

ENTERTAINMENT > MOVIES > HISTORICAL MOVIES

How the Incredible Story of the First All-Black High School Rowing Team Made It to the Big Screen

A *Most Beautiful Thing* premieres on July 31, and tells the story of Arshay Cooper and his teammates who grew up on Chicago's violence-plagued West Side

Published on July 16, 2020 02:40PM EDT By [Rachel DeSantis](#)

Growing up on the West Side of Chicago in the late 1990s, the students of Manley High School were no strangers to gun violence – many were no older than 11 years old the first time they saw someone get shot.

So while becoming part of a brotherhood was appealing, the idea of joining a rowing team wasn't exactly top of mind.

"I don't even swim, why would I want to do this?" recalls former Manley student Arshay Cooper. "When you think of white people sports, it's really sports that we felt like we couldn't afford. Or it's that that kind of stuff gets you killed."

Cooper signed up for the team anyway, not knowing that becoming a member of what would be the country's first all-Black high school rowing team would lead him on a life-changing path.

The journey Cooper first chronicled in his memoir *A Most Beautiful Thing* will soon hit the silver screen in a documentary of the same name that highlights the team's reunion 20 years later, and their decision to get back in the boat and take to the water once again for the Chicago Sprints.

The incredible story of how Cooper and his teammates Malcolm Hawkins, Preston Grandberry, Alvin Ross, Ray Hawkins and others used their time as rowers to help overcome their circumstances (many were born to drug-addicted mothers; two served time in prison) and emerge as successful entrepreneurs was one that instantly caught the eye of director Mary Mazzio.

Mazzio, a former Olympic rower herself, tells PEOPLE she was quickly sold on the story, and after a tweet to Cooper set the process in motion, knew she had found something special.

She even helped recruit basketball legends Grant Hill and [Dwyane Wade](#), who are both executive producers, and Common, who serves as the documentary's narrator.

"Growing up on the South side of Chicago, I personally understand the healing power of sports and its ability to give new hope and change lives," Wade tells PEOPLE of why signed on to executive produce. "This inspiring and uplifting story about a team uniting to overcome adversity and persevering despite their differences and life circumstances will resonate with everyone."

Hill, too, was struck by the power that sport had over the lives of the men: "You can see that these are real people [who] dealt with some incredible misfortune and have found a way through sport and through opportunity and through access to be alive, but also be surviving and thriving in their current lives," he says.

For Cooper, who now lives in Brooklyn and works to bring rowing to underprivileged communities, the idea that sports can heal was never more true than when he'd head out on the water with his teammates.

The group wasn't without struggles — they lost a teammate to gun violence while still in high school, and to this day can recall the stares they received as Black rowers, as well as the time they weren't allowed into a restaurant because of the way they were dressed.

"[We knew] that no one else looks like us, that no one may root for us, and everyone's staring at us, so we have to be here for each other," says Cooper.

Though the film was initially meant to be a celebratory chronicling of the team's mission to compete in one more race together, things evolved when Cooper welcomed local law enforcement to their training sessions.

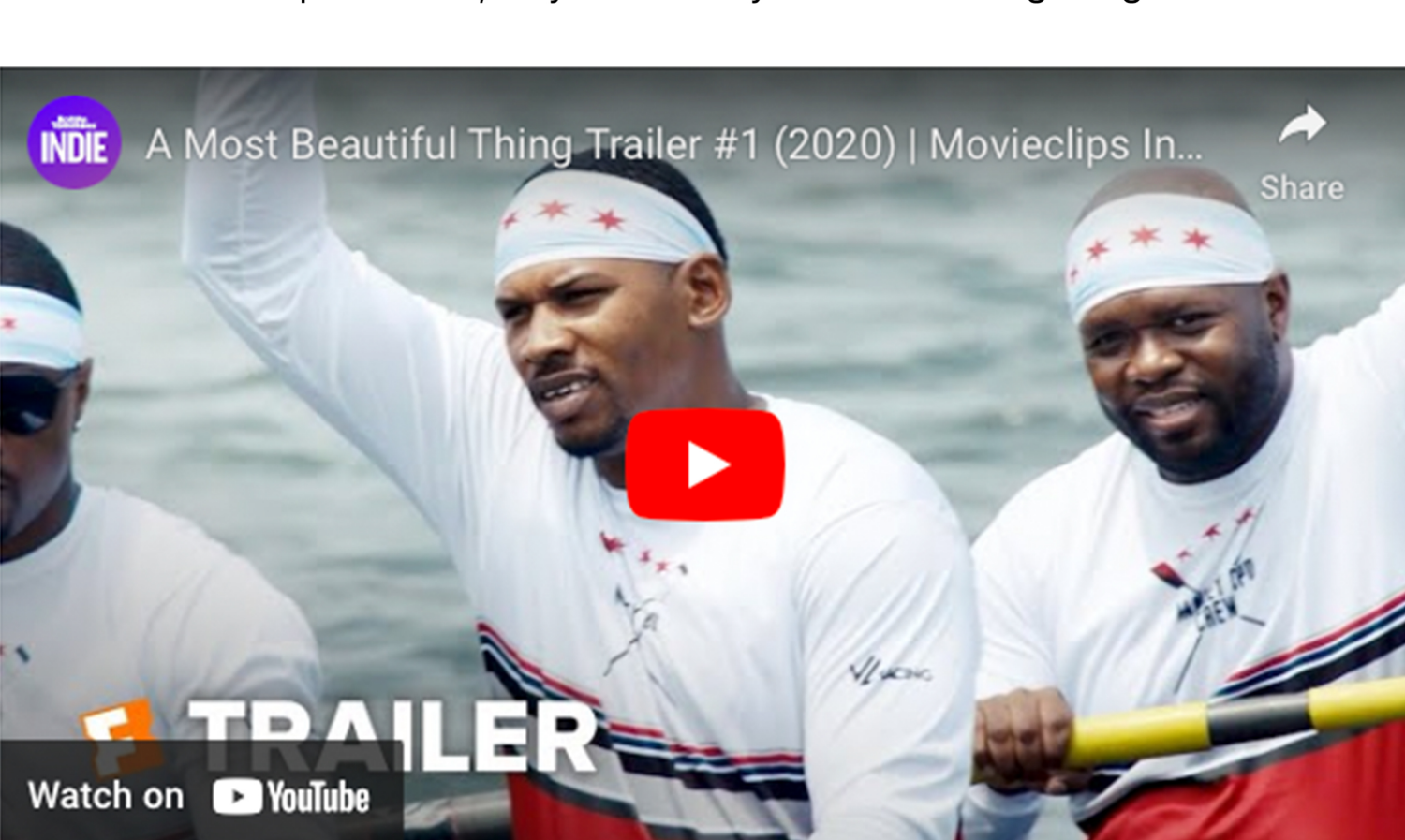
"I thought we would do this retrospective, and you visit the neighborhoods, and then maybe we get all of them out on the water again. Like, 20 years not in the boat, fade to black, they all sing 'Kumbaya,' " Mazzio says. "I had no idea what we were in for, and I don't know that they did either."

The team's shining moment on the water is in the film, as is the journey they took with the local Chicago police officers who ended up sharing in their bond – a joining of two worlds never more relevant than over the past month, as the United States continues to fight against systemic racism and police brutality.

"It doesn't change the system. But like, when that situation happened with George Floyd, I got a text from [the officers]," Cooper says. "But knowing that that sucked and kind of also reaching out to me, kind of to show a little bit of that change I wanted to see, it planted a seed. But what I need now is for you to start holding people accountable, and your colleagues accountable."

Mazzio says she hopes her film will help relieve people from neighborhoods like the West Side of stereotypes thrust upon them, and lead viewers to learn that the only thing often separating people is the circumstances of birth and skin color.

"When young people have a chance, when people have an opportunity, when they have access, when they have proper nurturing and purpose, they can exceed expectations," says Hill. "They can do amazing things."



For Cooper, watching his story come to life is a way of showing the world just what he and his friends overcame in order to become the successful people they are today — and how others can do the same with the right resources and help.

"Sometimes people talk about Chicago and it's all about the violence, but it's never about people who made it through this adversity and pushed through these challenges," he says. "And not only survived and became successful, but gave back to the place that gave to them."

A Most Beautiful Thing hits theaters on July 31.