

In Proximity

Season 3 Episode 14

Prox Gems: Ammar Mohamed

Final Transcript

Ammar Mohamed: We're like, "All right, Spike, you know, Ryan has some meetings, so we about to bounce." And he's like, "What meetings? Who got meetings?" And we're like, "Oh yeah, you know, we're going to the Upper East Side." He's like, "Nah, you ain't got no meetings." He's like, "Follow me." So we cancel the meetings for the rest of the day because what you gonna say to Spike? Nothing.

Paola Mardo: No meetings!

Ammar Mohamed: Nothing. No meetings.

[00:13 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today is the first in our Prox Gems series of 2025, and we're starting with a fan favorite! It's our episode with Ammar Mohamed. We know a lot of you guys really love this episode. He shared a lot of really great anecdotes and stories about his role as Ryan's assistant.

But in today's Prox Gems mini episode, we'll have some of the fun stories that folks really leaned into, and a special never-before-released great story about a special day he spent with Ryan Coogler and Spike Lee. Enjoy.

[1:00 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

Ammar Mohamed: I was making many mistakes along the way, as you do when—when you're in unfamiliar territory, or as you can in unfamiliar territory, but, but, like, yeah, I would say, like, I was definitely proud of myself after the movie came out that I was able to, like, do it because when I started, it felt like I was climbing Mt. Everest, you know? And every day felt like you could—you could slip, you know? You were—it was like—you know, you would get tasked with things every day that if you—if you fucked it up, you could lose your job, you know what I mean?

Paola Mardo: I'm starting to, like, sweat thinking about this. Can—can I ask you to name—you know, I know you did a lot on this job. But tell me, you know, a memory or, or walk us through one of those, like, Mt. Everest type days where you had to do something or get out of some crazy situation and how you did that.

Ammar Mohamed: There's so many that I could talk about. But the one that I—that I want to talk about on this podcast, this one was actually very small, but the feeling that I had was like—I was so terrified. And it was—it was the day I moved to Los Angeles. I might've had this job for like two months, maybe less than that.

And I finally get to L.A., and the first day I land, I'm in the office and, and Zinzi, who is a founder at Proximity and also Ryan's wife, she calls me. And she says, "Hey, can you get me—can you get me a scan of Ryan's ID and—and email it over to me?"

I said, "Yeah, that's easy. No problem." So I go to his office, and I tell him. I say, "Hey, Zinzi asking for your ID. She needs a scan."

He's like, "Yeah, cool." Gives me his ID. And he also gives me—he's like—he's like, "Matter of fact, I got—I left something in the trunk of my car. See if you can grab that for me."

I'm like, "Cool." And he gives me his keys. I go downstairs. I grab what he needs from the trunk. I come back. I bring it to him. And then I go to—to scan the ID to send to Zinzi, and I'm looking around, checking my pockets.

[SOUNDS OF AMMAR PATTING HIS POCKETS]

I can't find the ID. I'm like, "Holy shit." I'm looking—I'm emptying all my pockets, and I'm like, "Shit." I'm like, "Where did I put this thing?"

And now I'm like—you know, I'm retracing my steps. And—and I retrace my steps, like, up and down this building like three times.

Paola Mardo: Oh, man.

Ammar Mohamed: Like, I'm—I'm in, like, a full panic because I'm like, I just showed up that day! And eventually, I'm looking around, and, like, I can't find it. And so then, I'm walking around the office like a crazy person whispering to people. I'm like, [WHISPERING] "Hey, have you guys seen a ID on the floor?" You know, like, I'm—I'm, like—I'm terrified because the last thing I want to do is walk into this man's office on my first day in L.A. and say, "Hey, man, I lost your ID," you know what I mean?

Paola Mardo: Ooh, yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: So I'm, like, freaking out. I'm trying to find it. I'm wasting hella time at this point. So I was like, all right, I got—I just have to go in there and tell him, because I could not find it anywhere.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: And I remember I go to his office. The door is, like, creaked open, and I—and I open it. And I walk in, and I see Ryan, and I see the head of Marvel Security standing in his office talking to him, and I kid you not, I walk in, and I literally hear him say—he's like, "Yeah,

man"—he said—he said, "Somebody said they found your ID on the floor, and they gave it to me."

Paola Mardo: Oh, my gosh!

Ammar Mohamed: And I walk in, and he looks at me, and I look at them, and I'm just like, "Aw, shit." And I thought I was going to get fired. Like, I was like, oh, yeah, that's it, you know what I mean? Like, this, this is how it goes. You show up on your first day, you fucking lose somebody's ID, and then you get clipped, you know? And I remember the rest of that day, I was super anxious. Like, the whole time, I'm just like—I'm waiting for somebody to come in my office and send my ass home, you know what I mean?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: And we go home—

Paola Mardo: Well, did you guys talk at all?

Ammar Mohamed: No! Like, he didn't say anything about it. That was the thing that—that scared me.

Paola Mardo: Whoa. Whoa.

Ammar Mohamed: Because he didn't say anything. He just kind of gave me a look, and I gave him a look, and that was it. And so I go home, and I'm still freaking out at home. I'm like, man, they're going to fire me tomorrow. You know, like, all this shit's running through my head. And this is—and this is how fucking nice Ryan is. He comes in the next day, and he has this, like, pouch. And he hands it to me. It's one of his. He hands it to me, and he says, "Hey, man, put your stuff in here."

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: Like, "Put your important belongings in here."

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: And that was it. And, and that moment was, like, a big deal for me because I knew at that moment, I was like, all right, I'm going to be safe on this job. Not necessarily like—like, I'm not talking safety in the sense of, like, job security, but safe in the sense of, like, these people are not—like, these people are going to take care of me. As long as I have this job, like, I'm not around people who are—who are looking to see me, like, fall or anything like that. Like, we in this together.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: And him coming the next day, like anybody—man, he could've cussed me out. He could've sent me home. He could've said whatever he wanted. But his reaction to me losing his ID was to give me one of his own belongings and say, "Hey, man, put your stuff in here," you know what I mean? So—

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: It was something I always remembered.

Paola Mardo: I love that story.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, something I always remembered.

Paola Mardo: I love that story. I feel like a lot can be learned on both ends, you know?

Ammar Mohamed: Oh, yeah. Big time.

Paola Mardo: Whether you're assistant or the boss, like—

Ammar Mohamed: Big time.

Paola Mardo: That's a really eye-opening one. And not to feel like a talk show host, but we do have the bag here with us.

[PAOLA PULLS OUT THE BAG]

Ammar Mohamed: Yes. It's a great bag. I love it.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Can you talk a little bit about this? Because—

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. [HOLDING BAG] This thing is—it's got, you know, two little compartments. But I—I would wear this for a long time just, like, kind of casually anytime I was out. And it did, it helped me keep all my—all my stuff together. I had my phone in here, my wallet, my keys, any of Ryan's stuff that he would hand to me because oftentimes, like when he's going to—he might be going in to do something for work. He'll hand me his phone. He'll hand me his wallet. He'll hand me his keys. And I—

Paola Mardo: Put it in there.

Ammar Mohamed: So this was like—this kept me—like, I knew as long as I had this, I had all my stuff. And it was just—yeah, it's a sense of relief, and it's just—yeah, it's something I always keep just because of, like, the memory of it, you know?

Paola Mardo: Oh, so you've graduated from this bag. You no longer need it?

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. I mean, I use it—I use it from time to time still, you know?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. That's awesome.

Ammar Mohamed: But, but it's something I hope to always keep, you know what I'm saying? And, and maybe one day I'll pass it along to somebody who, who keeps losing IDs.

The other thing about that story I got to tell you—

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Okay.

Ammar Mohamed:—is the day before I lost his ID—I had moved to Flint for a little bit before I got the job, and I was supposed to move from—fly from Flint to L.A. on the 24th. And I show up to the airport—

Paola Mardo: Oh no.

Ammar Mohamed: Me and—my pop took me to the airport. We walk in, and I go to check my bags, and—

[AMMAR PATS HIS POCKETS]

Ammar Mohamed: Same thing. I'm looking around. I can't find my ID. And so, literally, I had to delay—

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Oh, my god.

Ammar Mohamed: I had to call Ryan and say, "Hey, man, I have to delay my trip a day because I lost my ID, and I have to go get a new one, and I have to get on a flight tomorrow at the same time." So I'm already coming in playing defense because I'm—I'm supposed to show up to work one day, and I'm calling him, saying, "Hey, I can't come until tomorrow now because I lost my ID." I show up to work on the 25th, and then I fucking lose his ID, you know what I mean? It was terrible!

Paola Mardo: He's like, "This man and his IDs, I have no idea."

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, man, and, like, I just—I was so anxious after those two days. I was so anxious.

Paola Mardo: Wow. So you technically made the same mistake twice, but it's for different IDs, so it doesn't count. Doesn't count.

Ammar Mohamed: Different IDs, different circumstances, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It doesn't count.

Paola Mardo: But you learned from both. You learned from both.

[7:50 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: For those who don't know, you said your job with Hannah Beachler was your first job in the industry. So before we get to the Ryan Coogler part of your career story, how did you actually enter the industry? Like, how did you get that job, and what does Twitter have to do with all of this?

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. So small background is that I'm born and raised in Flint, Michigan, and my parents are immigrants from Sudan, which is in East Africa. And—and they came here in the early '90s, in 1993. And so I grew up there, and I did not have—you know, I didn't know anybody that worked in this industry or in entertainment, really. And, and it had always been of interest to me, but I never had, like—you know, no pun intended, but I never had the proximity to it.

And so, you know, one of these days—I was living in Detroit at the time. I think I was like 25 years old, 24, 25 years old. And I'm scrolling on the computer one day just on Google, like in a—in a—just in a wormhole of, like, searching things. And I remember I saw Hannah's name come up in, like—I don't remember what I was looking up, but her name came up in, like, "Suggested People" or something like that on Google search.

And I had remembered her name because of the Academy Award. She was the first Black person to win her category and be nominated.

Paola Mardo: And that was for Black Panther.

Ammar Mohamed: That was for Black Panther, yes. Yes, Black Panther. And I clicked on her name. And one of the first things that came up was a Twitter link, and below that Twitter link for her Twitter account was her three most recent tweets. And one of those tweets was, "Hey, everyone, I'm coming to Detroit to do a movie in January until June." And she was like, "And I'm looking for an art department assistant to help me out."

And I'm, like, sitting in Detroit on my couch, and she's coming—and she's talking about she's coming to Detroit. So I'm like, man, I, I got to send her something.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: So I made a Twitter. I didn't even have one. I made a Twitter. I DMed her my resume, and I said, "Hey, you know, I would love the opportunity to interview." And interestingly enough, she actually told me that—that when she saw my resume, she didn't really want to interview me. And her son Dominic—shout-out to Dominic—told her that he thought my resume was interesting and that she should interview me. He's like, "He has a very diverse resume. It's not necessarily, like, entertainment, but he's done a lot of stuff," you know, like political organizations. I had worked on some music. I had worked on some—I had scored some short films and some web series. Like, it was just this, like, mix of random things, random experiences.

And Dominic liked it. He told her to interview me. And she interviewed me, and we talked for 35 or 40 minutes, and she did not mention anything about the job while we were talking. When we got to the end of the conversation, she gave me the details, and she was like, "Are you still interested?" I said, "Hell yeah!"

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: And when I hung up the phone, I got the feeling that she had already picked her person and that she kind of spoke to me as a formality because she told me she would.

Paola Mardo: Oh, so you didn't think it went well.

Ammar Mohamed: No, it's not that I didn't think it went well. I just—to me, like, a job interview is supposed to be about the job, and we spent 95 percent of it not talking about the job.

Paola Mardo: Got it.

Ammar Mohamed: So I was—like I said, I thought she was just giving me the time of day because she already told me she would interview me. And then I remember it was MLK weekend. I interviewed on a Friday, and then she's like, "I'll get back to you at the end of the holiday weekend." And she called me on—I think on that Tuesday. She's like, "You got the job," and that was it.

And I didn't—I don't really know—my assumption is that, you know, because we spent so much time doing this job with people that she probably wanted someone that she would vibe with because the job is not—you know, being a PA is not—it's a hard job for many reasons, but it's not necessarily, like, a complicated one. It's not super hard to figure out. It just requires a lot physically from you, and it requires a lot of time.

And so I think that, that was her mindset, like, "He'll figure it out, and he's cool. We vibe." And it worked. I mean, I worked with Hannah for two and a half years and, like, some of the—some of the best years of my life, yeah.

Paola Mardo: Wow. It kind of goes back to what you say about just good people.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Being around good people.

Ammar Mohamed: Big time.

Paola Mardo: Especially when you're production, you're around each other almost 24/7.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, exactly. So usually—

Paola Mardo: You want to like the people you work with.

Ammar Mohamed: You want to be around cool people. You want to be around people that are chill. You want to be around people that are, like—you know, they're not—they're not going to give you a hard time.

Paola Mardo: Mm-hmm, but that also get the job done.

Ammar Mohamed: But that also get the job done, exactly.

[12:06 - "In Proximity '90s" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Give us one more, just a surprise that we would never think of. Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: One more surprise name?

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: Can I tell a story with it?

Paola Mardo: Sure! Yes, please.

Ammar Mohamed: I—I'll give you one story, and this is one of the days on this job that I'll never forget.

Paola Mardo: You got a lot of those!

Ammar Mohamed: Oh my God, there's so many. But this one really, like, I really will never forget this. It was one of the craziest days of my life.

Paola Mardo: Go for it.

Ammar Mohamed: We were in New York City, Brooklyn, to be specific. You know, Ryan had a whole day of meetings scheduled and we're riding around—it was me, Ryan, and Ryan's brother Noah, also known as OG DAYV, rapper and musician.

Paola Mardo: Yup. Shout out!

Ammar Mohamed: Shout out to OG DAYV. And so we're rolling around New York City hitting this meeting, that meeting. And—

Paola Mardo: This is post Panther, right? I remember.

Ammar Mohamed: This is post Panther. This is June of 2023.

Paola Mardo: Okay, cool.

Ammar Mohamed: It's Post Panther.

Paola Mardo: Okay. He's feeling refreshed.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, we're feeling refreshed.

Paola Mardo: He's, like, gone through this whole thing.

Ammar Mohamed: We in New York. We got a documentary that's about to play at Tribeca. And so we in New York, we feeling good. It's summertime. And on Ryan's schedule, he had a meeting to go see Spike—Spike Lee. And so we pull up to Spike's offices, Forty Acres and a Mule offices in Brooklyn. And the crazy part is I had this double VHS copy of Malcolm X that belonged to my pop, and I took it from the house.

I found it during the pandemic, and my dad told me the story of how he got it, and I would travel around with it because I was like, if I ever meet Spike, I want him to sign this thing. And so I had it with me and I was so excited, you know what I mean? And so we go to Spike, and then he's like, "Alright." He's like, "Let's go have lunch." So we go around the corner, there's this restaurant around the corner from his office. And in my mind, I'm like, "Oh, it is just Ryan and Spike going." But he's like, "Nah, no, you guys come."

So me and DAYV, me and Noah, we joined. We at this restaurant, we eating. We are having a good time. Spike's telling stories. Ryan's got his dad on FaceTime. Everyone's having a blast, right?

Paola Mardo: Amazing. Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: Everybody's having a good time. And I'm looking at my watch because I'm trying to monitor these meeting times. You know, because what Ryan told me before the meeting was like, "Yeah, it'll be quick." He's like, "Spike is very brief. He's like, Spike, like, he tells you what he needs to tell you. And then he's gone. He's on to the next thing." So in my mind, we're going to be here for 30 minutes and then he's going to send us home. So we go to lunch and we end up being there for a while.

So now I'm looking at the watch and I'm like, oof, we're about to be late for these next few meetings.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: We walk—we go back to Spike's offices outside, and like, you know, we're about to leave, and we're like, "All right, Spike, you know, Ryan has some meetings, so we about to bounce." And he's like, "What meetings? Who got meetings?" And we're like, "Oh yeah, you know, we're going to the Upper East Side." He's like, "Nah, you ain't got no meetings." He's like, "Follow me." So we cancel the meetings for the rest of the day because what you gonna say to Spike? Nothing.

Paola Mardo: No meetings!

Ammar Mohamed: Nothing. No meetings. So now we have no meetings. So we follow Spike into his office, and he—I don't know, it's crazy to even call it an office. It's a fucking museum.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I bet.

Ammar Mohamed: It's like, I think four stories maybe, and I think it was a brownstone maybe that they turned into, like, an office that has now become literally a museum and he's taking us floor by floor, one wall at a time. He has things all over his walls. Like, you know, you got to imagine 35 years or whatever it's been for him of filmmaking, but also just being like a, you know, a cultural icon. You know, Spike rubbed shoulders with everybody, so...

And he's telling us stories about everything that's on the wall. Oh yeah, I went here and did this and, you know, Reggie Miller and Steph Curry and Francis Ford Coppola. He's telling us all these stories and he's just giving us a tour, one floor at a time wall. It was crazy. And we're just like kids in a candy store.

Paola Mardo: Wow. Wow.

Ammar Mohamed: Like, all three of us. Me, Ryan and Noah.

Paola Mardo: And he's a—and he's a professor. So I feel like he's teaching you things, and you're learning...

Ammar Mohamed: Exactly. He's teaching you along the way—

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: And it is his time. You just following. And Spike is just—

Paola Mardo: That's dope.

Ammar Mohamed: The whole time in my head I'm like, this is surreal. I don't even know how to act. You know what I mean? I'm just in the background taking pictures and, like, listening to them and trying to soak it up and it was beautiful.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: And then we left and Spike had somebody bring out—he had this big Black Panther poster that Ryan signed for him when the movie came out. He brings it out. He puts it on there and they're taking pictures with it outside.

Paola Mardo: Aw. Oh, I love that.

Ammar Mohamed: It was just beautiful, you know what I mean? And then at the end, Ryan was like, "Hey man, he has—my assistant Ammar, he has something for you to sign." And I gave him the VHS of Malcolm X.

Paola Mardo: Oh, so Ryan knew? You told Ryan?

Ammar Mohamed: Oh yeah, Ryan knew. I was—I mean, he saw me. I was traveling with it for a year at that point.

Paola Mardo: Okay, okay.

Ammar Mohamed: And so, he signed a copy for me. And I remember I went—we ended up leaving and it was a really special day, and it felt like—nobody said this directly, but it felt like you were watching, like, you know, you were watching the old guard pass the baton.

Paola Mardo: Oh my gosh. Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: You know what I mean? And Spike is still obviously—thank God he's still healthy and he's still making movies, and I hope he gets to do that as long as he wants. But

yeah, you couldn't help but, like, think that, just watching them walk together and talk, and they were so excited to be in each other's company. It was a beautiful thing to witness.

Paola Mardo: And what did you learn from it?

Ammar Mohamed: You know, I don't know that I learned—I couldn't tell you what I learned. All I can tell you is the entire time I was on cloud nine, I was just very happy to be there and very happy to watch them and listen to Spike's stories. And he finally signs this VHS for me, and I went to the hotel that night and I FaceTimed my dad. I was like, "Yo, I got this signed. I got Spike Lee to sign it!" And he's—he's, like, smiling. He's super excited about it.

And I remember after I hung up that FaceTime call, I just started sobbing. But it was like good tears, you know what I mean?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Ammar Mohamed: It was like, um—it was like tears, tears of joy, if you will. At that point, I couldn't believe, like, where I was and what I was doing and who I was spending my time around. That whole day was just—it was like a dream. And yeah, I'll never forget it. I'll never forget it. It was one of my favorite days on this job for sure.

Paola Mardo: I don't know why you're making me cry.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah, it was beautiful.

Paola Mardo: I'm, like, so inspired by that.

Ammar Mohamed: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you cry. But, it was like, yeah, I'm very glad I got to witness it. And yeah, I went—and even after that, like, I remember going on my laptop and writing about it. I just wrote everything that I could remember from that day.

Paola Mardo: Love that.

Ammar Mohamed: Living legend.

Paola Mardo: Legend. Living legend. That's an incredible story.

Ammar Mohamed: Yeah. It was great.

[18:20 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed, and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

The production team includes Brittani Brown, Isabella Miller, and Alexandria Santana.

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[VOICEOVER ENDS]