



# A Most Beautiful Thing:

## Screening and Panel Discussions Spark Crucial Dialogue

**ELIAS FELDMAN**


Multimedia Communications Director

As part of a celebration of Black History Month, Convent & Stuart Hall welcomed Arshay Cooper, whose memoir, *A Most Beautiful Thing*, is the subject of a documentary of the same title about the first all African American high school rowing team in the country. Joining him was Mary Mazzio, a former Olympic rower turned award-winning director, who left a career at a top law firm to dedicate her life to making films about the underserved. Mr. Cooper and Ms. Mazzio visited us virtually for a panel discussion with Grade 7–12 students and an evening talk and Q&A with the adult community.

Mr. Cooper's memoir tells the story of a group of young men growing up in rival sections of Chicago's West Side in the 1990s and their journey to join their high school's newly created rowing team against a backdrop of rampant gang violence and intergenerational poverty. Twenty years later, the men and their mothers reflect in the film about their entire journey, from childhood trauma to how rowing has positively impacted their lives. Now 38, Mr. Cooper, the team's captain, is a motivational speaker, consultant and volunteer, using his story to help create social change and working to bring more racial diversity to the sport of crew.

A team consisting of Cor Unum Workgroup members and others introduced faculty, students, parents and alumni to the film, providing a private screening link for classes and families to watch on Martin Luther King Jr. Day in preparation for the visits with our guests. Also helping to make this event possible was Stuart Hall for Boys parent Bill Hudson, who executive produced the film with NBA stars Grant Hill and Dwayne Wade, and Academy Award/Grammy-winning artist Common.

Arshay Cooper, the author and protagonist of *A Most Beautiful Thing*.



As a lifelong rower, a former director of a youth rowing club and a former board member of the Marin Rowing Association, Mr. Hudson believes in the transformative power of rowing and wants to see the sport become accessible to more diverse populations. "I'm passionate about how the sport can help forge a positive path forward in kids' lives," he says. "Frankly, I'm overwhelmed by how this sport has so profoundly shaped Mary's and Arshay's lives and led to such a powerful message of hope about what can be achieved when people work together towards a shared goal."

Following the discussion with Mr. Cooper and Ms. Mazzio and a Q&A moderated by junior Joe Shea and sophomore Isa Infosino, students engaged in small group dialogue sessions, exploring the themes of empathy, privilege, implicit bias, police violence, the lasting impact of intergenerational trauma, how racism creates systemic inequities in this country, the power of sport to heal and bring lasting change, and, generally, what they took away from the film and our guests. "Whatever the reason, *A Most Beautiful Thing* is one of those films that reaches out beyond the scope of the screen and touches bone-deep into the lives of its viewers," says Dennis Estrada, an Upper Form Associate Dean and Stuart Hall for Boys Studies in Literature & English Language Faculty who co-led the workgroup along with Alyson Barrett, Academic Department Chair for Libraries, to bring the film — and a curriculum to discuss it — to our community.

One particular line in the film voiced by a Chicago police officer continues to resonate with Dennis. In speaking about the men's lives, the officer says, "It doesn't matter where they were; it matters where they're going." Dennis adds: "Now isn't that a most beautiful thing?"