



Impact Statement

Yurim Lee, Grade 11

Where Humanity Remains, 2026

Colored pencil, watercolor on paper, 21.5 x 15.5 inches

St. Johnsbury Academy Jeju, Seogwipo-si, South Korea

Unsung Hero: Marek Kotański

While leading sessions for an art therapy initiative I founded for younger students who struggle to express themselves verbally, I began to understand that some forms of pain are incapable of being solved through simple advice. Many people do not need judgment first; they need patience, dignity, and someone willing to meet them where they are. Watching my students gradually open up their emotions through trust, I reflected upon how transformative compassion can be. Simultaneously, it made me wonder about individuals in history who had dedicated their lives to offering that same kind of hope, but on a larger scale. Upon searching for such a figure through ARTEFFECT, I discovered Marek Kotański, a Polish psychologist, therapist, and humanitarian whose work centered on aiding people struggling with addiction, homelessness, HIV/AIDS, and social exclusion. Though I had never encountered his name in most mainstream history discussions, I immediately recognized the importance of his unsung legacy.

What primarily drew me to Kotański was not merely the scale of his accomplishments, but the founding philosophy behind them. Born in Warsaw in 1942, Kotański studied psychology at the University of Warsaw and since then was involved in aiding orphans and vulnerable youths. That early commitment to social service later developed into one of the most influential humanitarian efforts in modern Poland and beyond.

In 1978, Kotański established the first MONAR rehabilitation center in Gloskow to dedicate his efforts to people struggling with alcohol and drug addiction. Despite the social stigmas of the late 1970s, which strongly condemned these marginalized individuals, Marek Kotański refused to define people by their circumstances. Where others saw failure, danger, or inconvenience, he saw people in need of love and care. Instead of relying solely on predominant forms of punishment or institutional seclusion, MONAR emphasized a cooperative form of therapeutic community, allowing patients to rebuild discipline and a sense of self-worth. The Polish organization's success demonstrated that recovery was possible when people were treated not as lost causes, but as lovable individuals capable of change. MONAR expanded rapidly throughout Poland and became a major force in addiction recovery.

His later work broadened in 1993, when he founded MARKOT, an organization supporting homeless individuals, single mothers, people with disabilities, and former prisoners attempting to re-establish their lives. During the 1990s, MARKOT reportedly provided nearly half of Poland's shelter spaces for people battling homelessness. This statistic alone demonstrates

Kotański's profound influence. Kotański also advocated for people with HIV/AIDS during a period marked by fear and stigma; he strived to shift public attitudes and hatred into compassion and practical care. He did not simply build institutions: he altered the moral imagination of society by insisting that those pushed to the very margins still belonged within it.

Hence, my painting was created to capture that humanity at the core of his accomplishments. In the foreground of my artwork, I placed Marek Kotański embracing a struggling, pale child. Although Kotański assisted diverse marginalized communities, the figure in my artwork symbolizes vulnerability itself: the universal need for protection, compassion, and hope that he provided. By making the embrace the focal point of my artwork, I willed compassion rather than authority to define heroism.

Surrounding the central figures are fragmented scenes of suffering that illustrate the realities marginalized citizens confront. Broken bottles and scattered debris on the ground refer to addiction, self-destruction, and neglect, whilst the shadowed crowds in the background represent those who are protesting societal neglect. Hints of hospital imagery, such as beds and wheelchairs, allude to Kotasnski's advocacy for HIV/AIDS patients, while faded images of newspapers and texts denote his courage to speak openly against prevalent stigma. I intentionally placed these scenes around the embrace so that the viewers experience a stark contrast between chaos at the margins of society and powerful humanity withstanding at the center.

This contrast is reinforced through the light and color. I intentionally utilized vivid, bold tones with strong contrast for the central figures while employing lighter, faded tones for the surrounding elements. In addition, I focused on gesture and body language to communicate humanity rather than dramatic symbolism, since much of Kotasnski's heroism was quiet yet prolonged. It existed in patience and steadfast care. Compositionally, the eyes of viewers are repeatedly drawn back to the embrace, reinforcing the ideology that love and compassion are powerful driving forces even in a hateful society.

Creating this piece altered my understanding of leadership. Contemporary culture often associates influence with visibility, wealth, or status. On the flip side of the coin, Marek Kotasnski represents a different model: he chose to stand besides, not in front of, people others avoided. As I worked on this painting and researched his life, I naturally reflected on how society frequently notices suffering when it is strongly publicized or extreme. His actions challenge me to be more attentive and caring toward hidden struggles that may exist around me.

In the near future, I am planning to share my artwork with the elementary students in my art therapy club and through my social media page so that others may learn about a figure whose contributions deserve wider recognition. I hope to spark conversations about the people whom we often undermine or neglect unintentionally, and about how communities are transformed when dignity is extended for all. Marek Kotasnski may be an unsung hero, but his legacy persists in modern society wherever compassion is turned into action.

References:

Black. "Marek Kotański." Radio Awangarda, 25 Jan. 2023, radioawangarda.pl/marek-kotanski.

Kozielec, Jakub. "Marek Kotański " Stowarzyszenie Na Rzecz Chłopców I Mężczyzn." Stowarzyszenie Na Rzecz Chłopców i Mężczyzn ", 6 May 2024, schm.org.pl/blog/marek-kotanski