

Impact Statement

Hera Cuyos, Grade 12

The Guardian of Life, 2026

Oil on canvas, 23 x 19 inches

Tagum City National Comprehensive High School, Tagum City, Philippines

Unsung Hero: Dr. Frances Kelsey

“Behind the Shadows, Beyond the Faces: The Quiet Architect of Impact”

Do heroes always wear capes? Or is being a hero simply defined by recognition and fame? In today's world, people often view heroes as individuals who are widely known and admired by almost everyone. They are respected because of their contributions to society, and their names become familiar to many. However, an important question arises: Does a true exemplary need to be recognized by the public, or are they only acknowledged because of their visible acts of philanthropy? To explore this idea, I created a painting that emphasizes how even an unsung hero can make a profound impact on countless lives.

The person I chose to portray is Dr. Frances Kathleen Oldham Kelsey, also known as Dr. Frances Kelsey. She was a Canadian American pharmacologist and physician who dedicated 45 years of service to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). She protected public health by standing firm against intense corporate pressure. Most notably, she is remembered for preventing the drug thalidomide from being approved in the United States. Thalidomide was a sedative prescribed to pregnant women to treat morning sickness. However, it was later discovered to cause severe birth defects, particularly affecting the development of limbs in unborn children. Dr. Kelsey's decision to withhold approval of the drug saved thousands of babies from being born with these life-altering conditions.

I chose Dr. Kelsey as my subject because she stood not for personal gain, but for public safety. I deeply admire her courage and integrity in refusing to approve thalidomide despite immense pressure, simply because she was not satisfied with the available safety data. She demonstrated that one person's determination can truly make a difference—a difference rooted in protecting others rather than seeking recognition. In other countries, thalidomide caused devastating birth defects in thousands of infants. However, because of Dr. Kelsey's vigilance, an estimated tens of thousands of children in the United States were born healthy. Her actions not only prevented a national tragedy but also led to stricter drug safety laws and improved regulations worldwide. Through my research on her life, her work at the FDA, and the tragedy of thalidomide, I came to understand the depth of her contribution. I can confidently say that she was more than a hero, she was a silent protector whose actions became a safeguard for future generations.

In my painting, I chose to portray Dr. Kelsey not merely as a symbol of resistance, but as a guardian and protector. I depicted her holding a baby close to her heart, representing the

countless lives she helped save. Radiant golden rays behind her symbolize hope and the light she brought into the world. I used deep red and gold tones to convey intensity and significance, while the blue of her medical uniform represents trust, healing, and professionalism. The caduceus symbol on her chest highlights her role in medicine and public service. Surrounding her are images of thalidomide bottles, chemical structures, and thorny vines—elements that represent the dangers she faced and the obstacles she overcame. By placing these threats outside her protective embrace, I emphasize her role as a barrier between harm and innocence. I chose oil paints as my medium because they allow for rich colors and deep textures, helping convey the emotional weight and importance of her story.

As I learned more about Dr. Kelsey, I realized the importance of being careful, ethical, and courageous. Her story inspires me to question, to think critically, and to stand firm in doing what is right—even when it is difficult. I hope to share this painting with my school and community so others can learn about her and be inspired, just as I was. Her story reminds us that we all have the power to protect and uplift others, regardless of gender, status, or background. Even the smallest actions can create meaningful change. Sometimes, heroes do not wear capes—they wear uniforms, quietly fulfilling their duties and protecting others from harm. And sometimes, even in the shadows, their sacrifices shine the brightest.