



Impact Statement

Tina Zhao, Grade 11

The Unextinguishable Deep, 2026

Acrylic on canvas board, 16 x 20 x 1 inches

Forest Ridge School of the Sacred Heart, Bellevue, WA

Unsung Hero: Eugenie Clark

Every time I go to the beach, I find myself staring at the water for a long time. As I set out in a boat from the shore, the water is so clear that I can see the shells and sand swaying with the waves at the bottom, with a few small fish darting around nearby. As the boat moves slowly forward, the sea seems to change its face, turning into a pitch-black expanse with no end in sight. To be honest, this sense of the unknown and the mysterious always fills me with awe and even a touch of fear. I find myself wondering: how much courage and determination must a person possess to plunge headfirst into this uncharted darkness, back in an era when we knew next to nothing about the ocean?

That is, until I came across the story of Eugenie Clark. After visiting an aquarium, Clark fell completely in love with the experience, the glowing, cloud-like jellyfish, the colorful little tropical fish, and the mysterious, dangerous sharks with their gaping jaws. Captivated by these wondrous creatures, she dove headfirst into the "study" of marine life; every Saturday, Clark would rush to the aquarium with eager anticipation. The look of inquiry in her eyes seemed to suggest she could communicate with the marine inhabitants, and she made a solemn vow: one day, she would swim alongside the sharks. Clark soon earned a bachelor's degree in zoology from Hunter College through her own merit, and she was ready to continue her studies in the marine world. But in the 1940s, a patriarchal society allowed the arrogant professors at Columbia University to try to shut Clark out of her field of study under the pretext that "women will eventually return to the home," a preposterous excuse. However, they had no idea just how deep Clark's love for the ocean ran. Passion cannot be stopped. Every Saturday, she would visit the aquarium, recalling the innocent vow she had made to herself, and her resolve only grew stronger to make that vow a reality. As an adult, she turned this dream into reality, completing 72 dives and becoming one of the few ichthyologists at the time to study living specimens through diving. During her research, she discovered that the Moses sole could release a shark repellent. She devoted a great deal of time to educating the public about sharks and chronicled her experiences in the Red Sea in a book dedicated to all those who, like her, harbored a deep love for the ocean. I am profoundly grateful that Clark chose not to turn back and go home, but instead opted to spend her entire life in the water, breaking down the prejudices against both her and sharks.

In my painting, I placed the elderly Dr. Eugenie Clark right in the center, her face now deeply lined with wrinkles. These wrinkles are not a sign of her advanced age, but

rather a testament to how many years Clark has devoted to the ocean. What I most wanted to capture were her eyes and the smile on her face. The excitement that sparkles in her eyes as she gazes at the coral reef is, in fact, the same as that of her younger reflection in the background. To me, that translucent shadow is not a memory of the past, but her enduring passion. Whether it was the little girl lost in wonder at the aquarium or the “Shark Lady” later remembered by everyone, this passion has not faded with age. I chose to set the scene underwater because I felt the land was too “crowded” for her, weighed down by the constraints of age and society. But in the deep sea, gravity disappears, time slows down, and those prejudices fade away. Even until her death at the age of 92, Clark continued to dive.

To me, painting is just as important as diving was to Dr. Clark. Her achievements have made her a hero, yet it is her unwavering dedication that I admire most. I have chosen to portray this great hero through the medium I cherish most, “painting” the very craft to which I am most devoted. I envision myself at the helm of a boat, carrying Dr. Clark out into the vast expanse of the ocean, so that more people may come to know her as a remarkable woman making immense sacrifices for our world.