

# Community — a most beautiful thing



**MICHAEL  
ROMAIN**  
Commentary

Last Friday, the Parks Foundation and the Park District of Oak Park hosted an outdoor screening of the recently released documentary film, *A Most Beautiful Thing*, on the grounds of Cheney Mansion, where about 50 people sitting 6 feet apart took in the story of the first Black high school rowing team in the nation.

Afterward, Reeshoda Graham Washington, of RGW Consulting and Live Cafe & Creative Space, facilitated a virtual panel discussion that included Arshay Cooper, one of the film's subjects and an author whose book serves as the basis for the film.

The park district's screening of *A Most Beautiful Thing* comes amid a years-long effort by the district and leading community members to build a new indoor recreation center.

The screening was an implicit acknowledgment by the park district and the Parks Foundation that you cannot build another Oak Park institution without at least examining the precepts and practices on which Oak Park's existing institutions are built.

Before Oak Park builds another "place to belong" (the slogan on the cover of a handout containing the proposed center's mission and purpose, along with some architectural renderings), it's always wise to ask who in the space will belong there and who won't. And to whom will it belong?

Friday's screening was a creative way of posing those questions and rethinking the answers. The documentary itself works in the vein of Steve James — the longtime Oak Parker whose documentary films, which include *Hoop Dreams* and *America to Me*, don't so much seek to resolve the multi-layered social problems that make up their core as much as unsettle established assumptions about those problems.

*A Most Beautiful Thing* explores the unlikely bond forged by several classmates at Manley Career Academy High School on Chicago's West Side after they're lured by free pizza into joining a rowing team established by Ken Alpart, a brash white futures trader.

Cooper and his teammates, now alumni, recall Manley as one of the most violent high schools in the city. As teenagers, they witnessed someone shot dead in front of the high

school during a drive-by. The neighborhood is dominated by gangs and drugs and guns — terrain that young teenagers often must learn to navigate on their own.

"We did not like each other, like we had no love for each other," Cooper, referencing his rowing teammates, told Washington after Friday's screening. "Every day going to school we had to be tough. And we had fear."

The boys were as fearful of the water as they were of the West Side until they "started pulling for each other and developing that magical rhythm," Cooper said. "That's when it became meditative ... that water was completely life-changing."

The boys show flashes of brilliance as a rowing team, but they don't end the season as champions. In fact, for years after the rowing team at Manley High folded, Alpart was convinced it was a failure. The boys, seniors in high school, left Manley with no big wins on the water and no grand plans to go off to college.

And then the boys became men, most of them entrepreneurs, and began telling people about how beneficial their experience on the rowing team, and Alpart's mentorship, had been to their development. They had been baptized by the water's tranquility and transformed.

"I love basketball, I love football — I'd run all my life, I'd been chased, I had a lot of trauma," Cooper told Washington. "So when I played basketball, it was a trash-talking sport and I wanted to fight. When I played football, the coach was always like, 'Knock 'em dead.' So [those sports] triggered a lot of trauma. But when you're part of a non-conflict, non-combative sport, it actually reduces all that trauma."

"I love that you are calling out this notion that there are more athletic opportunities for young, Black boys than basketball and football," Washington said.

Her statement prompted me to think about a tragic reality — Blacks, bearing the remnants of that original trauma of being packed like sardines into the bowels of cargo ships — have been historically denied access to water as a means of mitigating this remnant trauma and all the other trauma that flows from it.

Nowadays, instead of the cargo ship, we're packed like sardines within the "trauma and conflict sports" of basketball and football, and if we're successful gladiators in those arenas, we're sold into the pros to compete in the sports-entertainment-industrial complex.

Any reconstructed notion of community recreation in Oak Park has to confront this historic racial inequity in recreation, its impact on our society, and aggressively seek

to rectify the inequity at the local level.

Cooper also critiqued white do-gooderism. Alpart judged the success of his rowing team based on the number of kids who went to college or got great grades or won races. When he didn't see those results, he deemed the program a failure. But his definition of success was incomplete.

"Move your organizations, move your community with the Black voices who live there," Cooper said. "You can't measure success on how you think it should be. Ken said, 'We weren't winning and I thought it was a failure.' But you have to understand that getting guys from different gangs together is a win. Culturally, overcoming the fear of water is a win."

It's encouraging that the park district has leaned into its community outreach regarding the proposed community center by centering the voices of longtime Black Oak Parkers for whom many of Oak Park's institutions have been anything but places of belonging — people like Stephen Jackson, Christina Waters and Juanta Griffin, all of whom were panelists on Friday.

During an Aug. 12 virtual town hall on the proposed community center, Waters said that when she was a child growing up in Oak Park, there were neighborhood-based community centers that were safe spaces for young people ("places where my friends and I would hang out, order pizza; we didn't have to have any money, we didn't have to have a certain grade to get in").

"Later on, when that changed from a community center-based model to a program-based model, that went away," Waters said. "There was no longer these safe spaces where we could go to spend quality time with staff and get to know our neighbors. I believe a community recreation center will provide that."

Alpart wanted a good program and his idea of success was "program-based" — all about metrics and meritocratic milestones (perhaps to create a compelling narrative for some white philanthropists). But that's not what a genuine community of belonging is all about.

A genuinely open community accepts people for who they are and allows them to flourish in their own skin, not solely in the accoutrements of success — and success, as this society understands it to be, is becoming increasingly hollow, distorted and corrupted by structural racism and growing wealth inequality. In the area of recreation, as in everything else, the playing fields need to be corrected, not the people.

"Talent is everywhere," Cooper said. "Access to opportunity is not."

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