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COMMENTARY ENTERTAINMENT AND CULTURE COLUMNISTS

‘A Most Beautiful Thing’ documentary on West Side high school rowers is truly beautiful

In a time of sorrow, this uplifting documentary gave me hope. That these young men from Manley High School are even alive to tell their stories is a triumph of the human spirit.

By Mary Mitchell | Aug 7, 2020, 4:19pm CDT



The men of the Manley Career Academy High School rowing team reunite in Oakland, 20 years after their introduction to the sport. | 50 Eggs Films

Every now and then, a film comes along that touches my soul.

In this instance, it is “A Most Beautiful Thing,” a documentary by Mary Mazzio about the 1990s all-Black rowing team from Manley High School on the city’s West Side.

It is both a reunion story and a memoir about a group of Black men from crushing circumstances that bonded over the sport of rowing.

If you really want to know why young Black men join gangs, these guys can break it down for you.

They were boys who joined gangs as a matter of survival because there was no other option for them.

As one of them candidly put it: “When the neighborhood YMCA closed down, I went to the street.”

My colleague, movie columnist Richard Roeper, gave the film three and a half stars, a thumbs-up review. You can read his review on the Sun-Times’ website.

So why am I writing about it again? Here’s why:

Many of us cannot relate to the pain that these young men experienced just trying to get from home to school.

For instance, I grew up poor, but I don’t know what it is to have nothing to eat because my mother was strung out on crack and my father was nowhere to be found.

I grew up in public housing where crime was a fact of life, but that was before the gangs and guns took over and young Black men were being shot dead on the street.

The fact that these young men are alive to tell their own stories is itself a true triumph of the human spirit.

It is appalling, really, that although they were members of the only all-Black rowing team to compete in a sport associated with wealthy Ivy League athletes, they were invisible to the rest of us.

“A Most Beautiful Thing” is the story of Arshay Cooper, Alvin Ross, Malcolm Hawkins, Preston Grandberry and Ray Hawkins Jr.’s journey through some perilous waters.

The documentary, based on a memoir written by Cooper, brought tears to my eyes one moment and joy to my heart the next because it captured the struggles that just about every Black boy growing up in an impoverished neighborhood faces trying to live to manhood.

Several of the members of the 1990s rowing team had mothers who had been strung out on drugs, leaving them to fulfill the role of “man of the house” because their fathers were not around.

As a mother, I know it must have been incredibly difficult for these mothers to put their failures out there for the world to see.

Except for intermittent commentary by Arne Duncan, co-founder of Chicago CRED (Create Real Economic Destiny) and the former U.S. secretary of education, the members of the 1990 Manley rowing team told their own stories.

In doing so, they connected all those dots that we fail to connect when we talk about disinvestment in certain communities, about generational poverty, about violence.

In one of the film’s most somber scenes, the men are asked: When was the first time they saw somebody die?

They all had faced that devastating reality before their teens.

The documentary also showed the power of empathy.

It was a white man, Ken Alpart, a Chicago trading executive and a former rower himself, who came up with the idea of forming a rowing team at Manley.

Perhaps the most powerful scene in the documentary — and one that gives hope that we can overcome the tensions that now exist in some of our communities between Chicago police officers and young people — was when the Manley reunion team joined the members of the Chicago Police Department in a show of unity at the Chicago sprints rowing event.

This is truly a Chicago film.

It is narrated by Common. Chaz Ebert and Dwyane Wade are among the executive producers.

Without being preaching, “A Most Beautiful Thing” shows us a way forward.