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WEEKEND CONFIDENTIAL

A Member of the First All-Black High School Rowing Team in the U.S. Wants to Make Waves

Arshay Cooper is working to bring more racial diversity to the sport that transformed his life



Arshay Cooper, photographed at North Palm Beach Rowing Club, North Palm Beach, Fla., May 31. JEFFERY A. SALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



By [Alexandra Wolfe](#)

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Growing up in the 1990s on Chicago's violent West Side, Arshay Cooper often had his walk home from school punctuated by the sound of gunfire. To him, "crew" was another word for "gang." One day in the fall of 1997, a rowing coach with the nonprofit Urban Options who was trying to launch a team at Mr. Cooper's overwhelmingly African-American high school beckoned him toward a sleek boat and a rowing video display set up in the cafeteria. Mr. Cooper realized that "crew" could mean something else.

He wound up joining what would become Manley Crew, the country's first all-black high school rowing squad. In a new memoir, "A Most Beautiful Thing," to be published June 30, Mr. Cooper credits the sport with transforming his life and those of his teammates, keeping them away from gang violence, focusing their studies and paving the way toward more promising futures.

Now 38, Mr. Cooper is a motivational speaker and community outreach volunteer. He works as a consultant to nonprofits, clubs and public schools to help them make rowing, often thought of as a sport for the well-heeled, more accessible to people of all income levels. In 2017, he founded the East Side Rowing Team at the public

East Side Community High School in Manhattan. The same year, he won the Golden Oars Award from USRowing, the national governing body for the sport, for “achieving measurable success in expanding diversity opportunities in rowing,” the organization states. According to USRowing, in 2019 only 1.3% of its approximately 75,000 members (including high school and college athletes) reported that they were black or African-American.

A documentary, also called “A Most Beautiful Thing,” is slated to open in theaters in 17 cities next month, produced by the filmmaker and former rower Mary Mazzio and the former NBA player Grant Hill and narrated by the rapper Common. The movie chronicles the journey of Mr. Cooper’s teammates, some of whom began as rival gang members and ended up as a closely knit group. It also captures Manley Crew reuniting for a race 20 years later and, in a twist, inviting the Chicago Police Department to row with them on their team. Mr. Cooper still rows with his old Manley Crew teammates; they practice separately in the cities where they live and periodically meet up. Mr. Cooper told Ms. Mazzio that his teammate Alvin Ross was excited to reunite with the team “to celebrate the fact that we survived the West Side, that we’re still alive.”



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PHOTO: JEFFERY A. SALTER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The movie, which was filmed before the protests spurred by the May 25 killing of George Floyd in police custody in Minneapolis, offers a glimmer of hope that law enforcement officers and members of the communities they police can better understand one another. Still, for Mr. Cooper, seeing the video of Mr. Floyd's killing brought up painful memories. "I never committed a crime, and still, as a kid, numerous times I had my face pressed down on a police car, I had a cop ask me if I had drugs, and I was angry," he says. Mr. Cooper remembers wanting to break something or punch a wall and knows that many young black Americans carry the trauma of similar experiences. Mr. Floyd's death brought that rage to the surface for him. "I feel that riot in me coming back," he says. "There are those who can control it and those that can't."

Mr. Cooper is the son of a single mother who spent years as a drug addict. When he was in eighth grade, she disappeared for two weeks. Mr. Cooper discovered that she had gone to get help at a nearby church, whose rehab program and Christian guidance helped to turn her life around. Mr. Cooper was so impressed at her transformation that he too became a believer.

In high school, most of Mr. Cooper's classmates vied to join the basketball or football teams, which he found too full of combat and conflict. He finally decided to try out for rowing when one of his friends, eager to get a promised slice of free pizza, pledged to introduce Mr. Cooper to a girl if he would go with him.

A former rower at the University of Pennsylvania named Kenneth Alpart had started Urban Options, the nonprofit that brought the sport to Manley Career Academy High School, the year before in Philadelphia. Using proceeds from his trading career, he funded the team in an effort to keep kids in school and help structure their lives.

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The rowing team tryouts involved grueling conditioning drills and taxing workouts on an erg, an indoor rowing machine. The students practiced for two hours a day, heading to the boathouse, warming up, stretching, taking the boat out and then washing it down. Most of the students didn't

know how to swim, Mr. Cooper says. Once they made the team, their first experiences in the boat were rocky, but they grew to love the calm that the water provided. "You're rowing, and there's only one sound, one voice, and you finally get a chance to collect your thoughts," Mr. Cooper says. "It made me feel the same way I feel when I go to church."

The team competed in a league with mostly private schools from Chicago, the East Coast and the Midwest. Mr. Cooper says that they stood out. "In the rowing world, people looked at us like, 'Who the hell are these guys? Where did they come from?'" he remembers. "We were in a group by ourselves the whole time."

The team didn't win any first-place medals at races, but by their second season, it went from the back of the pack to regularly placing in awards ceremonies. Neither

Mr. Cooper nor any of his teammates rowed in college or earned rowing scholarships, but some of the students he has gone on to mentor have. His friend Preston Grandberry recently told him, “We are no longer teammates. We are brothers.”

After high school, Mr. Cooper worked for two years for AmeriCorps, a federally supported voluntary civil service program, helping kids in Chicago public schools. Having long been interested in cooking, he went on to take classes at Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in Chicago and London. After he graduated from cooking school in 2004, he got a job as a chef for World Wrestling Entertainment, where he cooked for wrestlers and executives. He left to start his own catering business in 2006, making food for events, celebrities, athletes and movie sets.

In 2010, he moved to New York City, where he continued catering, and in 2013, he started giving cooking classes to high-school students. He started hearing stories like his own, about children whose mothers had been involved in drugs and didn’t have fathers. That, he says, is “when the passion came back” and he decided to write a book about his high school experience. In 2016, Mr. Cooper left the food world to mentor high-school students, help connect them to college rowing coaches, and assist schools and nonprofits in starting and diversifying their crew teams.

Mr. Cooper’s next goal is to help get an African-American rower onto the 2028 U.S. Olympic team. He wants to let both the students he coaches and the institutions he works with know that the Olympics is a real possibility for athletes of all backgrounds. “We have to put it in their heads,” he says. “We have to let the sport know that rowing should reflect the diversity in any city.”