Lowell Milken Center for Unsung Heroes
ARTEFFECT

Impact Statement

Allen Gu, Grade 8
Savior of Saviors, 2026
Colored pencil, watercolor, paper collage on wood panel, 11 x 14 inches
Luckie Art Studio, Lexington, MA
Unsung Hero: Dr. Virginia Apgar

During a period when newborn babies were unclear on whether they needed extra attention or were already healthy, Dr. Virginia Apgar created a point system-based test in 1952. She was an obstetrical anesthesiologist, specializing in caring for women during pregnancy. The reason I chose her as my Unsung Hero is not only because her work connects with my birth but also for the care and dedication she took towards saving lives, even while facing gender inequalities.

She developed the APGAR score through her numerous experiences of delivering infants, which is still in use today. The APGAR test is a 10-point system used in the 1st and 5th minutes of the baby's birth based on 5 categories from 0 to 2: Appearance, Pulse, Grimace, Activity, and Respiration. This simple method allowed doctors to quickly assess a baby's health to see if the baby needs extra attention or not. When I was born, both my mother and I contracted a fever for days. Most likely, without the help of the APGAR test, I might not even be here to this day. The devotion Dr. Apgar showed towards saving the lives of others was not only with the APGAR test, but she also tried to educate professionals and the public by traveling around the world, creating sayings such as "Be good to your baby before it's born" and writing novels such as *Is My Baby Alright?*

Dr. Apgar's curiosity about science and medicine most likely came from her father, as he was a young inventor and an astronomer. She began an internship at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons (P&S). Although her first surgery was very impressive and promising, her mentor was worried that a female surgeon during the Great Depression wouldn't get far, leading her to switch to her main profession as an anesthesiologist. Her work in the field has saved countless lives by allowing for quick and simple identification right after the baby's birth. Later in 1949, the Division of Anesthesiology became a department. Dr. Apgar was expected to be named chair, but the position was given to a male colleague due to gender inequalities. Dr. Apgar, however, was appointed to a full professorship at P&S. While she worked there, she and a couple of colleagues began to develop the early versions of the APGAR test. By the late 1950s, she had attended over 17,000 pregnancies and refined the APGAR score. Instead of trying to keep up with other male doctors in a similar area of research as Dr. Apgar was in, she simply carved out new areas of research to explore. My research about the life of Dr. Apgar has not only helped me better understand her achievements but also recognized the gender barriers she had to cross to reach them.

My vision for this artwork was to represent both the care and perseverance that Dr. Apgar showed throughout her life by including an image of her tending to a newborn while being frowned upon by a male in the corner. I included visual representations of each category used in the APGAR score to give the audience a better understanding of how the test works. Additionally, I included a plane to show Dr. Apgar's restless energy and determination to learn even in her late 50s, wanting to fly under the New York George Washington Bridge as part of her dream. These categories were specifically chosen to reflect her perseverance, curiosity, and impact not only on her medical career but also on her regular life.

Most people today are alive because of Dr. Apgar's work; most, if not all, people don't recognize her work or her dedication. Before researching and drawing her, I didn't recognize her actions either, even if it might've saved my life. This discovery during my research process opened my eyes towards paying closer attention to other inventions that I use in my everyday life. My plan of action to spread awareness of Dr. Apgar's work is most likely through social media and from friend to friend by making her invention seem more personal, causing the message to give off a lasting impression on the audience. By spreading awareness, I hope more people will recognize Dr. Apgar as the unsung hero she truly is.

References:

https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2025/02/virginia-apgar-the-doctor-who-saved-the-lives-of-millions-of-newborns/#:~:text=Apgar%20was%20an%20engaging%20speaker,the%20need%20for%20more%20research.

https://profiles.nlm.nih.gov/spotlight/cp/feature/biographical-overview