

Impact Statement

Finnley Scott, Grade 10

Behind a Dolphins Smile, 2026

Acrylic on ceiling tile, 24 x 48 inches

Kelowna Secondary School, Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada

Unsung Hero: Ric O'Barry

"A dolphin's smile is nature's greatest deception. It creates the illusion they are always happy."
~Ric O'Barry, Animal Activist, *The Cove*. For a long time, I also believed in this deception; I thought that these beautiful creatures lived harmoniously with the world and were at peace. I am realizing my ignorance. Those times that I witnessed dolphins while peering over a ferry railing and assumed they were at peace, and that their smiles were real...this may not have been the case. Thousands of dolphins are being killed by industrial fishing annually, and approximately 3,000 dolphins are held in captivity worldwide. Their deaths and detention are damaging the ecosystem and contributing to coastal degradation, which is leading to the gradual loss of these beautiful creatures. This atrocity is one of the many reasons why I chose the animal activist Ric O'Barry as my Unsung Hero. Watching the documentary *The Cove* really opened my eyes. This acclaimed film revealed the disturbing realities that dolphins face globally. Thanks to O'Barry's compassion and perseverance, many of these dolphins are still alive today.

Ric O'Barry did not start as an activist; he worked for years as a dolphin trainer. In fact, he was the lead trainer for the hit 1960s TV show *Flipper*. However, when circumstances led to one of the primary dolphins, named Kathy, dying in O'Barry's arms, it sparked something in him. The guilt and the feeling of responsibility over the dolphin's death drove O'Barry to abandon his original career path as a dolphin trainer. In 1970, O'Barry founded a nonprofit organization called the Dolphin Project, which is dedicated to ending the exploitation, captivity, and slaughter of dolphins worldwide. Now at the age of 85, O'Barry has compiled quite an impressive resume as an activist. To date, he has been responsible for the release of over 25 dolphins from captivity, the closure of numerous dolphin facilities, and has been pivotal in negotiating the end to dolphin hunting in the Solomon Islands. His remarkable contributions extend further with the release of the documentary *The Cove*. Through increasing global awareness, this film has significantly helped reduce dolphin hunting worldwide. No greater is this effect felt than in the area surrounding Taiji, Japan—widely regarded as one of the biggest dolphin hunting regions in the world. O'Barry's efforts have not only bolstered the dolphin population in the wild, but he has sparked passion in others to support the movement to end dolphin captivity globally.

Although a daunting task, I attempted to capture O'Barry's story through my painting. I dedicated my time to portraying the many aspects of his life, including: his activism, his challenges, his accomplishments, and his mission. I started by emphasizing the key attributes of O'Barry's activism, such as his hope, passion, and the changes he made, using a plethora of

colours and gradients in my piece. The bright, vibrant yellow and teal symbolize the intensity O'Barry has brought to his work, while I used the gradient of dark red to teal to represent fewer dolphins being killed each year. To express the obstacles that both O'Barry and the dolphins have faced, I chose to add the imagery of chains and buoys. The chains represent the injustice that the captured dolphins faced, and what O'Barry endured in the form of oppression due to the controversies surrounding his activism. The media coverage at the time often focused on his arrests, conflicts with authorities, and travel bans; which overshadowed his achievements and created a negative public persona. That is the reason I chose to smudge the words on the protest signs; the media often changed the meaning of his work or obscured it from the public entirely. I then used buoys to depict the methods used to capture and confine the dolphins in Taiji, as shown in the documentary *The Cove*. Furthermore, I also sought to demonstrate O'Barry's ability to overcome obstacles, which is illustrated by the knife and camera. The knife represents his efforts to physically free and rescue the dolphins, while the camera showcases the work he did behind the scenes. I then placed both chained and unchained dolphins in the left and right corners to further accentuate how O'Barry's help has resulted in their release. I portrayed how O'Barry's work has created a movement by including a protest scene. I chose to use a blue tint in the protest scene to draw your eye to the centre of the piece, where a younger version of O'Barry is portrayed with a dolphin to demonstrate the key motivation for his mission, his love for dolphins.

Throughout the creation of this piece, I came to realize how often we ignore problems that are not explicitly presented to us, the injustices that can be quietly swept under the rug. That is why O'Barry's story felt impactful and important to me and why I knew his activism needed to be the subject of my artwork. O'Barry refused to look away from the dolphins trapped in captivity or the thousands that are slaughtered each year. Instead, he chose to challenge these realities directly by investigating deeper when it would have been easier to remain silent. The time I have spent with O'Barry's story has made me reflect on what it means to take action in my own life and how I can speak out against injustice when I see it. My artwork will be displayed in a collage of unsung heroes on the ceiling of my Humanities classroom. I hope that when future generations look up to the ceiling, they find themselves curious about the unsung heroes above. I hope that they take the time to learn about them and become inspired by their stories. Ultimately, I hope that future generations of students are empowered to speak out against injustice and to take those first steps in raising awareness, just like Ric O'Barry has done.

References:

www.worldanimalprotection.org/latest/blogs/dolphins-stages-of-suffering

<https://www.dolphinproject.org/campaigns/save-japan-dolphins> <https://opsociety.org/ops-productions/films/the-cove/> <https://www.afd.org.au/dolphin-drive-hunts/>