

Impact Statement

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***A Kindheart Saves Little Heartbeats*, 2026**

Oil on paper, 14 x 10 inches

Florida Virtual School, Tampa, FL

Unsung Hero: Helen Taussig

Helen B. Taussig is, to me, a truly extraordinary and deeply admirable woman. At a time when medicine was overwhelmingly dominated by men, when women struggled to be heard in academic spaces, and when disability was often misunderstood or dismissed, she chose not only to exist within that world—but to transform it. Being deaf and living with dyslexia, she faced barriers that could easily have silenced her ambitions. Instead, she turned those very challenges into the foundation of her strength.

The field of medicine in the early twentieth century did not offer much room for women. It certainly did not make space for someone to navigate both gender discrimination and physical limitations. Yet she refused to allow society to define the limits of her potential. Through perseverance, intellectual rigor, and unwavering dedication, she carved out her own place. She did not wait for permission to belong; she earned her place through excellence.

What moves me most is not only what she achieved, but how she achieved it. Despite losing her hearing, she refined her diagnostic skills in a way that was almost poetic in its determination. Unable to rely on sound in the traditional sense, she learned to “listen” to the heart with her hands. By carefully placing her fingers against a patient’s chest, she could detect subtle vibrations, rhythms, and murmurs. Where others heard through stethoscopes, she felt through touch. What might have been considered a limitation became, in her case, a rare and heightened sensitivity. She transformed adversity into innovation.

Her work led to the development of groundbreaking treatment for children born with congenital heart defects—especially those known as “blue babies,” whose oxygen-deprived blood gave their skin a bluish tint. At a time when many of these children had little hope of survival, she helped pioneer a surgical approach that changed everything. Her collaboration in developing what became known as the Blalock–Taussig shunt offered these infants not just extended life, but the possibility of childhood, family, and future. She did not simply study disease; she restored hope.

Because of her, countless children were able to grow up, to laugh, to run, to dream. Families who once prepared themselves for loss were given the gift of time. Parents were able to watch their children take first steps, attend school, and build lives of their own. The impact of her work extends across generations. It lives in every family photograph that exists because a fragile newborn was given another chance.

She is often called the “mother of pediatric cardiology,” a title that reflects not only her scientific contributions but her nurturing commitment to children’s health. She helped establish pediatric cardiology as a recognized and respected medical specialty. In doing so, she opened a path where none had clearly existed before. She did not just walk through doors—she built them.

Personally, her life fills me with courage. When I think about her journey, I am reminded that difficulty does not erase possibility. If she could persist in a world that doubted her abilities, if she could rise above physical challenges and societal prejudice to create lasting change, then perhaps any of us can find the strength to continue when the path feels uncertain. Her story is a quiet but powerful reminder that resilience can shape history.

In the background of my artwork, you can see a universe in shades of blue and purple. It represents the universe of possibilities opened by pediatric cardiology, which she helped to pioneer. The blue symbolizes the “blue babies,” those little ones who suffered from heart conditions characterized by a bluish or purple discoloration of the skin, and who, thanks to her work, were given a new lease on life.

You can also see human hearts, as a reminder of the many hearts—the many lives—that she saved. It is no wonder she is known as the “mother of pediatric cardiology.”

In one of her arms, she holds a healthy baby, a symbol of the hope she brought back to the world. In the other hand, she holds a heart, because the hearts of so many children were literally in her hands.

That heart shines, because this doctor gave each of them back a spark of light to keep living. A light that illuminated not only the babies she helped, but also their families, society, and, in a way, the entire world.