more entranced with the complexities of pumping muscle and roaring blood and the geography of veins and arteries. With every new patient whose room I stepped into I wanted help them more - I didn't want to let them die and that's what medicine does to you, I think, it doesn't let you stop. Helen Taussig never stopped, never let her dyslexia stop her, she didn't let men stop her, didn't let being deaf stop her. That's why I chose her as my hero.

For the actual painting I had to interpret Taussig's independent and fiercely determined persona into something visual which is of course fairly difficult to make something intangible into something you can physically see; so this was my first challenge. To accomplish it, I placed her dead-center on a sort of marble pedestal with a background that gradated towards her to make her the main focal point. Her white coat I fashioned into a kind of queenly regalia which is a theme I followed through with the newspaper article that reads, "Queen of Hearts Cures the Blues." Queen of Hearts is my nickname for her and who I see her as because being a surgeon is very difficult but then being a pediatric surgeon is even more so because children's organs are far more fragile and delicate so I gave her the title of queen to symbolize her elite skill. The "cures the blues" part comes from her collaboration on the Blalock-Taussig shunt which repairs a condition in infants called "blue baby syndrome." This inspired the color blue to become a recurring theme that I sort of ran with, so the palette of my painting is very much geared towards the cooler side of the color spectrum. The red I used to depict blood on Taussig's sleeve and

white coat which are to symbolize that, yes she was a phenomenal doctor and possibly a queen in some people's eyes, but she got to her position of renown through hard work, sacrifice, diligence, and not being afraid to get her hands dirty. Also, the sight of blood can be gory and represents violence to a great many people, but those who heal instead of kill also deal with it on a daily basis; they crack people open, get up to their elbows in blood, and rifle through patient's organs for the sake of preservation. Blood means life, and so it only seemed fitting that red become a central theme of my painting. The last symbol I included is the staff Taussig is upraising, which originated from the Greek myth of the god Hermes who carried such a staff called caduceus. It now commonly symbolizes the art of medicine and healing so I thought it apt to be the scepter for the Queen of Hearts.

The papers drifting down through the background are articles attesting to a few of Taussig's successes. The long list of her accomplishments include being honored by France as Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur and honored by Italy with the Feltrinelli Award. She received an honorary medal from the American College of Chest Physicians, the Lasker Award, the Gold Heart Award, the Howland Award, was honored with the American Heart Association's award of merit, was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and to the National Academy of Sciences. She was also awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Lyndon Johnson and was the first female president of the American Heart Association. She earned more than twenty honorary degrees and became a member of the American Pediatric Society, the Society for Pediatric Research, and the American College of Physicians. To be clear, she was extraordinary.

In conclusion, this experience has changed my view of certain things to an exponential degree. I learned that it may not always feel like it, but hard work is rewarded, our flaws cannot destroy our dreams, and women can succeed in fields dominated by men. I also think everyone should know Dr. Helen Taussig as the warrior who pressed fearlessly through the fray, as the queen who led women where they had never ventured before, and as the Savior of millions the world acknowledged for a split second and then forgot. But I have taken it upon myself to remember, and I have hope that someday, the world will too."