

Impact Statement

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Behind the Breakthrough, 2026

Oil, quilling paper on canvas, 20 x 16 inches

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Unsung Hero: Jean Purdy

Jean Purdy was a British nurse and embryologist who worked alongside Robert Edwards and Patrick Steptoe to develop IVF, or in vitro fertilization. Jean Purdy began training as a nurse before eventually joining Steptoe and Edwards to help couples who were struggling with infertility. In the late 1960s, there was a lot of skepticism about IVF and its treatment. However, this did not stop Jean Purdy. She had the passion and determination to discover a new infertility treatment. She organized data, managed lab supplies, and cared for patients.

One thing I especially admire about Jean Purdy is that she worked in the lab every single day, further highlighting the determination Purdy had for IVF. In 1978, Jean Purdy became the first person in the world to see the cells of an embryo divide, eventually leading to the first IVF baby, Louise Joy Brown. Even though Purdy was the first person ever to see the embryo divide, she was not widely recognized for her work. Instead, Robert Edwards was awarded the Nobel Prize for his contributions, but he made sure to highlight Jean Purdy and her important contributions. After the birth of Louise Brown, Jean Purdy also helped to establish Bourn Hall, which was the first IVF clinic in 1980. Although Purdy died when she was only 39, her work continues to influence the lives of countless people who benefit from IVF.

For my piece, I chose to oil paint a picture of Jean Purdy working in the lab, as something I truly admire about her is that she never gave up and stayed in the same lab for many hours and days on end. I chose to paint in oil because it requires countless layers and time, which represents the years of research behind the development of IVF. I also chose to keep a cooler color palette centered around blues to represent the more isolated environment of the lab. The cool colors also reflect her patience and dedication to her research. After painting Jean Purdy with her lab materials, I decided to use paper quilling on top of the painting, specifically on the laboratory test tubes. The process of carefully rolling, shaping, and arranging each piece of paper symbolizes the patience, precision, and attention that her work required. By making the test tubes three-dimensional, I wanted them to physically stand out from the painting, which is representative of how Purdy's contributions were eventually able to change lives around the world, even if at the time of her discovery, she was not recognized much for it.

Jean Purdy's story reminds me that the value of someone's work should not be defined by how much attention they get for it. I would like viewers of my artwork to think about and appreciate the people in their own lives who may work hard without receiving any recognition. I would also hope that viewers feel determination and hope through my piece and show others that if you work hard enough for something, anything is possible, even if it may be tedious and take countless months or even years.

References:

<https://www.bournhall.co.uk/fertilityblog/jean-purdy-ivf-pioneer/>

<https://www.lowellmilkcenter.org/programs/projects/view/jean-purdy-blazing-a-trail-for-the-forgotten/hero>