Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes
ARTEFFECT

Impact Statement

Marilyn Sommerville, Grade 11
The Heart of a Hero, 2026
Acrylic, quilting on canvas, 36 x 24 inches
King School, Stamford, CT
Unsung Hero: Helen Taussig

For this piece, I chose to learn about the life and legacy of Dr. Helen Taussig, an unsung hero. A pediatric cardiologist, medical innovator, and barrier-breaking pioneer, Dr. Taussig was truly a hero to many, including myself.

I have a congenital heart defect and have always been fascinated by cardiology, so I chose to research Dr. Taussig because I was curious about her field and her impact. I also love helping people, especially children, so I found a personal connection to Dr. Taussig's work because she cared so much about children's health. Learning about Dr. Taussig affected me by making me feel incredibly grateful for her work because it helps me and others receive important diagnoses and medical care.

Dr. Taussig experienced many challenges throughout her career and life. From a young age, she struggled with serious hearing loss and dyslexia at a time of rampant discrimination against people with disabilities. She grappled with gender barriers in science and higher education as she pursued a career in the overwhelmingly male-dominated medical field. Dr. Taussig studied science and medicine at Harvard University and Boston University, but neither allowed her to earn a degree because she was a woman. In one class, she was even banned from speaking to male classmates because that would "distract" them. Despite these disheartening experiences, Dr. Taussig persevered through these challenges and overcame them, earning her medical degree and rising to the division chief position in Johns Hopkins Medical School's pediatric department. She continued to break gender barriers by becoming one of the first women to serve as a professor at Johns Hopkins University and was elected as the first female president of the American Heart Association in 1965.

Dr. Taussig conducted groundbreaking research on blue baby syndrome, which causes babies' skin to turn blue from lack of oxygen. Blue baby syndrome had a very high mortality rate, with 25% of babies dying before age 1 and 70% before age 10. Dr. Taussig discovered the causes of blue baby syndrome, which she found to be blood vessel blockages and septum leaks. She worked with surgeons to develop a new surgery, the Blalock-Taussig-Thomas shunt, to correct the defect. This procedure was a turning point in medicine because it saved countless babies' lives and was one of the first steps toward modern open heart surgery. Blue baby syndrome continues to impact many babies today, so Dr. Taussig's work continues to save lives.

Throughout her life, Dr. Taussig continued to break ground in her field. She published her book, Congenital Malformations of the Heart, in 1947, establishing pediatric cardiology as its own field of medicine. Later on, she testified before Congress against the drug

thalidomide, which causes birth defects in newborns, eventually leading to its ban. Dr. Taussig also pioneered new methods of studying children's hearts in safer ways by combining x-rays and fluoroscopy. Dr. Taussig had a massively successful career and her work touched so many lives, leaving a lasting legacy in medicine today.

I admire Dr. Taussig's compassion and selflessness; even when she was experiencing challenges like dyslexia or deafness, she continued to constantly give her complete effort to helping others. Late in her life, when she was completely deaf, she continued to care for her patients by lip-reading and "learning to listen with her fingers" to feel the rhythm of their heartbeats instead of relying on a stethoscope. Dr. Taussig's dedication to others is incredibly powerful, and her selflessness and deep care for patients lives on in her contributions to the field.

After learning about Dr. Taussig, I wanted to create an artwork that exemplified her passion for helping others and the deep kindness in her heart. I envisioned that my artwork would convey a positive, hopeful feeling because Dr. Taussig saved countless lives and had a positive impact on individuals, the medical field, and the world.

In this artwork, I painted Dr. Taussig caring for one of her young patients. Dr. Taussig is painted in warm, reddish gray hues to represent blood, life, warmth, and passion for others. The baby is painted in cool, blue-gray hues to represent blue baby syndrome, the struggle for life, and the hopelessness that many families felt. Dr. Taussig, by caring for the baby, is sharing her kindness and selflessness while giving the baby a new chance at life, with her red hues blending and mixing with the baby's blue hues. In my creative interpretation, Dr. Taussig is spreading life and warmth to others, carrying red, oxygen-filled blood and new hope to those in need. Additionally, Dr. Taussig wears a heart on her sleeve, made from different red fabrics stitched together to represent how her different experiences have shaped her as a person. My artwork represents how Dr. Taussig was selfless and wore her heart on her sleeve, helping others without question even when faced with barriers. The specific colors, materials, and artistic decisions made in my piece create a unique composition that tells the story of an incredible unsung hero.

In this project, I discovered that there are so many people who have made lasting impacts on the world, yet they remain unknown and unsung. I learned the power and responsibility that come with telling someone's story. Dr. Helen Taussig's story taught me that compassion can truly change the world, and courage in the face of challenges creates a stronger character. Dr. Taussig's legacy inspires me to follow my dreams and pursue a career in science, and her character encourages me to always consider others and work for the betterment of the world and the people in it.

I hope viewers will gain a sense of hope from my artwork and understand the importance of telling people's stories that have previously been buried. Whether they be family, friends, classmates, or strangers, I hope viewers will feel a sense of connection through my artwork and be inspired to make a positive impact on the world.

References:

https://cfmedicine.nlm.nih.gov/physicians/biography_316.html

https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/helen-taussig