



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

**“A Hero and a Role Model:
Jonas Salk and Rebecca Gratz”
by Alex Rawitz
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A hero is someone who selflessly helps other people, expects nothing in return, and often suffers for it. Heroes show strength of character, bravery, compassion, and humility. They can come from humble beginnings, but no matter how successful they become, they always put others before themselves. I feel that Jonas Salk, brilliant scientist and developer of the first polio vaccine, fits this description. Dr. Salk is the embodiment of the values of perseverance, bettering the world, and education. His story is an inspiring one. He was the son of Russian Orthodox Jewish immigrant, and he became the first person in his family to go to college. He used his education to develop a vaccine that saved millions of lives.

Jonas Salk was born in East Harlem, New York on October 28, 1914, to Daniel Salk, a garment worker born in America, and Dora, who had come to America to escape anti-Semitism in Russia. Neither of his parents had a formal education, but they encouraged Jonas to study hard and learn, and he did. An extremely intelligent student, he graduated from Townsend Harris High School, a school for the talented and gifted. He then worked his way through City College and the College of Medicine at New York University. He spent a year at NYU researching influenza. The virus that causes flu had only been discovered recently. Salk’s experiments with the flu became the basis for his experiments with polio.

In 1947, Salk was offered an appointment to the University of Pittsburgh Medical School. He worked along with researchers from the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis and saw the chance to develop a polio vaccine and help millions. He rushed headlong into this task and, with the help of funding, dedicated himself to finding a cure.

Polio, or poliomyelitis, is a contagious disease normally transmitted through the consumption of material contaminated with feces. Common ways to get polio were not washing your hands after going to the bathroom or drinking contaminated water. Three different types of Polio are known – effects range from severe flu-like symptoms to paralysis and even death. There were almost 60,000 cases in 1952 and almost 3,000 deaths in the United States at the peak of the epidemic.

After eight years of tireless, hard work, Salk produced the successful vaccine in 1955. The vaccine consisted of the dead poliovirus, which could immunize but not infect the receiver. Salk was hailed as hero and a savior of children.

In 1963 Jonas Salk founded the Jonas Salk Institute for Biological Studies, an inventive center for both medical and scientific study and research. Even toward the end of his life, Salk devoted himself to producing a vaccine that fought AIDS, a goal that sadly has not yet been accomplished. Jonas Salk died in 1995, at the age of eighty.

Jonas Salk is a hero to me because he came from a humble background to do great things and help many people. He chose not to profit personally from something he had done, for he refused to patent the vaccine, thus gaining nothing monetarily from his invention. It was enough for him to work to get the vaccine distributed as widely as possible and see the positive results. This alone is an admirable quality, but few people have worked so hard: the speed at which he worked was remarkable, and he never once gave up. Salk worked on noble causes right up to his death. Hard work is an important value to me, and it clearly was to Jonas Salk. Salk is also a fantastic example of how education can help a person, who in turn can use it to help the world.

Jonas Salk was certainly not born rich, and one of the things that make him my hero is his coming from nothing to help millions. However, you don't have to be born poor to help the poor, as is evidenced by my role model, Rebecca Gratz.

A role model is someone who you respect enough to want to be like them, or do the things they do. Rebecca Gratz, who preceded Jonas Salk by almost two centuries, worked to make the world a better place for those in need. She protected the Jewish identity in a time when it could have been lost. Rebecca Gratz was the founder of the Philadelphia Orphan Asylum, Hebrew Sunday School, and the Jewish Foster home. To me, she is the perfect example of someone who is both fully Jewish and fully American. During her lifetime she was not only one of the most prominent Jews in America but one of the most prominent and respected women in the country. She dedicated her life to children, women, her fellow American Jews, and the less fortunate. I did not know her before I did research for finding my role model, and with all the great things she did, I think that more people should know her compelling story.

Rebecca Gratz was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, on March 4, 1781, the seventh of the twelve children of Miriam Simon and Michael Gratz. Her parents were prominent in Philadelphia society and also observant Jews. They valued education, like my family; so much so that Rebecca's older sister, Richea, was the first woman in America to attend college.

In her late teens, Gratz was a vivacious, clever, beautiful woman in Philadelphia society. Through this position Gratz came to know many of the important literary, philosophical, and artistic figures of her time. However, in 1800, she was torn away from the social scene when her father suffered an incapacitating stroke. While her older brothers took over the family business Rebecca became her father's nurse. She did not enjoy the role but soon became the family's caretaker.

In 1801 Gratz, along with her mother, sister, and 21 other women, founded Philadelphia's first nonsectarian women's charitable organization, The Female Association for the Relief of Women and Children in Reduced Circumstances. The association's mission was to help hard working, honest women who had fallen upon hard times

Because of Gratz's work with the Female Association she became very eager to help women and orphans. In 1815, she helped found the Philadelphia Orphan Society, a non-sectarian, private organization that educated and housed poor orphans until they were old enough to be apprenticed to families. Gratz became secretary of the board, a position she occupied for over forty years. Gratz was known to the public as a kind-hearted, charitable woman and advised others who wanted to form similar organizations.

In 1819 Gratz helped found the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society to help the increasing number of disadvantaged Philadelphia Jews and form a Jewish presence in the community. It was Gratz's hope that the Society would prove that Jews could provide for themselves.

By 1835 Gratz had become concerned about the religious education of Philadelphia's 750 Jews, urging the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society to form a 'Hebrew Sunday School' to teach Judaism to children the way that its Christian counterpart taught Christianity. The school was very different from other schools of this time because they met only once a week and lessons were taught in English instead of Hebrew. It was coeducational, was run entirely by women and was the first Jewish institute to give women a total role in educating Jewish children.

From her work with the Philadelphia Orphan Society Gratz knew that even non-sectarian orphanages had a Christian bent that might weaken a child's Jewish identity. In 1855 when was Gratz was 74 years old, she opened a Jewish orphanage, The Jewish Foster Home— it was the first of its kind in the United States.

Rebecca Gratz lived out her remaining years opposing slavery during the Civil War. When she died in 1869 she had remained active in all of the organizations that had meant so much to her. The Hebrew Sunday School and the Female Hebrew Benevolent Society continued to function for almost 150 years.

Rebecca Gratz and Jonas Salk both worked very hard to help other people. They share some of the same values as I do, and they have my respect and admiration. Both achieved greatness in the eyes of many, including myself. But in the end, what draws me to them is that they did not achieve this greatness for them, because they didn't want greatness in the first place; they didn't want fame and fortune; they wanted to make the world a better place. And anyone who does that is a hero.