

Impact Statement

Victor Aldrete, Grade 12

***Man Who Saved a Generation*, 2025**

Acrylic, charcoal, pastel, marker, 11 x 14 inches

Pleasure Ridge Park High School, Louisville, KY

Unsung Hero: Dr. Martin Couney

Dr. Martin A. Couney was a German-Jewish doctor who advocated for the lives of premature infants. Martin Couney displayed incubator exhibitions where guests could see the effectiveness of incubators and how premature babies thrived with proper incubator care. "His exhibits popped up in Nebraska, Chicago, and New York; one of his better-known exhibits was in Coney Island, NY. There, he worked with Dr. Julius Hess and several nurses to care for premature babies and explored ways to improve the standards of neonatal care.

Martin Couney kept the babies in carnival spaces, and many of the babies in those incubators survived their premature births and the inability of the hospitals where they were born to nurture them only because of those sideshows. The mortality rate for premature babies was nearly 40%, and medical care was under-sourced during the 1900s; they were undervalued and neglected by social standards. "Many in the medical community saw premature babies as unfit for survival and refused to recognize the value and legitimacy of incubators."

"Dr. Couney was working against indifference. He kept saying that those babies could be saved, and that they deserved a chance to live." Dr Martin Couney had a charitable career with astonishing success rates of 85%, rescuing more than 6,500 premature babies in his lifetime.

Despite his prestigious success, Couney received backlash for the exhibitions. Some said that the sideshows exploited the premature babies purely for profit. Around this point in time, it was very costly to take medical care of the babies on a daily basis. Martin Couney used the sideshow's profit as his method of combating the financial expenses. This meant that parents who worried about their baby's chance at survival would not have to pay a penny.

The reason I selected Dr Martin Couney is that I was a premature baby myself, and for 2 weeks, I had to stay in an incubator to be able to develop properly and survive premature birth. I personally feel thankful for his efforts in popularizing the incubators and ultimately improving neonatal care in the U.S.

For my artwork, I sketched out a composition that combined a selection of reference photos that, all together, tell a story. They each highlight the sentiment behind the exhibitions. I referenced Coney Island, where Dr. Martin Couney's sideshows gained the most popularity and where Couney died in 1950. The media I used for this piece were oil pastel, acrylic paint, charcoal, and marker on pastel paper. When working with these media, I decided to go with a monochromatic theme to reflect the black and white photographs of the time. It sets the stage for Dr. Couney's story and emphasizes the century in which Couney was born. This mirrors the way the media was portrayed in this era. In my artwork, Dr. Martin Couney is holding a premature baby while looking at the viewer (Bottom right). This placement allows the viewer to acknowledge that he is the main focus in this piece and shows his fondness for his career.

With contributions from Dr. Martin Couney, incubator care began to become recognized in more hospitals around the U.S, and thanks to him, I can be here today to recognize and share his inspiring story through my art.

References:

"Martin Couney: All the World Loves a Baby." *Lowell Milken Center*, 5 Feb. 2024, www.lowellmilkencenter.org/programs/projects/view/martin-couney-all-the-world-loves-a-baby.

'*The Strange Case of Dr. Couney*' - *the Jewish Standard*, jewishstandard.timesofisrael.com/the-strange-case-of-dr-couney/.