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# Story Of The First All-Black Rowing Team Is Absolutely A Must Watch



The Manley Team (Arshay Cooper in blue sweatshirt) on the water in Oakland. credits: 50 Eggs Films

Just walking to school each day was a nightmare for kids like Arshay Cooper, growing up in Chicago's West Side in the 1990s.

It was a terrifying, dangerous route that involved navigating territories of multiple gangs. Giving allegiance to one, so you're not alone, is necessary just for survival.

Cooper and his friends formed lifelong bonds and managed to survive and escape the bullets and the gang life of Chicago through the most improbable venture: Rowing.

A new documentary called ["A Most Beautiful Thing,"](#) by Mary Mazzio details their struggle to become the first all African-American rowing team in the country.

Inspired by Cooper's 2015 book *Suga Water: A Memoir*, the film dives deep into the struggles of growing up on the West Side. Cooper and teammate Alvin Ross gave Mazzio a tour of the area they grew up in on their first meeting. They made her wear a baseball cap, and instructed her on how to wear it so as to cover her face and to not mimic rival gangs as she sat in the back seat. They didn't take her to any "active" streets, but she got a good sense of the ever-present danger.



Mary Mazzio

"We live in this really segregated society," said Mazzio, who rowed for the U.S. at the 1992 Games in Barcelona. "You have millions of Americans living in conditions like a developing country, not a compassionate, industrialized society. In these neighborhoods, the idea of the 'American Dream' does not show itself. It's just not there. Their starting line is so far back.

"Talent is equally distributed; access and opportunity are not."

Rapper Common narrates the film, and executive producers of "A Most Beautiful Thing" include retired NBA superstars Grant Hill and Chicago native Dwyane Wade as well as hip-hop mogul 9th Wonder. "A Most Beautiful Thing" was set to premiere at SXSW in March, but the film festival was canceled as one of the first casualties of the coronavirus in the United States.

The consequences of growing up around constant street violence are akin to being in a war zone. Or worse. "A Most Beautiful Thing" cites a study that shows children in similar neighborhoods [suffer PTSD at higher rates than soldiers in combat](#).

When rowing coach Ken Alpart showed up at Manley High, offering free pizza to anyone who tried out, everyone at the school was dismissive and skeptical. "We don't even swim," said Cooper. But he and a handful of others gave it a shot.

Things didn't begin auspiciously for the rowers. Most of the kids were terrified when they first got out on Lake Michigan. But Cooper puts it in chilling perspective: "How can you deal with gunshots all day long in your neighborhood, and you're scared to sit in a boat?"

The hours of training got the teens off the streets, away from the gang life, and gave them a sanctuary.

"The special thing of being on a boat is not being around the noise," one member says. "The noise in the West Side of Chicago is ... police sirens, gunshots, people screaming. People getting jumped. There was something about the water that gave us peace. That was something that we all had never felt before."

It's not all smooth sailing, and there are many setbacks. In one race, the team steers straight into a wall. But that's the least of their problems. Two members end up serving time in prison.

There are countless tragedies, including deaths to friends and family members. The stories of abuse and violence are overwhelming and devastating.

I dare you not to cry.

In 2018, the team reunites at the funeral of coach Mike O'Gorman, and being together sparks the idea of getting back on the water to race the Chicago Sprints. Cooper sought out Mazzio to make the movie after the two connected on Twitter. The team members, approaching their 40s, even enlist the help of Olympic coach Mike Teti to get them into shape.

"Arshay had this idea — in fairness, he pretty much directed the movie," Mazzio said. "He said, 'I want to call the Olympic coach.'"

Getting Teti on board for the movie was easy, as he had contributed, very quietly, to the team before, and Mazzio describes him as "a big ham." But that wasn't the end of crazy ideas.

Cooper, who is shown time and time again to be a man capable of building bridges no one even dreamed possible, wanted to get the Chicago police to join the team. For Cooper, it wasn't about forgiveness, but about starting a dialogue and setting an example to the kids of the Windy City. He wanted to break the cycle of violence and despair.



Arshay Cooper and teammates In Oakland. credits: Courtesy 50 Eggs Films

Four officers joined the Manley High team and learned how to row. It was an extraordinary, even life-changing experience for everyone involved. Perhaps the most memorable moment of the documentary is when Malcolm Hawkins expresses complete astonishment to learn police officers are actually just like everyone else.

"Once they came out of them uniforms, they was regular human beings, you know? They was no different than anybody else on the street, you know. We was able to relate to them, kick it with them, crack jokes, have a ball. You know, at the end of the day, they go home to a family and kids and mothers and wives, too. So, you know, we just don't get the chance to see them in their element, or in that light sometimes. It was cool to see that."

"I was in tears two or three times when these guys came together," Mazzio said. "I could not believe my eyes. Especially when you know these guys and know why they were in prison.

It is clear that Mazzio, who has directed films such as "Apple Pie," about athletes and their mothers; and "Underwater Dreams," about the sons of an immigrant building an underwater robot; was moved by the experience of making the film and meeting Cooper.

"He's a really special person, Arshay Cooper," said Mazzio. "He has a beauty to his spirit that is just extraordinary. For him to transcend that toxicity that's really quite wild. I felt so privileged to be there."