

Impact Statement

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The Artificial Cycle of Life, 2026

Digital Art

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Unsung Hero: Jean Purdy

A quiet laboratory was where Jean Purdy transformed an idea widely treated with skepticism into reality. Born in 1945, she became one of the key pioneers behind in-vitro fertilization, or IVF, a breakthrough that reshaped the future of reproductive medicine. Though her name often remains in the background, her impact continues to echo through millions of lives. Her dedication to helping others face biological challenges inspired me to choose her as my Unsung Hero.

While researching different figures for this project, I found myself drawn to Purdy almost immediately. Among photographs and records of her work, one detail stood out above all else: her smile. It felt deeply human in contrast to her purely clinical surroundings and the black-and-white nature of the photographs. That expression made me connect to her immediately and pause to wonder about the person behind the discovery. As a woman who also hopes to pursue a career in the medical field, I saw in her a reflection of the kind of professional I aspire to become, someone who blends knowledge with passion.

Jean Purdy worked alongside Robert Edwards and Patrick Steptoe during the early development of IVF, a process that allows fertilization to occur outside the human body. At the time the project faced overwhelming ethical skepticism, with people comparing the idea to “playing God” or “creating monsters”. Despite the hate, she remained committed to the work, carefully nurturing embryos and supporting the team through years of trial and error. Her contributions played a crucial role in the eventual success of the first IVF birth in 1978, a moment that opened doors for families tragically facing infertility across the world.

What makes her story even more meaningful is how long her contributions went unrecognized. While others received widespread acknowledgment, her name faded into the background for many years. Yet her impact continued through every life, every family, every future scientist, teacher, and service worker made possible by IVF.

My artwork reflects her generational impact. At the center, Jean Purdy stands smiling beautifully, surrounded by a soft glow that represents the artificial “cycle of life” she and her team made possible, where the early stages of life appear, gently illuminated, symbolizing the beginnings they helped nurture. The film-like forms scattered about the background resemble ultrasounds, capturing glimpses of the future they created. In the background, a peaceful scene unfolds

where a woman held their baby happily, representing the countless families built through her work.

Jean Purdy's life also carries a sense of tragedy. She passed away at a young age of 39, before she could fully witness the global impact of her work or receive the recognition she deserved. This adds another layer to her story, one of dedication without expectation of reward. Her legacy reminds me that meaningful contributions come from passion and purpose rather than recognition alone.

Learning about Jean Purdy changed the way I view both science and my own future. She showed me that medicine is ultimately about helping others. Her story encouraged me to believe that even small roles in a larger effort can lead to extraordinary outcomes, it also reminded me that compassion and determination can exist side by side, shaping a career that truly makes a difference.

Because of Jean Purdy, I see my path in medicine with greater clarity. I want to bring the same care and humanity into my work, helping others regardless of what rewards or recognition I may receive. Her life stands as a powerful example of the quiet strength I looked up to. She may remain unknown to many, yet her impact continues to grow with every life she helped create. She is, without question, an Unsung Hero.