

Third Place Winner
Division II– 10-12th Grades
Irena Sendler: A Hero In Disguise
by Kaylee C.
Northglenn High School, Northglenn, CO

“I was brought up to believe that a person must be rescued when drowning, regardless of religion and nationality,” Irena Sendler once said (Gale). As an activist who didn’t like to be in the spotlight, Irena Sendler liked to downplay her actions when, in reality, what she did was no less than extraordinary. As a child born into a family of doctors, she was taught never to discriminate against anyone and always help people in need, regardless of who they are or what they look like. When Sendler was in college, she experienced segregation. Even though she knew her actions would have consequences, she purposely sat on the “Jewish” benches, defaced her grade card and crossed out the stamp that allowed her to sit on the “Aryan” benches. This act of defiance landed her suspension from college for three years. Already at a young age, she knew the difference between right and wrong, and wasn’t afraid to fight for change, despite knowing the consequences (The Economist Vol. 387, Issue 8581). She acted based on her morals and beliefs, without being scared of the repercussions of her actions. However, Irena Sendler would go on to achieve greater goals that would save the lives of thousands of innocent people.

Irena Sendler saved over 2,500 Jewish children from concentration camps in World War II. However, it was not an easy achievement. Knowing the possible consequences of her actions, Sendler’s tactic in order to save the children started when she knew that her cities’ Jewish population was being transferred to the infamous Warsaw Ghetto. “I saw the Polish nation drowning and those in the most difficult position were the Jews. And among them those most vulnerable were the children. So I had to help,” Sendler said, when later reflecting on her actions (Gale). Because Sendler was a nurse, she had legal access to the government camps, which she used to her advantage by secretly bringing in food and medical supplies and arranging for multiple children to be extracted from the concentration camps and relocated to new homes or orphanages who were willing to help (Gale). However, despite Sendler’s hard work, time was running out and every day, more and more innocent children were dying. In an effort to do more, Sendler became the head of the children’s division of an aid organization called Rada Pomocy Zydom (Council for Aid to Jews) or better known by its code name “Zegota” where she relocated children from the Ghetto and place them with sympathizers (Gale). Sendler continued her work until she was arrested by the Gestapo. “Sendler's activities attracted the attention of the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police agency, and she was arrested in October of 1943. In prison, she was beaten and tortured, but refused to divulge any details of her work or the names of her fellow humanitarians” (Gale). Sendler eventually escaped and had to take a new identity but still continued her work with Zegota until 1945 when the war ended. After that, Sendler worked in the field of social work for the remainder of her life. Irena Sendler acted based on her morals and pushed past her fears of failure and her fear of getting caught in order to make the lives of these

innocent people and their children easier. Moral courage drove Sendler to save the lives of thousands.

Irena Sendler's actions affect many people still today. Most of Sendler's recognition would, unfortunately, take place after her death in 2008, but she did live to see how her acts of moral courage affect the lives of others. In 2006, two years before her death, one of the infants that Sendler rescued, Elżbieta Ficowska, read a statement by Sendler at a Polish Senate ceremony honoring Sendler's wartime work. Although Sendler was too ill to attend the ceremony, her response to the speech was, "every child saved with my help and the help of all the wonderful secret messengers, who today are no longer living, is the justification of my existence on this earth, and not a title to glory" (Gale). After dying at the age of 98 in 2008, Sendler was honored with various awards including the Audrey Hepburn Humanitarian Award in 2009. She also had plays and documentaries written about her life such as the famous play called *Life in a Jar*, which was written by four high school students in Kansas who were inspired by her work.

As a society, it is important to recognize these hidden figures whose work has been overshadowed by the evil in our history. We need to use them to guide us to having our own moral courage and standing up for what we believe in despite the consequences. Whether it be something as little as standing up for a classmate, to something as large as starting a movement to end racism and hate, every action will cause an impact. Sendler has taught me that following your morals and what you believe in is most important. Even more important, perhaps, would be how she faced her fears and decided that she wouldn't let them stop her from acting when she believed something was immoral. You have to have the courage to stand up for what you believe in if you want change to occur. I feel very connected to Sendler because she was just a normal girl who did amazing things. She used her opportunities she was given in life to make change happen. Sendler's actions inspire me because I recognize how much courage it took for her to stand up for the innocent children. I feel like I have been given a lot of opportunities to change the world and Sendler has taught me that I need to not take those opportunities for granted and use them to the best of my ability. As Irena Sendler once said, "A hero is someone doing extraordinary things. What I did was not extraordinary. It was a normal thing to do," (Gale).