

Stars align to help power new rowing documentary

By [Chris Smith](#)

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The film tells the story of Arshay Cooper (blue shirt) and the first Black high school rowing team.

Photo: RICHARD SCHULTZ / COURTESY OF 50 EGGS FILMS

A new documentary has brought together an acclaimed director, a pair of retired NBA All-Stars and two award-winning hip-hop artists to tell the story of the nation's first Black high school rowing team.

"A Most Beautiful Thing" centers around Arshay Cooper and his teammates, some of them members of rival gangs, who attended Manley High School on Chicago's West Side in the late 1990s. The film addresses

issues of racial diversity and inclusion, and director Mary Mazzio hopes it can play a role in ongoing conversations about equality. “The timing could not be more resonant or powerful,” said Mazzio.

Mazzio, who rowed for the United States at the 1992 Olympics, first discovered the story a few years ago after reading Cooper’s 2015 self-published book, “Suga Water: A Memoir.” A tweet at Cooper congratulating him on his story soon led to a phone call. “He’s such an amazingly powerful communicator, and when he told me his story, I thought that we’re both members of this quirky community of rowers, so we share the same DNA,” said Mazzio. Filmmakers began shooting in January 2019.

Among the executive producers are NBA legends Grant Hill and Dwyane Wade, plus native Chicagoan and rap legend Common, who narrates the 95-minute movie, and Grammy-winning music producer 9th Wonder, who produced its hip-hop soundtrack.

Initial distribution plans included a South by Southwest premiere in March followed by a theatrical run with AMC Theaters, both of which were canceled over COVID-19 concerns. The film will now receive a full digital release. It will be made available for free on-demand to Xfinity subscribers beginning July 31, and it will get a wide release on NBC’s Peacock at the start of September. Plans are being finalized for an additional release on Amazon in October, along with a companion soundtrack.

The project was entirely funded by individuals. The first to contribute was retired attorney and former Princeton rower Bill Hudson, long an advocate for youth rowing. “I saw kids come into the sport and have their lives changed,” he said. Later investors included New York Giants co-owner Laurie Tisch, Olympic silver medalist and Seattle Storm co-owner Ginny Gilder, Olympians Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss, BlackRock co-founder Sue Wagner and former Vanguard Chairman and CEO Bill McNabb, who rowed at Dartmouth.

A charitable fund has been established under the George Pocock Rowing Foundation and will support nationwide efforts to diversify the sport at the youth level. “We’re seeing a huge vein of philanthropy open up in the

wake of this story and this project,” said Mazzio. The fund’s initial board of advisers includes Mazzio, Hudson, IOC member and former Olympic rower Anita DeFrantz, and current Olympic coach Mike Teti, among others.