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Former Gardner-Webb Football Players Seek to Promote Unity

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ALUMNI

Former Gardner-Webb Football Players Seek to Promote Unity

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON FEBRUARY 16, 2021

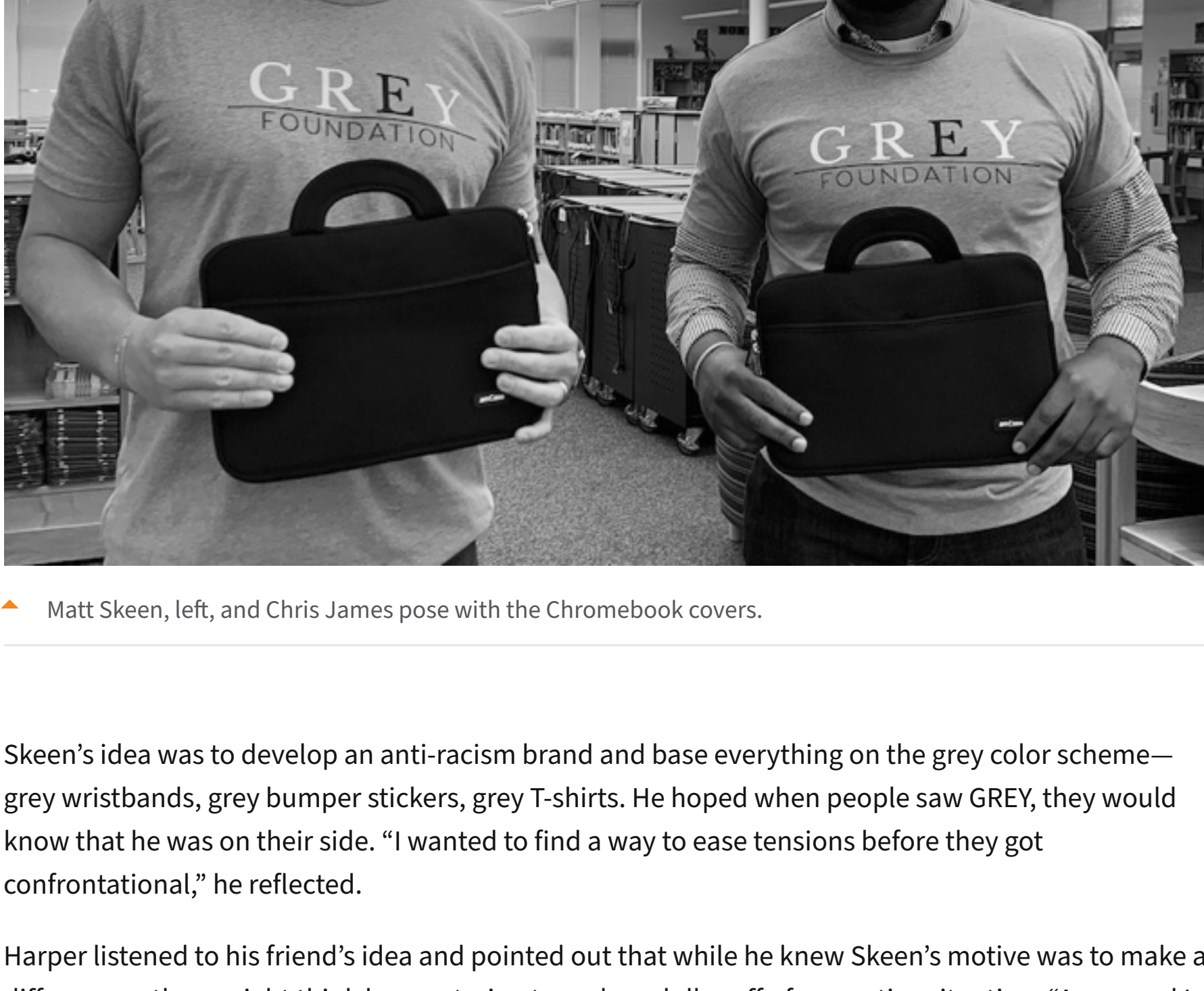


GREY Foundation Supports Equality through Education and Professional Development

Team spirit is built inside the locker room, where everyone is equal and valued. A bond is created that lasts a lifetime. Matt Skeen, a 2007 alumnus of Gardner-Webb University, values those relationships and keeps in touch with his teammates around the Charlotte, N.C., area and beyond. When the nation witnessed the death of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent civil unrest, Skeen turned to his teammate, Avery Harper, '07, for answers. Just like when they played football together, they could discuss difficult topics.

"It's all about dialogue and perspective," Skeen observed. "Without those conversations, everyone goes back to 'assume'—you assume someone is racist or you assume that someone has a specific point of view, without knowing the whole picture."

They began to ask, "How can we bring the locker room atmosphere to the real world?" It was topic they also discussed in 2014 after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. However, in the busyness of life, nothing came from the idea. "Then, with all the things going on in our communities after George Floyd's murder, that's when I called him back and said, 'This is still on my heart, this is something we can try to do,'" Skeen avowed.



▲ Matt Skeen, left, and Chris James pose with the Chromebook covers.

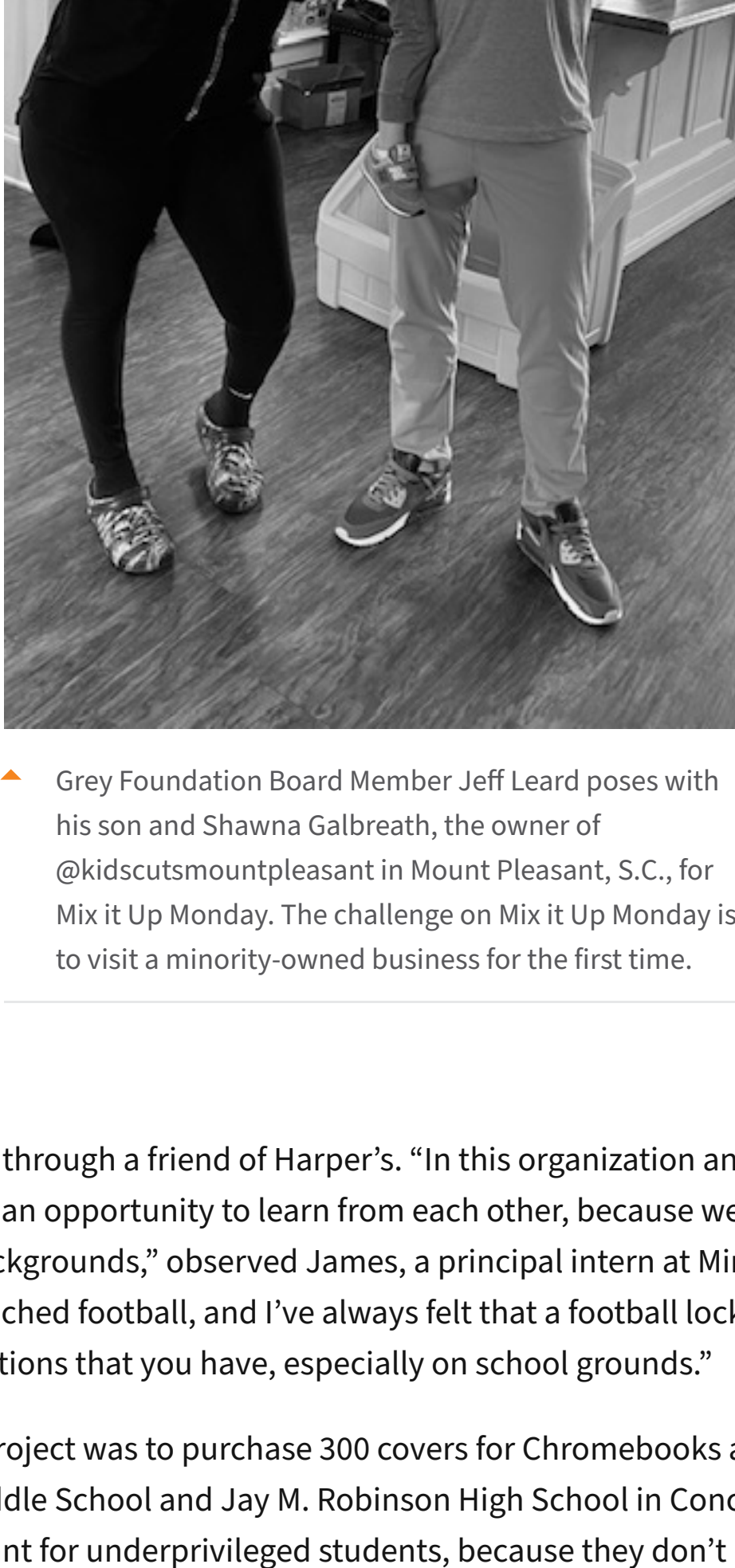
Skeen's idea was to develop an anti-racism brand and base everything on the grey color scheme—grey wristbands, grey bumper stickers, grey T-shirts. He hoped when people saw GREY, they would know that he was on their side. "I wanted to find a way to ease tensions before they got confrontational," he reflected.

Harper listened to his friend's idea and pointed out that while he knew Skeen's motive was to make a difference, others might think he was trying to make a dollar off of a negative situation. "Avery and I started talking and we asked, 'Are we trying to sell wristbands or are we trying to make real change?'" Skeen stated. "And we decided to go the route of let's make real change and impact people."

They asked other GWU football alumni and a mutual friend to join the effort. In the midst of a global pandemic, the group started the **GREY Foundation**, a non-profit organization in Charlotte. The mission is simple: "To promote unity in communities by advocating for equality through education and professional development." They are fulfilling this purpose by addressing needs in schools, such as technology resources and tutoring, and by coordinating workshops for young people on leadership and other career skills.

Skeen, who is the practice administrator at OrthoCarolina in Gastonia, N.C., became the founder and president, and Harper is the vice president. Joining them are Chris James, '11 and '14, education chair; Jeff Leard, '06, secretary; Stephen Knorr, '06, treasurer; George Pressley, '05 and '07, mentor co-chair; and Thomas Trudeau, '07, business development.

Board members raised money through donations and selling T-shirts and wristbands. Gardner-Webb Head Football Coach Tre Lamb ordered T-shirts for the GWU football team. "We raised close to \$15,000 during a pandemic and we started in July," Skeen related. "We have been able to raise about \$2,000 a month."



▲ Grey Foundation Board Member Jeff Leard poses with his son and Shawna Galbreath, the owner of @kidscutsmountpleasant in Mount Pleasant, S.C., for Mix it Up Monday. The challenge on Mix it Up Monday is to visit a minority-owned business for the first time.

James joined the group through a friend of Harper's. "In this organization and this group, the unique thing is that we all have an opportunity to learn from each other, because we all come from completely different backgrounds," observed James, a principal intern at Mint Hill Middle School in Matthews, N.C. "I've coached football, and I've always felt that a football locker room is probably one of the most diverse locations that you have, especially on school grounds."

The Foundation's first project was to purchase 300 covers for Chromebooks and similar devices for students at Mint Hill Middle School and Jay M. Robinson High School in Concord, N.C. Protecting these devices is important for underprivileged students, because they don't have money for repairs. Waiting on the school to repair them can take months. The group's other projects include providing a professional development workshop for the senior members of the GWU football team and coordinating tutoring sessions for Charlotte-Mecklenburg students.

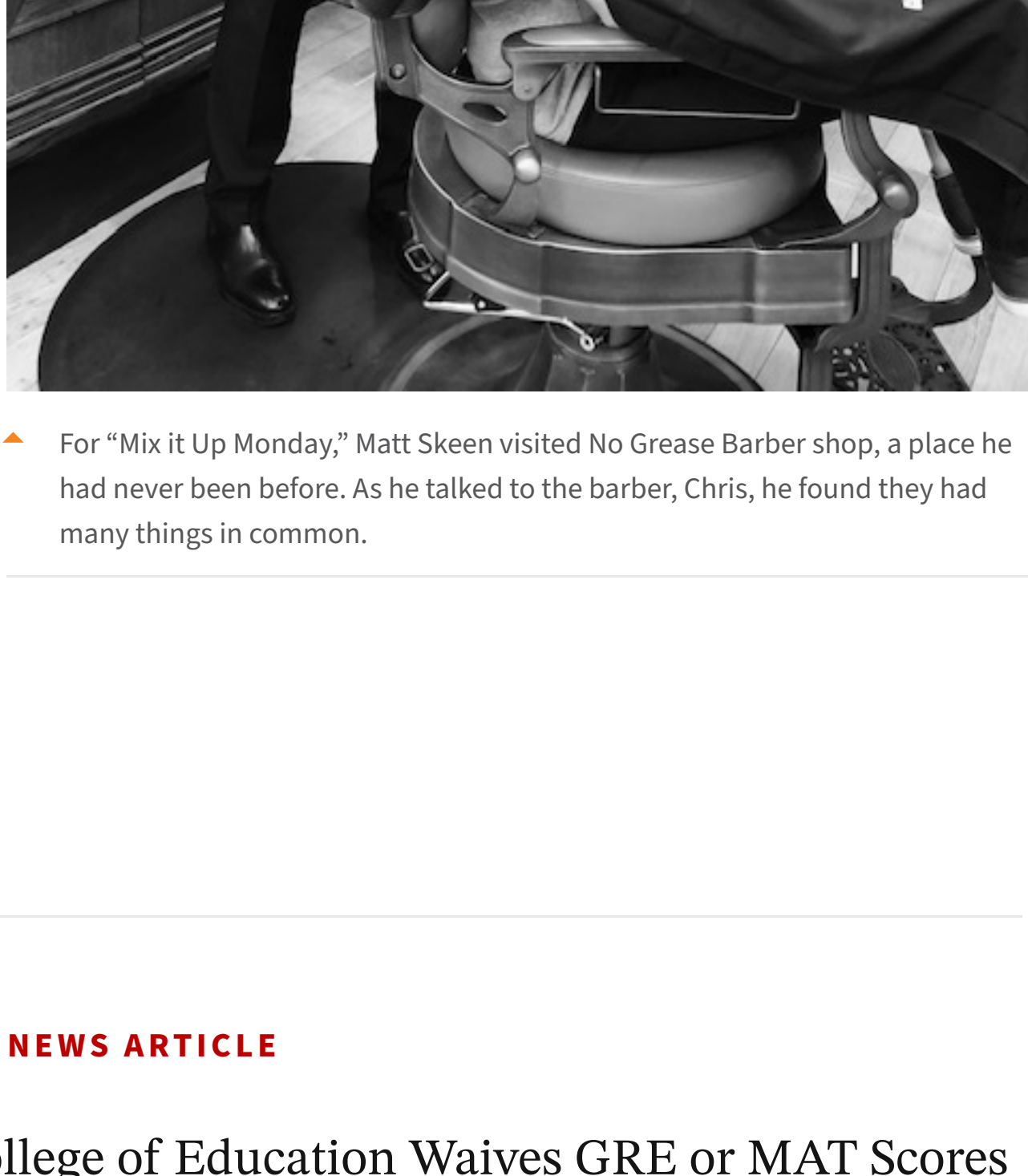
Both James and Skeen believe improving race relations begins when people talk—and listen—to each other. "Dialogue is needed and is extremely important in this," James related. "I love our group so much, because being teammates and being friends for so long, we aren't afraid to ask each other the tough questions and have the tough conversations. We talk often that what we do has to stretch to the masses. If not, we are meeting and doing all these things for no reason."

He said being open and honest is the best way to open the dialogue "Be confident enough to say, 'I don't know. I want to help, but I'm really unsure about what to say, what to do,'" James offered. "If you do that in itself and you are open, I have no reason not to take my guard down."

Another intentional way that the Foundation's Board members promote communication is by sharing "Mix it Up Monday" on [Instagram](#). On Mondays, they visit a minority-owned business. "It could be African American owned, woman owned, Hispanic owned, or veteran owned," Skeen said. "I went to No Grease Barber shop, a black barbershop, and got my haircut. They gave me a fancy part that I've never had before. The barber, Chris, was cutting my hair, and we talked the entire time. We had so many things in common (refereeing sports and being dads). If I hadn't gone in there and we passed each other on the street, I wouldn't know we had all that in common."

About The GREY Foundation: The GREY Foundation focuses on two main areas to create change in communities: technology in education and professional development. To find out how you can get involved in the dialogue or partner with the Foundation, email contact@greyfoundation.org or visit the website. <https://www.greyfoundation.org/>

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▲ For "Mix it Up Monday," Matt Skeen visited No Grease Barber shop, a place he had never been before. As he talked to the barber, Chris, he found they had many things in common.

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