



Impact Statement

Layla West, Grade 11

Dybwad's Work, 2026

Gouache, marker, hot glue on canvas, 14 x 11 inches

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Unsung Hero: Gunnar Dybwad

Dr. Gunnar Dybwad made large strides in his career and lifetime to pursue rights for those with disabilities. Dybwad believed that people with developmental and intellectual disabilities best responded to integration into the community. He humanized those who were shunned in mental hospitals, framing his fight as a fight for social equality and civil rights, not a medical issue. I chose Dr. Dybwad because he gave a voice to those who may not have been able to speak up for themselves. And personally, as someone who has been close with those with disabilities, including some I have myself, I am incredibly grateful for the work Dr. Dybwad and his wife strived to accomplish.

Dybwad supported volunteer groups and citizen advocacy, whose purpose was to "demand and obtain" services for people with disabilities. He brought an international perspective to the issue. In the 1950s, Dybwad, representing the Association of Retarded Citizens (The Arc currently), helped to organize family members and friends in efforts to "liberate people" from custodial institutions. These institutions were large, state-run residential facilities that segregated people from society. They were often overcrowded, prison-like warehouses that prioritized basic care—providing only food and shelter—over rehabilitation, frequently leading to abuse, neglect, and loss of autonomy. Dybwad played a major role in encouraging PARC to file disability rights litigation with the federal court. Among the top concerns of the group was the right of people with disabilities to receive public education. This action, along with others—resulted in groundbreaking changes to due process and equal protection for the treatment and education of people with disabilities.

For my art work, I wanted to make something that carried that inclusivity that Dybwad fought so hard for. So I chose to both fingerpaint, use gouache, and also use acrylic markers. Decorating the canvas is braille with a quote I took from one of his interviews; "Those with a disability are a part of us" (1987, Dybwad). Even while he may not have fought particularly for physical disabilities, his work paved the way for others to fight for that cause. I also used this braille to represent those who were considered "blind" and helpless from society. Making this piece, I wanted this to be considered something that we continue to fight for, something that we can still interact with and improve on. My goal for this piece was to carry out that inclusivity that Dybwad worked toward. I want everyone, regardless of their capabilities, skills, or appearance, to be able to enjoy my art and touch it!

My research on Dybwad has impacted my view of equity and protesting. As a child, I had always wanted equality. But after learning more, especially through this research, I've realized that everyone deserves equity. Equity is what separates just giving and truly caring. Dybwad cared for his cause, and for that, I thank him. Through his work, I also understood the impact of protesting. His cause became global through his protests. And the idea of what my voice can do, especially for those who can't voice it—no matter how small—has helped me realize the potential I carry. And through my artwork I hope that this piece will show others the same lessons I've learned from this—Your voice matters, especially for those who cannot fight.

References:

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