



Impact Statement

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A "No" that Saved Thousands, 2026

Oil, colored pencil on canvas, 39 x 27 inches

Vilniaus lietuvių namai, Vilnius, Lithuania

Unsung Hero: Frances Kelsey

I believe every one of us has experienced a day which could be considered our happiest, a day we could look back at with a smile. My most memorable day was November 11, 2018, the day my brother was born. I was just 11 years old the first time I laid my eyes upon a tiny baby that changed my life. He was so small and fragile yet so full of life and so unbelievably beautiful. In that moment I experienced joy I had never felt before. At the same time, I am grateful that many more people have had the chance to experience what I felt, thanks to the heroic actions of Frances Oldham Kelsey.

What inspired me to choose Dr. Frances Kelsey was her dedication to fight for what she believed was right, ultimately saving thousands of newborns. She helped stop the distribution of a medication called thalidomide which caused birth defects. Thalidomide was first introduced in Germany, 1957, under the brand name "Contergan" and soon spread worldwide, especially in Europe. It was commonly used by pregnant women to ease morning sickness, but soon doctors noticed more and more babies being born with serious defects. Parents were struck with grief when they saw their newborns with missing or underdeveloped organs and limbs. At the time, drugs were not always thoroughly tested before being released to the public, and the dangers of thalidomide only became apparent after many people had already consumed it. On the other hand, In 1960, the manufacturers of thalidomide attempted to expand into the United States. This is when Dr. Kelsey, working at the FDA, first reviewed the drug. She refused to approve it because she believed the safety data was incomplete. She was particularly concerned about reports of nerve damage and the lack of proper testing on pregnant women. Because of her decision she was met with threats and constant aggressive visits from the company who produced thalidomide. This went over a year and throughout the time she stood her ground, till other countries realized the dangers of the drug and discontinued it.

Thalidomide affected over 10,000 children worldwide, with around 40% of them dying before their first birthday. Many more would have suffered, and countless families might never have had the chance to even see their children due to miscarriages, if not for the actions of Frances Oldham Kelsey. Her determination led to major legal reforms in modern drug regulation, in the end ensuring that such a tragedy would not be repeated.

When painting her story, I wanted to emphasize Dr. Frances resilience and the place she protected. In my painting, I portrayed Frances Oldham Kelsey in her office, where most of the fight with thalidomide took place. On her desk lies the packaging of the drug, which she examined. Her face is stern and in deep thought, as she is ready to

face the challenges ahead. In the background, I depicted an American maternity hospital from the 1960s, a place where families welcomed newborns into the world. On a nearby table, there are flowers symbolizing the celebration of new life. Nurses surround the newborn ward, with one of them gently holding a baby.

I've used oil paint as my main medium. Because of its slow-drying properties, I could work slowly, ensuring I didn't miss any details, but at the same time it can be challenging. Before starting a new layer, I would have to wait a week or more for paint to dry, which slowed my overall progress. Another major challenge I faced was portraying Dr. Frances Kelsey herself. I struggled to capture her character and the woman she was for I had to use my imagination rather than photos of Francis. This was partly due to the limited number of reference images available online. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the process of making this painting because I got to practice painting in color on such a large scale, something I don't do often.

Throughout this project, I learned a lot. Not only did I improve my ability to mix colors, but I also gained insight into the history of medicine, which is not normally taught in my school. As someone who is stepping into the adult world, I'll soon have to make many important decisions on my own, which can be nerve-wracking. However, Frances Kelsey showed me how to be confident in my choices, even if others try to bring me down. I have also come to realize how lucky I am to have a healthy younger brother, a blessing not everyone gets to experience. Simply, I hope this piece influences other viewers to fight for what they believe is right and to not falter under the pressure of others. As I move forward, I plan to share Dr. Frances Kelsey's story on my school's website, as well as with my peers, in hopes of inspiring others in my community.