

In Proximity
Season 3 Episode 33
Michelle Khare
Final Transcript

Michelle Khare: This is the first time I'm attempting something I genuinely think is impossible. It's called The Great World Race.

[CLIP: I Ran 7 Marathons in 7 Days on 7 Continents - Michelle Khare]

Paola Mardo: So in 2025, you successfully petitioned for your YouTube channel, your show, to join the Primetime Emmy ballot for Outstanding Hosted Nonfiction Series.

Michelle Khare: How cool would it be for a content creator to go for a Primetime Emmy? Anyone who's ever won an Emmy, that's in their LinkedIn bio, okay? So I'm calling all of these foreign militaries asking, "Can I borrow your plane?" Of course, most of that is a dead end.

Paola Mardo: They're like, "Who? What? Why?"

Michelle Khare: Yes, exactly.

[0:38 - "In Proximity Theme" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today we're running seven marathons in seven days on seven continents. Okay. We're not, but I am talking to someone who did and filmed it for YouTube, Michelle Khare. Let's go.

What does it really take to push yourself to the limit? Today, I'm talking to Michelle Khare, the daredevil behind Challenge Accepted, her YouTube series where she takes on some of the world's toughest professions and wildest challenges. From recreating Tom Cruise's deadliest stunt to escaping Houdini's Water Torture Cell, Michelle has built a career on doing the impossible. With over 6 million followers and an Emmy nominated YouTube show, she's redefining what it means to challenge yourself and to build a creative business on your own terms.

On this episode, we talk about her origin story from her days as a producer at BuzzFeed, her intense prep and production process where one day can start off flying in a fighter jet and end in a ballet class, pro tips on creating content on YouTube and what actually makes people click and stay, and what she learned from running seven marathons in seven days on seven continents.

It really happened. We'll link to it below. Here's Michelle Khare.

[02:02 - "KN 9 to 5" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Welcome to In Proximity, Michelle Khare.

Michelle Khare: Thank you for having me.

Paola Mardo: Thank you for being here and making it all the way out here to our Proximity Studio. How are you? I feel like you do a lot on your show. How are you doing right now?

Michelle Khare: I will say I'm feeling a lot better than when I ran seven marathons in a row a few months ago.

Paola Mardo: Yes.

Michelle Khare: So anything is better than running a marathon in Antarctica, I've realized.

Paola Mardo: And then seven of them in a row in a week.

[LAUGHTER]

Michelle Khare: Yes.

Paola Mardo: Cool. Well, we'll get into that for sure, but before we dive in, I also really wanted to ask because after doing our deep-dive research on you for this interview, I mean, you do some of the most intense physical challenges, and they're very extreme, and they take kind of a toll on your body, I would imagine. So what do you do to relax and recover after, like, a big race or a big challenge?

Michelle Khare: Oh, that's a great question. So on Challenge Accepted, it's a show where I attempt the world's toughest stunts, professions, and lifestyles. And as you know, that can range from attempting seven marathons on all seven continents in one single week to learning how to hold my breath for multiple minutes to attempt Houdini's underwater lock escape.

Paola Mardo: That's crazy.

Michelle Khare: And so, in a given day, 24 hours of Challenge Accepted is super varied. And an example of a day at Challenge Accepted I think can really be summarized by: there was one day where in the morning I went to an airfield, I went in a fighter jet, flew around pulling like 5Gs for NASA astronaut training.

Paola Mardo: Wow. Wow.

Michelle Khare: The plane lands. I throw up in the cockpit with the glass seal still over.

Paola Mardo: Oh, my goodness.

Michelle Khare: And then I got out of the plane, drove three hours back to L.A. and had a ballet lesson.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Michelle Khare: For two separate episodes.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Michelle Khare: So every single day is totally different. Like today, I'm recording with you. I'm going to go to an event this afternoon, and then tonight for like three hours from 8:00 to 11:00, I have training for Taekwondo Nationals. So it's always changing, but as far as rest and recovery, I'm a polar person. And by that, I mean I either go 100 percent or 0 percent. So rest and recovery for me is doing absolutely nothing. I love to do nothing. I love to chill on the couch, you know, watch a few episodes of The Pitt. Also watch DTF St. Louis, both great shows. Yeah, I love to do nothing. I love to play Zelda.

Paola Mardo: Oh, that's great.

Michelle Khare: That's, that's what I do to relax.

Paola Mardo: I love how The Pitt is your, like, relaxing show because that's actually not very. But it's a great show.

[LAUGHTER]

Michelle Khare: It's a great show.

Paola Mardo: That's so crazy. So, okay, by the time this episode airs, you will have released I think most, if not all, episode of your latest video series. Do you have someone helping you figure all that out?

Michelle Khare: Shout out to Maddie, my amazing assistant, who's fantastic at helping me keep everything together. But also I started as an assistant when I came to LA. Well, actually I was an assistant's assistant's intern.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Michelle Khare: So, like, a few steps below the assistant.

Paola Mardo: So you were, like, down. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Michelle Khare: Over at DreamWorks Animation. There, I really learned the importance of attention to detail and how to manage a Google account, how to send an email. And when I started my YouTube channel, I had some experience making internet videos, but I didn't go to film school. And I found that what I lacked in technical understanding, I was able to have a leg up in producing. And I can bring a team of people together. I can organize a set. And so, when we talk about some of these bigger projects that we do now like recreating the Mission Impossible stunt where I was hanging off the side of a plane as it was taking off—

Paola Mardo: Wild.

Michelle Khare: Those same skill sets of staying organized, hitting deadlines, knowing how to make a call sheet in Excel, all of those come together still today in a way that allows me to be the best host and producer I can be, hopefully.

Paola Mardo: That's amazing. Well, let me ask about that, actually. Can you walk us through your origin story? Like, where did you grow up, and also, like, what got you into sports and media?

Michelle Khare: I'm from Shreveport, Louisiana, which is a small city in the South. So my childhood was, like, very contained. When I was in high school and, later, in college, a lot of tax incentives occurred in Louisiana to draw film productions there. And so I got to intern on some sets and just witness it happen even in our neighborhood.

Paola Mardo: That's awesome.

Michelle Khare: And, again, most of these projects were, like, low-budget, even parody movies. Because it was in Louisiana, all the vampire movies came. I think True Blood shot some stuff there, too. But it was—it was really fun to witness it happening. And what I learned through those experiences was just the vast understanding of how a set operates. So, even though I was a production assistant or an intern on the sets, I saw how camera team operated, how sound operated. And I appreciated that everything that needed to be done had a specific specialized person to do it. You know, at the beginning of my YouTube channel, I was just a team of one. I could understand all of the parts of the production process just by watching it happen. So now, on our channel, what we try to do is bring both of those worlds together: what worked really well in traditional, and how can we innovate on it and be even more collaborative in our digital environment?

Paola Mardo: That's amazing. And also, you were an athlete, right?

Michelle Khare: I sort of dabbled in a few different sports. So, in high school, I did fencing. Very random.

Paola Mardo: Wow. Wow.

Michelle Khare: In college, I did ultimate Frisbee, another strange sport.

Paola Mardo: Range, range.

Michelle Khare: And then, when I came to LA on my internship, I didn't have any friends, but I saw a bunch of people riding bikes. So I decided to just pick up cycling. And then, from there, just because I was in LA, and, again, because I had no friends, I did a lot of cycling and ended up going to Collegiate Nationals and signing a pro contract. Crazy! And that background of interdisciplinary athlete, I guess, is what I bring to Challenge Accepted now.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Michelle Khare: So now, for each episode of Challenge Accepted, I try to find the best coach in the world to teach me to do the thing we're trying to do. So, for example, right now I'm training for Taekwondo. I'm working with this amazing, amazing, legendary martial artist, Master, Grandmaster Simon Rhee, and Gus and Damian Villa. These people have the record of sending the most people to Nationals every year.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Michelle Khare: It's incredible.

Paola Mardo: That's amazing.

Michelle Khare: And, and the premise of Challenge Accepted is, like, can someone like me just sort of jump in? And if you commit fully, how crazy is the before and after? How far can you go? And so I've learned a lot from human-guinea-pigging myself, in a way. And it constantly challenges me to always be open to learning something new because we're filming most of these episodes at the same time.

Paola Mardo: How many do you do at the same time, actually? Because these take months, sometimes a whole year to shoot, right?

Michelle Khare: Right. Usually, we stack it where I have one long-term training challenge—so right now it's Taekwondo—and—or last year, it was training for the seven marathons—and then, on top of that, we're filming other challenges that may only take a day or a week to film that may or may not be physical. For example, last year, when I was training for the seven marathons

project, we had—we were shooting another project in Vienna for a week where I worked at one of the most elite hotels in Europe for a week. Incredible experience.

Paola Mardo: I think I saw a little bit of that with the—you had a little outfit.

Michelle Khare: Yeah. They wear the little bellhop hat and everything.

Paola Mardo: That's great.

Michelle Khare: But the behind-the-scenes of that is every morning I'm waking up at 4:00 a.m. to run 13 miles, shower, and then go to set.

Paola Mardo: Wow. To train for the other video?

Michelle Khare: Yes, exactly, waking up every morning, running a half marathon to train for the seven marathons, shower, turn that part of my brain off—now I'm in hotel land for the rest of the day, being a bellhop, running errands, parking Ferraris. I like doing lots of things and experimenting and meeting lots of different people, and I think it's important to always be willing to pivot and ready to go, and the show definitely trains me to do that.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. And your show has been out for—is it six years now or more?

Michelle Khare: We're on Season 8 now, I think.

Paola Mardo: Wow. See? Wow.

[LAUGHTER]

Michelle Khare: I think. Yes.

Paola Mardo: And it's like—I guess I want to ask what made you—because you had a stint—like you said, you interned at DreamWorks. I know you worked at other companies including producing at BuzzFeed.

Michelle Khare: Yes.

Paola Mardo: Can you talk about BuzzFeed? Because I feel like that may be that—that feels like a pivotal sort of moment for you, as well, as a creator and producer and host.

Michelle Khare: At the time I worked there, it was one of the fastest growing YouTube channels in the world, and it was this really cool, creative, artistic startup vibe where all of us were

learning how to do everything and figuring it out as we go. And I think what was cool about that experience was it was sort of like paid graduate school for the internet, which isn't even a graduate program you can pay to do.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Like, they paid you to be in that school.

Michelle Khare: They paid me to do it somehow.

Paola Mardo: So what did you learn in that school?

Michelle Khare: It was a real crash course in how to do everything yourself. What I saw working on film sets was you pick one thing, and you know how to do the one thing you know. When it comes to making content online, most people start as a team of one, and so were we at BuzzFeed. Hundreds of people worked there, but all of us were able to operate as a team of one, meaning we were ideating, scripting, shooting, running sound, editing all of our own projects. And it was a huge, huge lift but an incredible crash course. We would do all of this data analysis after every upload. There was a leaderboard with who had the most views. So it was a really intense environment but really trained me on how to stay on my toes and also how to self-criticize the work that you do.

Paola Mardo: What do you mean by that?

Michelle Khare: When you upload something to the internet, sometimes you don't always know why it does or doesn't do well. There, because there were so many people who would analyze each upload, we were able to figure out, oftentimes, pinpoint, "Oh, that keyword," "Oh, that topic," "Oh, it was uploaded at the right time." It was very data and scientific approach, and I needed that because it helped shape my voice as a creator, not just becoming a better storyteller but being a storyteller that knows how to greenlight something effectively.

As a creative person, I think it's a trap sometimes to fall into where you have a passion project, and passion is the only thing driving it. I think, as artists, I feel a responsibility to not only tell stories I'm passionate about but also tell stories that will hopefully impact other people. And that means the audience is actually a part of the creative process. So, when we greenlight an episode of Challenge Accepted, we want to do so with implicit qualitative or quantitative data-backed understanding that other people will appreciate, understand this perspective, share it, etc.

Paola Mardo: So, in a lot of ways, it's still sort of that, I guess, traditional way of making shows and creative work where you're thinking about the audience.

Michelle Khare: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: But you learned a more data-driven, almost analytical way of looking at it from your time at BuzzFeed and working in YouTube.

Michelle Khare: It's a delicate balance, right? You have to take into consideration both. How many times have we seen pieces of media come out that are entirely data-driven and don't feel right to the audience? So you have to balance both.

Paola Mardo: Can you give an example of maybe a video or something you made at BuzzFeed where you really saw that data-driven sort of approach work?

Michelle Khare: Gosh. I mean, there are so many examples from there. When I started my channel, one of the first projects I did is I knew the Spider-Man: Homecoming movie was coming out. And so I, from my background and understanding, thought, okay, creating content around this would be smart and timely and effective just because of the simple understanding, if a movie's coming out, people are going to be googling it. If it's googled, it's going to rise in search results.

Okay. I know Spider-Man will be very trendy. It still is! It's like the number one trailer watched this year or something. How can I create a piece of content around that moment that is my lens. This is the part where you have to bring yourself to the piece. And for me, it was this idea of we've seen, oftentimes, many shows of celebrity or comedian tries a job for a day or tries something for a day. I wanted to ask the question: what would happen if you fully commit to that thing and really go all-out doing it?

Additionally, I knew implicitly that the stunt community is often undervalued and underseen. So I thought it'd be really cool to DM Tom Holland's stunt double and see if he would make a video with me. And he was—Holland Diaz was so generous with his time. He took me to the Santa Monica Pier. He showed me how to do the movements of swinging like Spider-Man. We learned all of these stunts, and we, we filmed a project together. And that was one of the first pieces on my channel that performed well.

But I think, like, that's a very basic example of knowing generally what is timely and important and how you can ride the wave of the momentum of an exterior property, but also making sure to bring your own creative voice to something.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I love that because you said, literally, you looked at this big moment but also, like, what could you bring it—bring to it as a creator or what could you make through your own lens.

Michelle Khare: Exactly.

Paola Mardo: I think that's so important because that's why people tune into your channel, is your lens and your voice.

Michelle Khare: It has to be additive. It cannot be derivative. Art as a medium has been copied since the beginning of time.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Michelle Khare: Like, I was in Italy a couple weeks ago. And we're walking around the Vatican, and the tour guide is telling us about all this drama that happened with the sculptors when sculptors were copying each other's work. And I'm sitting here like, how is that even possible? Like, how can you copy a sculpture with your hands and a chisel? That's insane to me.

But media has been copied and stolen since the beginning of time. And what makes media continue to evolve and impact audiences is when it is additive and added-to. So I think, like, if you're a creator or an artist looking to put your own spin on something, that is where the magic lies, and that's where you create your own voice.

[18:05 - "Good Times: by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Can we talk a little bit about your creative process? So how do you decide on what to do on your show? What challenge to accept? Do you guys have brainstorm meetings or writers room? What is the sort of ideation process to execution?

Michelle Khare: Ideation is a really big part of the process of Challenge Accepted. We have a pretty antithetical model for a YouTube channel. We only release 8 to 10 episodes per year.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, I noticed that.

Michelle Khare: That's it.

Paola Mardo: It's crazy! Which is very—like, on YouTube or even just online content, they're always saying, "Be consistent. Post weekly." Sometimes people post daily.

Michelle Khare: And I would agree with that. Maybe I'm doing the wrong thing, and I accept that.

Paola Mardo: But you're getting all the millions of views, so maybe not. But—

Michelle Khare: I don't know.

Paola Mardo: But what made you guys decide to do it that way?

Michelle Khare: We have a lot of really cool creative people on our team. And I think that's step one is surrounding yourself with people who challenge your taste and share your taste. At this point, a lot of our ideas come out of these crazy brainstorms that we have. And we will come up with like 20 ideas, but where things really actually start to take shape is during the research

phase of the process. So we'll come up with a ton of ideas, and then we'll start outreaching to potential people who could make it happen.

For example, I want to see if I can survive the Oregon Trail in a covered wagon using only resources of the period. And so, okay, that means we're going to be finding wagon companies in Wyoming and emailing historians. And a lot of this process is a ton of dead ends. Sometimes we'll sit on an idea for a year or two at a time before we find the right person to unlock it. Sometimes finding the crew or the right people to pull it off, the right collaborators, is even more important than the concept itself because that helps shape the story.

For example, we also iterate on past successes. So I did a project where I learned Harry Houdini's deadliest escape, which is called the Water Torture Cell. I learned how to hold my breath underwater for three and a half minutes and escape a glass box while handcuffed upside down.

Paola Mardo: That's wild.

Michelle Khare: That project did well for us.

Paola Mardo: And that came in, like you guys were just brainstorming, thinking about Houdini? Or, like—

Michelle Khare: Okay, okay. So that project came about because people suggest ideas to us all the time. "Oh, you've done garbage collection? You should try being a magician!" Okay. And, on the surface level, the first iteration of that video could have been I go to the Magic Castle, I learn a few card tricks, and then I perform in their parlor. That's one version of the video. But when we started asking the question, "How is this uniquely ours? How is this—how could this only be done by us?" Not necessarily only, but, like, really specifically—

Paola Mardo: Like your lens.

Michelle Khare:—with the additive component to it. We became fixated on Houdini's Water Torture Cell because it's a physical performance, it's extremely riveting to watch, and it's interdisciplinary. One of my favorite performers is David Blaine, and what I love about him is everything feels so visceral. And so we felt like one version of this could be making a little magic show and coming up with some jokes and performing them. But could we actually try to do the thing that only like 10 people in the world have done before? Maybe more than that have attempted. I don't know. And that, for us, was the Water Torture Cell. So leaning into specificity was really helpful for us.

And once that project did well, we started thinking about, wait, who are other incredible, iconic performers. Okay, well, Tom Cruise is one of the most iconic performers in history, and he has performed some insane stunts. So I was at an event with some other creators, and we were brainstorming, and someone just threw out, "You should just do Tom Cruise's deadliest stunt. You did Houdini's. You should do Tom Cruise's!"

And when you look up what that is, it's absolutely insane. It's hanging off the side of a military aircraft as it's taking off. So what does that mean? To perform the stunt, for it to look picture accurate, it requires a military aircraft. So it means—the, the aircraft they used in the source material was an A400M, which there are only like 10 of in the world, and they're all owned by foreign militaries. So I'm calling all of these foreign militaries asking, "Can I borrow your plane?"

Paola Mardo: Right.

Michelle Khare: Of course, most of that is a dead end.

Paola Mardo: They're like, "Who? What? Why?"

Michelle Khare: Yes, exactly. And I just got to this point where I just posted a tweet of the photo of, of Tom's performance. And I said, "Hey, does anyone have access to this plane?" I probably terrified everybody I know by posting something like that, but it actually led us down this insane path that led us to Red Bull. And Red Bull knew someone who knew someone who owned a very similar aircraft. And collaborating with Red Bull on that project was incredible because we became the first team in the world, to my knowledge, to ever recreate that stunt, following in the footsteps of Tom and his incredible stunt team.

I think I'm excited about that because when I started my channel, I could have never imagined that we would be doing stuff like this on YouTube.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Yeah.

Michelle Khare: I think that it's becoming more commonplace for people to expect greatness from independent online creators, but certainly that wasn't the expectation, understanding, or social norm when I started.

Paola Mardo: Right. When you were trying to recreate the stunt, did you ever call his stunt people just like you called, you know, the Spider-Man stunt performer?

Michelle Khare: Well, for that, we were more fixated on finding the plane first.

Paola Mardo: Got it.

Michelle Khare: So usually we start with what is the most mission critical to executing a vision. For the Oregon Trail video, we have to have a covered wagon. We're going to find that first. For the Houdini performance, we have to have a Water Torture Cell. Okay, we need to find a fabricator and engineering team who can help us pull that off. So sometimes it's less about finding a coach or people to physically put it together. It's whatever's the most important component of the idea itself.

Paola Mardo: Yeah, yeah. Production logistics and what makes it picture-ready.

Michelle Khare: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Going back to the idea of, like, your production process, so ideate, brainstorm, then there's the production, coordination, logistics. And then, at what point do you guys actually go into production and do the thing?

Michelle Khare: That research phase I'm telling you about, like calling people, "How can we find the plane? How can—how can we pull this off?" That lasts for a long time because we do not want to start filming a frame of the video, putting any meaningful spend resources behind it, unless we know there's something here. And sometimes we film the process as it's happening. Like, we filmed me calling all of the militaries because we knew it would be a fun part of the story should it happen, but I'm not going to start training for something unless we feel like pieces are put in place. So once we have the right people or resources, I suppose, to make it possible, we go into pre-production, which depending on the project is a ton of logistics, insurance policies, pulling together a crew. Our plane stunt, for example, I think 40 to 50 people touched that project and were on set.

Paola Mardo: Oh, wow.

Michelle Khare: And once it's filmed, we have a lengthy post-production process. So, for the seven marathons project, for example, that has been a four-month post-production process.

Paola Mardo: Okay. Well, but it was seven months, right, of shooting or training, at least?

Michelle Khare: So, for running seven marathons on all seven continents in one week, it was seven months of training, seven days of shooting while we're flying all around the globe, and then four—maybe a little over four months of post-production. But what's cool about this project is we've never done this before. It's going to be three episodes. There's just so much story to cover not just about myself but the people you meet when you do something like this—I know a lot of people think I'm crazy for doing it. What if I told you there are 59 other people who did this? 59 other people who saw the Instagram ad or whatever it was and said, "Bet. That's how I'm going to spend a week of my PTO."

Paola Mardo: Right.

Michelle Khare: "I'm going to elect to do this. Not for a YouTube video but for myself, for a charity, whatever it is." This is the story of multiple people and what drove them to do something this insane.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I, I think that's what I found so interesting because when I learned about this video, I was like, okay, wow, she's doing it—seven days, seven continents, seven

marathons. That's already huge. And then it clicked, and then it was like, oh, there's a whole group of people. It's an actual race that people do, and you guys are being flown, like, to different parts of the world. I mean, it's a whole event, and I love the stories about the different folks, as well. How do you create, like, that hook?

Michelle Khare: It's making sure that before you pursue a big project, that if you're at a party with friends and someone says, "Hey, what are you working on?" and you can say one sentence and their jaw drops, that's how I know, "Okay, there's something here." And when I started sharing with people, "I have this idea to run seven marathons on all seven continents in one week," everybody who you say that to has a visceral reaction. And they immediately start following up with questions, "Wait, how are you going to do that? Is that even physically possible? Is this dangerous? You're going to—wait, are you actually going to go to Antarctica?"

And I find like, okay, this has legs because people have questions. That is the exact same psychology of the title and thumbnail on YouTube. So a title and thumbnail should pique interest and make the viewer ask a question that they can only find the answer to by clicking through. Once you click into the video, I want the viewer to know that they are going to—you, you're—this is real, and you're about to see what you clicked on. This is not clickbait. So we have to show that in the opening 30 seconds. So we're very clear about — we're showing the different contents, we're showing, yes, we're going to Antarctica, this is going to be crazy, buckle up.

But what I think a really, really effective hook does is it then opens a new question that the audience wants an answer to. And the whole edit should continue to do that every two to three minutes, opening different loops for the audience to continue to want to find answers to the question.

Paola Mardo: Wow. So you're saying, in this series—

Michelle Khare: So, in this project, we have multiple natural arcs episodically, and we found that, in fact, if we were to put it all in one piece, it would be a disservice because we would have to cut things out that I felt were important to the details of, of the adventure. And so we're trying something new. It's an experiment. It always is an experiment. We're doing three parts, releasing April 18th and then the two weekends after. I hope people like it.

[30:10 - "Good Times: by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: So, in 2025, you successfully petitioned for your YouTube channel, your show, to join the Primetime Emmy ballot for Outstanding Hosted Nonfiction Series. Why did you want to do that and—yeah, why did you find that that was important to do?

Michelle Khare: I had a thought a few years ago that it would be really cool for a YouTube channel to win an Emmy. And what I didn't realize at the time is that it's actually been done before. Shout out Bernie Su and Hank Green, who won for Lizzie Bennett Diaries and a few other projects that Bernie has worked on.

And I started getting into the weeds of this. I started thinking, okay, well, YouTube is, as of last year and this year, the number one streaming platform on television. And also just that reaction from people of, "Is that even possible?" interested me. There is a reason that these award shows still matter. They attract crew who want to work on award-winning projects to make the show better. They attract advertisers and bigger opportunities because anyone who's ever won an Emmy, that's in their LinkedIn bio, okay? It's important for a reason. And it also attracts a new audience to support the show.

So from, you know, however you look at it—some people might say you don't need an award to have a successful business on YouTube or to be a successful content creator. And I think I'm more excited about the possibility of how cool would it be for a content creator to go for a Primetime Emmy. As someone who felt so many barriers to entry trying to get into the traditional world, I want to see a future where young artists and young content creators can feel empowered to come up with ideas of their own and go for something as big and bold as an Emmy without having to navigate obstacles that are often against us in ways that we can't change about ourselves. And so that, that's my current mission, is to try and do it.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. In a lot of ways—I mean, you mentioned Hank Green and Bernie Su. I mean, that's, like, an earlier wave of YouTube. You're in this new, sort of current wave that's happening. And—but also, YouTube's only been around for 21 years. So it's still so early in what this platform is, and it's—I think the lines between streaming, YouTube, television, it's all blurring. Even, like, what is a podcast anymore?

Michelle Khare: Whether people want to admit it or not, we care about these things. They matter to us. We understand when you hear the word Emmy or Oscar, that means something still. And that's why it matters to me to try and go after something as big as that.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Would you want your show—so you own your show, right? You own the channel. You own the show.

Michelle Khare: I do.

Paola Mardo: Would you want it to end up on, like, a traditional network ever at some point?

Michelle Khare: You know, Challenge Accepted is a show that I don't think ever would have gotten greenlit by a network because of how insane the production premise is. I don't personally know of any other show where you have one episode take a year to make, and the other take three months to make, and another take two weeks to make.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Michelle Khare: And, honestly, a lot of the conversations we have with networks are, "We love Challenge Accepted, but can you shoot 12 episodes in 12 weeks?" To that, I say, "Well, did you not watch the episodes?" Because literally, I'm going to be training Taekwondo for six months.

We can't do that in a week. And they're like, "Yeah, but we love that, but, like, can you do it in a week?"

And I'm like, that is unfortunate because you're taking away the exact thing that made the show so difficult to make and what made it special. And once you take it away, it could be anybody hosting it. And, in fact, there are tens of shows of people learning something in a week. To me, collaborating with a network would be so exciting to do something even bigger. And I think what's been antithetical about those conversations is like, well, if we're doing things in a week, and it's pared down, and it's a mini Challenge Accepted, what's actually the benefit? I can still do—I can make a second channel and do this myself.

And so what we're seeing is independent artists and content creators are becoming more, more independent and powerful in these conversations because I can do it myself. In fact, like, that is—how I started my channel was because I felt so many doors shut in front of me. It wasn't, "I can do this myself." It's, "I have to do this myself." But that became, "I can do this myself." And that empowerment is unfortunately, I think, what's working against some studios in these conversations now, is there has to be something brought to the table that is something we can't do on YouTube.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Michelle Khare: And many creators, not necessarily me, but some creators have—already have huge audiences. They already have massive revenue, business model. They have a full team. They own a production company. They have everything end-to-end from ideation to distribution. So, when a studio comes in or a network comes in to have a conversation, how are we elevating that? And those conversations should become more and more difficult as independence and autonomy is rising. But I would love to collaborate with a network on a reality competition show. I think that would be really fun.

Paola Mardo: That sounds super fun.

Michelle Khare: So I'm putting that out there.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Okay. You heard it here first! Yeah, that's so interesting. I mean, everyone's talking about the creator economy and how it's sort of really, really exploded in the last several years, and traditional networks are trying to figure their place in this new space. Can I ask about your business model then?

Michelle Khare: Yeah!

Paola Mardo: Because you just said you can do it alone. You have the resources. You have the team. How does it work? How do you finance even, like, the seven continents, seven

marathons, seven days episode? Like, I think you've said an episode can cost anywhere from 10-30k. Was that the same for that series or more? Whatever you're willing to share, of course.

Michelle Khare: I'll say it's much bigger than that now, depending on the premise. But as far as a business model, it's been really cool because we have remained independent and 100 percent owners of everything since the beginning, which is important to me, to have control over the IP and control over the story. The more control that we have as creators of the story, the more honest and clear and audience-forward the story will be.

As far as how it works, many creators have multiple revenue streams starting with, on YouTube, there's AdSense, so in the way actors get—or crew members get residuals from working on a TV show that is shown on a platform where there are ads, we receive residuals from the ads that play on YouTube. We also have a merch line, a fitness app, and brand endorsements. We also work with longer-term collaborators, like Red Bull has been the coolest collaborator to work with. They're amazing and have really helped us achieve some of these massive, massive projects like the plane stunt, like the Mission Impossible stunt, like running seven marathons on all seven continents. These are things that I couldn't have even dreamed of doing on my channel now that we get to do with Red Bull.

And we also work with Adobe and a few other, like, longer-term partnerships. But I love those opportunities because we get to more deeply understand the people at the companies and collaborate on building something together. We also syndicate our library on Samsung TV Plus. I also do, like, hosting on other stuff that isn't my channel, and I love doing that. So I'm hosting some episodes for Disney's Movie Surfers right now—

Paola Mardo: Cool.

Michelle Khare:—which is a reboot of the Disney Channel mini show that I loved watching in the early 2000s. So that's been really, really fun. And I think what I'm most excited about right now—like, my passions and focuses are, number one, making the best show I possibly can with Challenge Accepted, and number two, just living as many milestone memories as I can through any opportunity that comes my way. Like, I am just so genuinely overjoyed to get to wake up and, and do something creative every day.

When you upload something online, you effectively become a company of one even if you don't start profiting or making revenue off of it immediately. But you're the team of one behind the creative vision of what you're doing. It's special. It's a privilege to make something creative. It's a joy when other people see it and it gets views or, or shared. But it's the greatest feeling in the world when people actually like it and feel impacted from it. And so I, I am constantly chasing after that. I'm actually not an adrenaline junkie. I am chasing that feeling.

Paola Mardo: Wait, what? Wow!

[LAUGHTER]

Michelle Khare: No. Yeah. I'm probably the most anxious daredevil to exist, but I am always chasing that feeling of, like, oh, we made a difference here.

Paola Mardo: So I presume you read the comments?

Michelle Khare: Yeah, of course I read the comments, unfortunately. Leave nice ones under this.

Paola Mardo: Yes, please do. So if you were—I love just everything that you said about that because, you know, the word "creator" can get a bad reputation sometimes. I think not so much anymore but, like, maybe when you started, maybe there was some kind of assumption about it or—

Michelle Khare: Right, the connotation of "influencer" or "content creator." Who do you imagine when you hear that word? What is the avatar of that person? And what's interesting is when I hear the word "actor," I don't think of a specific stereotype or person, or if I see an actor, a specific person has done something crazy in the tabloids, I don't write that off as actors as a whole or directors as a whole. That whole community of people is bad because one person did something wrong. I think of creator, content creator, as a job type. It is an economy. It is a profession, and as such, there are many different types of people and creative people who do it.

Paola Mardo: I love that. If you were to start your channel today, like now, in this landscape, how would you do it?

Michelle Khare: So, when I started my channel, vertical content as we know it, as far as TikTok, YouTube Shorts, Instagram Reels, was not a thing. It was all long form or Vine.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Oh, my gosh, yes!

Michelle Khare: It's very polar opposite.

Paola Mardo: Shout out Vine.

Michelle Khare: Shout out Vine, rest in peace Vine.

Paola Mardo: Yes.

Michelle Khare: I think, if I were to start now, I would have a completely different approach that what I did. And—

Paola Mardo: Would you start on YouTube?

Michelle Khare: I would start on—I would start on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram with vertical content. And what I think is cool about vertical content—and I'm not the best at it—is you can experiment more. The stakes are a bit lower than a long-form video, I think, at this point because you can upload something that's one minute and test it out, test out an idea.

So, if I were a brand new content creator, I would start experimenting on shorts. I would start by looking at creators whose content I enjoy and really focusing in on what we were talking about earlier, is: how am I going to take this content and be additive to it?

Paola Mardo: I love that. Great advice. We're taking notes here. We really are. Well, I want to end with this. So, like I mentioned, we watched the first episode that we have currently with us of your series. And, like I said, I was hooked in the first 30 seconds, and every two, three minutes, I'm like, "Man! What's going to happen next? Oh, my god, new thing, new challenge!" But I will say, in that first 30, 40 seconds, you, you—there's a clip of you. I think you're on a panel or something, and you—because you started telling people about this, right? You don't normally share your challenges until they're done.

Michelle Khare: Correct.

Paola Mardo: But for this one, you were talking about it openly for better or worse, right? You got a lot of different kinds of feedback.

Michelle Khare: I did.

Paola Mardo: But there's a clip there where you said, "Can I do that, and what type of person would I be on the other side of this?" So you're here right now, so you did do it. Shout out. But what type of person are you now?

Michelle Khare: What I learned the most from running seven marathons in a row on all the continents was really one thing. I have so much more to give. Every time I really felt I was at my complete maximum edge, that community of people pushed me to do something I truly did not believe I could do physically, mentally, emotionally. And so, when I came back from that experience having completed it, it really made me reflect on: what am I leaving on the floor? Where am I not giving my all?

And I say that with a caveat because I think that can be interpreted as, like, pushing yourself to your absolute limit. It can be interpreted as burning yourself out. It can be interpreted as, you know, what capitalism pushes on us is, like, work, work, work. That's not what I'm saying. I was not appreciating in the way I do now every moment of life. And that can even be in the soft moments of truly loving and appreciating this moment of rest when I'm on the couch watching The Pitt. How am I not living and loving every hour of every day in the best way I can? When I step onto the mat to do Taekwondo, am I going to be annoyed about all the emails I had to send and bring that into the session? Or am I going to choose to be present and be grateful? I have

legs that allow me to do this. I have the ability to do this. I get to do this. I drove myself to this workout class. That is a privilege.

That was an important reflection for me, very specifically, in that moment, of: how many times have I given up on myself even when tens of people around me believe in me ten times more than me. Something I believe deeply is no one is going to care about your dream more than you. Maybe your mom.

Paola Mardo: Yep.

Michelle Khare: That's it. But if you do not believe in your dream, how do you expect anyone else to rally around you? And there were definitely aspects of my life where other people were rallying for me more than me, and I was not giving my all.

[46:00 - "Prox Recs Theme" by Ken Nana and Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: I just want to segue to our very, very last segment.

Michelle Khare: Okay.

Paola Mardo: So we call this Prox Recs.

Michelle Khare: Yes!

Paola Mardo: It's where our guests recommend something for the audience. Usually, it's something to do with what you do as a creator, but it could also be just anything that gets you through your work or your day. So, yeah, it could be a movie, a book, a song, a poem, anything that kind of inspires you in what you do and that you'd share with our audience. So, Michelle, what would be your Prox Rec?

Michelle Khare: My Prox Rec—the first thing that comes to mind for me is a book called Radical Candor by Kim Scott. Have you read it?

Paola Mardo: Oh, yes.

Michelle Khare: Okay!

Paola Mardo: I have that at home. Hell yes. I love it. It's so good.

Michelle Khare: It's amazing. So Radical Candor is a book, a premise, a philosophy of how to give critical feedback to people that you collaborate with. I think that understanding and learning this has been most helpful for me as a leader, as a woman in business, but I recommend it to

anyone because if you are a creative person and you want to go far, you will have to collaborate with other people, other brands, agencies, managers, whatever it is, and you will have to give and receive critical feedback no matter what you want to do. And I wish this was something they taught in school because I think it's one of the most necessary skill sets to have in partnerships, relationships, friendships. And that was most helpful to me as someone who suddenly became an entrepreneur and collaborating with people who were my friends and now coworkers, navigating that. And it's definitely a lot of skills and tactics I wish I had learned from the beginning. It's about how to care personally but challenge directly.

Paola Mardo: Yes. You're making me want to reread this right now. So thank you for that rec. Appreciate it. And thanks for being In Proximity, Michelle.

Michelle Khare: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me.

[48:18 - In Proximity Theme Music 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 is by Ludwig Göransson.

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

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

Our editors are Patrick Epino, Ken Nana, and Ben Caloza

The production team includes Celine Mendiola, Joy Woo, and Alexandria Santana.

Follow us on social media @proximitymedia.

For transcripts and more information, head to proximitymedia.com.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]