

## Women in Business and Technology

Transcript of Episode 018 - Tackling maker spaces and hackathons with Xyla Foxlin

Featuring: Kate Sommer, Xyla Foxlin

Summary: Colleen and Sonia reflect on an amazing Women's History Month and International Women's Day activities. Then, Colleen chats with Kate Sommer, the Local LEVO Seattle leader and community manager about their monthly meetups. Sonia interviews Xyla Foxlin, the founder and CEO of Parihug and the host and producer of Beauty and the Bolt. Our hosts wrap up the show with a discussion about inclusion riders and NPR's coverage of Frances McDormand's Oscar acceptance speech.

Find audio and more information at [Microsoft.com/WIBT](https://Microsoft.com/WIBT)

(Opening music.)

**VOICEOVER:** One of my big passions is STEM education and figuring out how on earth we can inspire the next generation of people to go into STEM, because I think right now, it's so exclusive to a certain type of person, except the field itself isn't, so how can we bridge that gap and catch these kids when they're younger?

**SONIA DARA:** Microsoft Build is our ultimate annual developer event, where the most innovative minds in tech meet to get inspired, create tomorrow, and code the future.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** The conference will take place from May 7th through the 9th at the Washington State Convention Center in Seattle, Washington.

**SONIA DARA:** Programming will focus on artificial intelligence, machine learning, mixed reality, cloud, data, and other emerging concepts.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** For more information about the event, or to register, head to [microsoft.com/build](https://microsoft.com/build).

(Music.)

**VOICEOVER:** You are listening to the *Women in Business and Technology* podcast from Microsoft.

In each episode, you will hear from women in amazing technology and business roles, as well as male allies who are helping make the industries more inclusive, and bringing you tips on how to build a successful career in a supportive community.

Welcome to *Women in Business and Technology*.

(Music.)

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Welcome to Episode 18 of *Women in Business and Technology*. I'm Colleen O'Brien.

**SONIA DARA:** And I'm Sonia Dara.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** We're kicking off this episode with a conversation that I had with Kate Sommer, the leader and community manager for Local Levo here in Seattle.

The broader organization, Levo, arms community members with the tools to develop their talents, build connections, and stay inspired.

**SONIA DARA:** And then we'll jump into an interview I had with Xyla Foxlin, the CEO and founder of Parihug, and she's basically an all-around rock star. I can't wait to tell you more about all of her projects around women in tech.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Finally, we'll wrap things up in our *Cutting Edge* segment with a discussion about inclusion riders -- provisions in actors' contracts that mandate diverse casting and production staffing.

**SONIA DARA:** But before we jump in, we would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge that March and Women's History Month is still in full effect. We've been honoring the month here at Microsoft with amazing guests. Bloomberg Technology anchor Emily Chang came to campus to discuss her new book, *Brotopia*. Joanna Coles, the chief content officer at Hearst Magazines stopped by campus for a fireside chat about her career navigation and relationships in the digital age. And, finally, the legendary Jane Goodall stopped by to discuss some innovative approaches to conservation.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Wow. It has been such a busy month.

**SONIA DARA:** Yeah. (Laughter.) Agree 100 percent. It's been a total whirlwind, but absolutely inspiring.

Did you do anything outside of work hours to celebrate Women's History Month?

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** First of all, I am never not celebrating women and our histories. (Laughter.) But one event in particular that I attended was Be Bold Seattle, which took place on International Women's Day, March 8th, and there I heard from Jonathan Sposato, who, of course, was our Episode 17 guest, as well as Amy Nelson, the founder and CEO of The Riveter, that female-forward, co-working space headquartered here in Seattle.

I also heard from Sophia A. Nelson, who's the author of *The Woman Code*, and two amazing Microsoft employees, MJ DePalma and Michael Tenney, who so bravely shared their personal story of allyship.

**SONIA DARA:** So what were the big take-aways from Be Bold?

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** So as we discussed on our bonus episode on March 8th, the global theme for International Women's Day was "press for progress." And while I personally am always trying to get down to brass tacks on the gender equity to-do list, it was really powerful for me to sort of take a step back and be in the audience with an amazingly supportive community of women I've come to know at this company, and you know, really celebrate the thought leaders who are doing hard work in this space. To take a step back and celebrate the inroads that we're making in this greater quest for gender equity.

(Music.)

**VOICEOVER:** Community Connect, get involved and stay connected.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I am excited to welcome to the studio today Kate Sommer. Kate, welcome.

**KATE SOMMER:** Thank you so much for having me.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah, thanks for being here. Can you describe to me your involvement with Levo League?

**KATE SOMMER:** Absolutely. Levo League is an online and offline collection of women, a group, a network. And I am one of the offline members, we call it "Levo Local." And the broader organization is just "Levo." And it comes from the Latin term "elevate."

And so our whole mission is really to elevate your career, arm you with the tools to develop your talent, to build connection, and to stay inspired as you grow and develop, and really to boil it down, we're just really excited about people living a life they're passionate about. And our whole mission, and my involvement as the leader of Local Levo for Seattle is to just build that kind of offline community where people can put their phones away, come and connect, and learn from different people in our community.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** So Levo League is this overarching, broader umbrella organization?

**KATE SOMMER:** Yes.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And Local Levo is community-based in person?

**KATE SOMMER:** Yes.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Okay.

**KATE SOMMER:** That's exactly right. So I should have checked how many chapters we have now. We're both national and international. And I kind of lose track with how many chapters. They do such a great job of opening and expanding, but all the major cities in the United States have a Local Levo chapter. And they vary in size and number of leaders.

I have a co-leader who's amazing, and what we do is -- so Levo Online is really a lot of just articles. Think about it as sort of LinkedIn for -- directly targeted at millennial women.

The real articles about how to negotiate that raise, or how to quit the job once you've just started it and realize it's not a fit for you, or how to figure out how to really bring passion into your everyday work. It's not something that we learned growing up.

So Levo Online is really that repository of articles. There's lots of different abilities that you can have to make comments connect online.

What we really saw as an organization is there is such a huge need for people to go offline, to meet up in person, to physically look across the table and see someone, to hear from people in your community and learn, and just to make connections. For millennials, it can be -- we're very outgoing, but it can be very hard for us to find those deep connections, and also those mentorships.

So what we do in the offline Levo Seattle group is we really orchestrate opportunities for women to come together, build connection, learn from each other, and really develop that community that we hear is so important to all of us.

**SONIA DARA:** And do those in-person community gatherings, are they really informal networking events, or do you have any orchestrated programming to coincide?

**KATE SOMMER:** They vary depending on what month it is and if people are on vacation. But we have a consistency to them. Every second Tuesday, we meet up, and we're still defining where our location is. Last year, we met at The Riveter, and we're hoping that we can go back and have our meetings there. But it's pretty informal.

We have a couple bottles of wine, some sparkling water and popcorn and just sit and talk, really. And we'll have a topic that we anchor around. Sometimes that means we bring in a guest speaker. We've got an amazing executive coach that works out of The Riveter named Jenn Hope, she's going to come and do a mindfulness course for us this quarter. And I'm going to be teaching discover your passion, set your intention. It's kind of a goal-setting for the year at our meeting in a couple of weeks.

So it really depends -- sometimes we'll do an article club. None of us have time to read books, so we'll have an article that's one page. You can literally read it as you're parking your car or on the bus on the way to the event. And we try to keep them informal.

It's always free admission. We really just want to make sure that women are setting aside the time for themselves to build that community and develop the tools and the skills that they need to elevate their career. So they're pretty informal.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Why are communities like Local Levo important?

**KATE SOMMER:** It is immensely important that as we have this digital online connection, everybody's connected. We can lose sight of what it really means to have physical connection and connect with another human being. And I personally and professionally am so passionate about people building a life that they're proud of, that they're excited about.

In my career and in my offline time through writing and doing things like this, building a life on purpose is really what my mission is. And it's so important to have these communities. And there's a lot of them. There isn't one right or wrong. There's Lean In, there's a bunch of executive women connection opportunities, there's groups like The Riveter and podcasts like this that you can listen to.

But Levo, to me, is so important because we're able to have that offline connection and really just meet up and have the physical connection and physically setting aside time for you to learn.

The second thing I really enjoy about it that a lot of groups do very well is it's great to say, "Oh, you should be passionate about your career, you should do something that really lights you up." But what is that? What does that mean? How do you find that? How do you discover what your passion is? And sometimes you're able to make that career.

Sometimes, it's really your opportunity to feel fulfilled in your time outside of work. So what are those tools to help you get to that point? That's something I'm passionate about, and we really try to have in that community and in other communities, I've seen this as well. It's that connection, and it's having the tools to get you to that perfect life. It's not the motivational poster that says, "You can do anything," it's saying, "And here's how you're going to do it."

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** This podcast has very much felt like that tool for me. You know, we do a lot of proactive sourcing of programming that we want to feature, guests that we want to feature on the show. But what's been most special for me is people raising their hands and saying, "I would like to be on the show," or, "You should investigate this great organization."

**KATE SOMMER:** Awesome.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah, it's been like a lightning rod for me to understand more of these types of communities that are connecting on the ground, online, et cetera.

**KATE SOMMER:** On that note, it's so important for all of these communities to follow this overarching theme of, "Let's connect together. Let's partner together." There isn't one right or wrong, there isn't only one podcast. They're your opportunity to so many people. It's so important for us to come together as communities and we each have our own little expression, but that's so great that there are things like this that are happening.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** How can our listeners get involved with Local Levo Seattle or a parallel chapter?

**KATE SOMMER:** So the best way to do that nationally is check out Levo.com. Again, it's free to sign up, there's no requirement to set up a profile. If you want to be part of the community and read a lot of the articles and comment, you'll have to create a profile.

They have their own kind of version of a profile tool similar to LinkedIn, little bit different, but that's the best way to kind of figure out about nationally all the different chapters that we have, and locally, the best way to connect with the Local Levo Seattle group is we have a Facebook group where we connect members to job opportunities, we post a couple times a week we're posting articles that we're reading, we're posting podcasts we're listening to, we're really trying to make a repository of those tools. And also that's where we post all of our events, it's where we really do the majority of our online community. And that's [facebook.com/groups/locallevoatlanta](https://www.facebook.com/groups/locallevoatlanta).

And if you type in "locallevoatlanta" in the search bar on Facebook, you should be able to find us, too.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Excellent. I get my daily newsletter from Levo League.

**KATE SOMMER:** I love it!

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** And I'm really excited to connect in person at your next Local Levo event.

**KATE SOMMER:** I can't wait to see you there. It'll be this month, the second Tuesday, and check out that Facebook group. We'll have all of the details, our topic, and the location and everything up there.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Excellent. Kate, thank you so much for joining us in the studio today.

**KATE SOMMER:** Thank you so much for having me.

(Music.)

**VOICEOVER:** And now, let's get on with the interview.

(Music.)

**SONIA DARA:** Please welcome to the show the CEO and founder of Parihug, Xyla Foxlin. Xyla, welcome to the show.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Thank you so much for having me, I really appreciate it.

**SONIA DARA:** Can you please tell our listeners a little bit more about your company, Parihug?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Parihug makes Internet-connected stuff animals. So you hug loved ones from anywhere in the world. So when one Pari is hugged, its Pari-pal gently vibrates out that hug in real time, and vice versa. So family members can connect, no matter how far they are in the world. And that's incredibly important for kids, especially, because when you tell a child, like a five-year-old that you love them, that doesn't really mean a whole lot to them. They interpret emotions and love through physical touch. So this is a way of adding physical touch back into the way we're communicating over the Internet.

**SONIA DARA:** So what inspired you to create that product?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** It's funny. I was actually in a long-distance relationship for a long time. And there was two parts of that that really had me thinking about this, and one was that, obviously, I was far away from my partner and I missed them and I really wanted a way to kind of get reassurance at the end of a long day that, you know, things would be okay.

The other one was that this particular guy was from a military family. So I could almost see the way his parents always being gone as a kid was affecting our relationship. And that was really interesting to me.

So I did some research on it, and I ended up deciding that, you know, I went into engineering so I could solve problems. So why am I not solving this one?

**SONIA DARA:** Looks like you launched Parihug at the Consumer Electronics Show, or CES, in 2015. It's an event that generates a ton of product news, I've been there myself, and it's crazy. Everything and everyone is there.

So what was your strategy behind that launch decision?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** So I was a sophomore at college at the time. And my university, Case Western, was running a competition where you could present a project or a product at

homecoming, and alumni would vote and then the top two companies would get an all-paid trip to CES.

**SONIA DARA:** That's awesome.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** And I had just wrapped up this hackathon where I built Baymax Buddies (ph.), a pair of stuffed animals that let you hug people from anywhere in the world. And we were kind of thinking about if we should take it further.

So my co-founder and I decided we were going to enter the competition. If we won, we'd launch the product and we'd do a startup, and if we didn't, then we would just leave it be, and that would kind of be our deciding factor.

So we went to this competition and we came in third by one vote.

**SONIA DARA:** Oh, wow, that's awesome.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** And it was one of those ones where we weren't expecting to lose. We kind of scoped out the competition and then, like, you know, maybe this is a product that people really want, and maybe this is something that has a future.

So after the loss, it was like -- it's almost like you know how you decide something when you flip a coin? And right before it lands, you know what you want.

**SONIA DARA:** Yeah. You've already kind of made up your mind and --

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Exactly. Exactly. We missed out, and it was like we didn't realize how much we wanted it until we lost.

So the next day, I walked into our entrepreneurship center. And I was, like, hey, you should give me a booth at CES anyway. And they were, like, "No, you lost, why would we do that?"

And I basically did that all week until they said, "Fine, you can have a booth at CES."

So we went to CES. We had a \$1,000 grant. We didn't get any of the funding that they were offering, we just got the booth. But we had a \$1,000 grant from this hackathon, and we made it work.

But what was really interesting is that we showed up knowing nothing, having nothing. We had a couple working-ish prototypes that were, like, "zombified" Walmart teddy bears that I had bought. (Laughter.)

And our booth was homemade. It was like card stock and just off-the-shelf shelves. But we generated a lot of interest. I think seeing a couple teenage girls with teddy bears at CES is definitely kind of a draw for curiosity, but the other one was that we were



catching people when they felt the most guilty. It was -- they were four days into a long business trip, it's right after the holidays, they really miss their kids and they really miss their families. And the response was incredible. And that's when we knew we really were going to turn it into a company.

**SONIA DARA:** You mentioned Baymax earlier, is that in reference to *Big Hero 6* Baymax?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** It is.

**SONIA DARA:** Yes! Love that movie.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** I know! Our very first prototype was Baymax Buddies, and it was on the way to this hackathon. I was carpooling with a bunch of guys I didn't really know. And it's, like, "Hey, does anyone mind if we stop at Target? I need to pick some stuff up for my project."

And they were, like, "Absolutely." So we stopped at Target, and it was hysterical because we're checking out, it's five college students, it's four college boys and they all have arms full of junk food, and then there's me with two stuff Baymax toys that I had found in the toy aisle. And those would turn into the product.

**SONIA DARA:** Okay, you didn't get the funding originally from school, but it was actually funded via Kickstarter, right, a crowdfunding platform. But you've since brought on some additional investment. Do you mind sharing a little bit about what your funding and debt philanthropy is as an entrepreneur?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Yeah. I think everyone's situation is very different. So our case, I was very lucky in that I could play the student card. And when you're a student, there are countless business plan competitions and entrepreneurship competitions and engineering competitions. And we basically entered every single one in the Midwest, and placed in all of them. And that was what bootstrapped us through pretty much the first year of the company.

It was going to these competitions and it was -- you know, I'd jump on a 3:00 a.m. Greyhound and go out to Pittsburgh and then pitch it in the morning, and then jump on the next sketchy Greyhound to somewhere else, pitch there and present.

And that, I found, was the best for us. It's not necessarily the best way for everybody, but if you're a student, there's a tremendous amount of opportunity there.

So we didn't have to take on a lot of, like, equity investment until much later.

And so we raised probably close to \$75,000 by just going to these competitions.

**SONIA DARA:** Wow, that's awesome.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Then we took on some additional investment right before our Kickstarter, and then we launched our Kickstarter and we actually have the taken any money since then.

**SONIA DARA:** Do you mind telling us a little bit more about your upbringing? Like, did you have many entrepreneurial or esteemed role models that might have inspired you to where you are now?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** I think the biggest one is this really bizarre juxtaposition between my mom and my aunt. So my mom is a designer and she's an artist and she's very put together and cares a lot about fashion and is very feminine. Whereas my aunt is -- this would be my dad's sister, I don't think she's ever worn makeup in her life, she's firmly against everything dresses, princesses, and she teaches fencing and was on, like, the fencing world team. And she finished grad school and decided she hated it and moved to the middle of Vermont, where she kind of lives with her cats and her husband. And they play in folk bands and build boats and sell them. And that's kind of -- it's just this very different -- but they both are very strong women in their own way.

And growing up, I had all these phases where I would try to be my mom, and then I'd try to be my aunt, and then I'd try to be my mom. And I finally realized that I ended up somewhere in the middle, and I feel like I've embodied what I think is the best part of both of them.

So, really, finding where you are and who you are is, I think, more important to your career than finding someone who has your career, necessarily.

**SONIA DARA:** So you launched Parihug when you were 19 years old. (Laughter.) That's supper impressive. So what was it like to be such a young company founder?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** It has its advantages and its disadvantages. I think, at the time, you mostly see the disadvantages. I mean, even little things like -- so we talked about going to CES. You can't check into a hotel in Vegas unless you're 21.

**SONIA DARA:** Oh, my God. (Laughter.)

**XYLA FOXLIN:** So we showed up and I couldn't check into the hotel I booked. And that's such a bizarre feeling because I was over 18, so I figured it would be fine. But there are all these things. I couldn't get into any of the networking events at bars, which is most of them. You know, and people and investors were, like, "Oh, do you want to meet at this bar some night?" You have to say something like, "Oh, I'm busy, how's coffee the next morning?" You have to find all these ways of getting around your age.

And then also I think learning to cover up your age, there is certainly ageism that comes with any professional scenario, and no one particularly wants to do business with a teenager.

So learning to dress and to do your makeup and to act like you're much older certainly comes with the turf. And as a result, I think a lot of my friends say that I have an on and an off, and my off is when I'm hanging out and I'm at home, but if I switch on, I switch into this, like, older version of myself that can fool people and it can be very disconcerting for people who only know me as my "off" self.

But it's also the learning to balance your life. At 19, you're in college, you're trying to find your way in the world, you're new to the dating scene, you're -- you know, there's all the normal challenges of being a teenager, and then you add founding a company on top of it. So that's probably the hardest part is figuring out how to find that balance, and to find that balance with your academic work as well.

But then the advantage is that you make a much better press story, so it's much easier to get press and it's easier to -- there's more competitions available to you, there's kind of more educational resources, people are more willing to help you.

I think at every conference I've been to, like, someone -- some stranger has kind of taken me under their wing as, you know, their daughter for the week. And shown me the ropes and introduced me to all the people I needed to be introduced to. And I would say that is probably a direct result of my age.

**SONIA DARA:** So you're currently studying mechanical engineering with a minor in studio art at Case Western Reserve University. Is your plan to continue to design products, or specifically robots in this case, with that intensive focus?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Good question. I don't necessarily know. Robotics has always been my passion, and it's what drove me into engineering in the first place. I think robots have the potential to change the world for the better, particularly when combined with things like art and psychology and design. But there's also so many other opportunities out there. And, again, I'm very young, so I don't know everything that's going on in the world.

One of my big passions is STEM education and figuring out how on earth we can inspire the next generation of people to go into STEM because I think right now it's so exclusive to a certain type of person, except the field itself isn't, so how can we bridge that gap and catch these kids when they're younger? So, if anything, I think it would be either robotics or education.

**SONIA DARA:** Well, it sounds like your kind of getting into that education standpoint. So it sounds like in addition to your studies, you're working as a teaching assistant with Thinkbox, a maker space at Case Western Reserve University. So what exactly does your job entail there? Is it more on the education standpoint?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** It is definitely the best job on campus. I basically get to work at the maker space, and when people need help with their projects or if they're too intimidated to start, you basically work with them.

So it's all very customized. You have to think of what you're teaching them on the fly. It's not like there's a set curriculum we follow every time. But it's things like someone doesn't know how to use the laser cutter. All right, let's teach you how to focus a laser. Someone doesn't know how to run a shop bot, okay, here's how you create the file. You know, someone doesn't have drill training or mill training or band saw training, your options are I can do it for you, or we can get you set up to get trained.

So it's mostly stuff like that, but as a whole, it teaches you to cater teaching for anyone, regardless of who they are and how they think.

**SONIA DARA:** Thinkbox had tutorial videos, but based off of your website, they seemed to be too intimidating for first-time makers. So in response, you and your colleague, Andrew Dupuis, have since launched the YouTube channel -- I love this -- it's called *Beauty and the Bolt*. So what was the goal of that YouTube channel? And what type of content do you feature there?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** There were so many goals when we went going into it. But it was really inspired by one particular case that was, you know, the fly that sits on, like, and pile and causes the whole thing to collapse.

I was sitting at work and I watched a girl come in. And our protocol was that if someone has never used a machine before, your first step is to set them up with the tutorial that we had.

And these were 80-page-long textual tutorials. You open it, and it's just this wall of unnecessary text.

And something like user a maker bot is so simple. She basically, she opened it up, she scrolled through it and closed her laptop and left. It was, like, I've seen this happen one too many times to be comfortable with it.

We're sitting here and just watching this happen because, primarily, it's minority groups and out groups that are feeling that intimidated and walking out, whereas people who are more comfortable in the space would be more willing to come straight to be us and be, like, "Yo, this is ridiculous, teach me how to do this."

So I really wanted to create video tutorials for Thinkbox specifically. And we made a demo video and it ended up being -- there are so many politics related to releasing something with the name of a university tied to it. So, instead, we went rogue and made our own YouTube channel.

And once we realized we had that freedom, you were, like, "Why can't we throw other agendas into there, too?" And something been pushing for a long time is that femininity and engineering are not mutually exclusive. There's nothing wrong with being an engineer that loves pink, sparkles, and eyeliner and dresses and fashion and design. Like, that doesn't make you any less of an engineer. In fact, I would argue it makes you a better engineer because it's forcing your mind to be more creative all of the time.

So we named it *Beauty and the Bolt* after one of my favorite Disney movies. And we also just thought Belle was kind of the perfect champion for this because she's smart, she's a bookworm, she thinks for herself, but she's also -- she's beautiful and she's very feminine.

And then, of course, the new *Beauty and the Beast* came out and they had made Belle an engineer, and it was the best day ever.

But I think our goal was to create valuable tutorials that maker spaces can use and that people can watch at home and go into the maker space with significantly more confidence. But then also to create easy projects that first-time makers can do.

One of the biggest things that we hear is that people come in and they're, like, "I really want to use Thinkbox, I really want to build a project, but I don't really know what to do, I don't have any good ideas, I'm not a creative person." And the reality is that in most of those cases, they're just too intimidated to come up with their own first ideas.

So if we hand them a first idea, then that can get that snowball going. And the next time they come in, they'll customize it, and then the next time they come in, it'll be straight up their own project.

So we released kind of -- we're trying to go for 50/50 of tutorials and projects.

**SONIA DARA:** These could be projects that people can pull off your YouTube channel for other maker spaces, potentially? Because we have one here at Microsoft called The Garage, and I know I personally find it intimidating to walk in without maybe a project starter, so is there a potential that I could grab it from your channel and also apply it there?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Yeah, totally. So for each project that we do, we leave the files down in the description. So you can literally just take the project, you don't have to do any of the prep work yourself. And the whole idea is for your scenario specifically, when you're too intimidated to go out and start a project, we'll hand you something so that you do it, you have no excuse.

**SONIA DARA:** One of your projects that I was most impressed by is the programmable LED dress that you made in M-Hacks, a 36-hour hackathon run by University of Michigan students. Can you explain a bit more about that project and why you chose to participate in the hackathon like that?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** I went to my very first hackathon before I knew anything. It was probably September of my first semester at college. And I didn't know how to cold, I didn't know how to solder, I didn't know how to build a circuit.

And what I really loved about it was that it's a place where you can make horrible mistakes and no one cares. And I've never found any other situation where I could truly let my guard down, not care what anyone thought of me, and just tunnel into something and learn.

And I don't know entirely how that sort of magical community and space came about, but I was very fortunate in that I had very positive teams going into all of them. And every hackathon team I've been on was all women. And as a result, we shared a lot of interests and also a lot of the same roadblocks that we had in common.

So the dress was -- it was really fun. We used I think 16 meters of (inaudible) pixels, and you could sing a Disney song, and whatever song you were singing, we'd parse the syllables of that song, and determine the lyrics, and then figure out what princess you were singing, and then turn you into that princess.

And, basically, pre-programmed each dress in. So if you started singing *Part of Your World*, the computer determines that it's Ariel, and then turns you into a rough version of the green tail and the purple seashells.

**SONIA DARA:** That's awesome. (Laughter.)

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Yeah, it was so much fun. We made a ton of mistakes, but in the end, that's not what people remember. Like, I remember -- so it was Michigan in February, and I was wearing the dress because I was the hardware engineer on the project, and no one else trusted it enough to wear it. So I was put inside the dress and it was very, very hot. There were certainly problems.

And part of it was that we had very limited resources, but we also built it into this giant solenoid. So we just took the power and, like, wrapped it around the body and then put a human in the middle of it. And it drew 30 amps, which is a ridiculous amount of power for one dress. It had to get plugged into three different outlets --

**SONIA DARA:** That's nuts.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** -- to function. And we also did not think through how the person wearing it would be able to go to the bathroom. So there were, like, all these issues that I know about, but in the end, when we walked out and demoed it, all people cared about was that it was literally magic. No one knew how it worked, and if they did, they didn't care because it was fun and it was creative and it was a great way to learn about different parts of technology without forcing yourself into something really boring.

So when we were one of the winners of M-Hacks and we were out on staging demoing, like, the entire auditorium sang, *Let it Go*. (Laughter.) And that's just such a cool experience that only this curiosity can get going. It's the curiosity of what technology can do, and what it is going to do.

It's so much fun going to hackathons and you get the creative license to build literally whatever the hell you want.

**SONIA DARA:** Prior to starting college, you were a flight intern and line crewman at Eagle East Aviation in Massachusetts. So what inspired you to pursue that internship? And what was your work like there?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** So ever since I was a little kid, my dream was always to fly. And I, you know, had that phase where I tried to build myself wings, and then I jumped out of a tree and it didn't work.

And things like I just had this fascination with the sky. And as I got older, that kind of turned into a fascination with airplanes and aircraft and at some point in middle school, I was in the high -- I think it was coming up on Christmas or something, and all I wanted was airplane stuff.

And my dad's boss mention a program called Young Eagles, and that it's basically you could bring your kid and a pilot would take them up in the cockpit for free in a small civilian aircraft.

So you could actually fly the plane. And so my Young Eagle Pilot -- so I went and I did my flight. And at these events, they always joke it's like, one in ten kids comes down from the sky and they have caught the bug. Like, there's no going back. I happened to be one of those. The pilot let me fly the aircraft. And I thought that was the most magical thing ever. Like, what's more magical to a 10-year-old than flying?

So I was convinced I was going to be a pilot, and for a long time I wanted to join the Air Force, and then I realized I couldn't have a life outside of that. But learning to fly is incredibly expensive. It's not something your average, like, pre-teen can afford -- or teenager, for that matter.

So I held onto this dream through middle school and then through high school. And then towards the end of high school, I reached out to Eagle East and asked if they would take a worker in exchange for flight hours.

And they said yes, so I started working. It was 20 hours on the ground for each hour in the air, plus an hour-and-a-half-long commute each way. So every day, I would commute somewhere between two and three hours total and then work 11 to 14-hour days, and then come home. It was incredible, because I finally got to fly. And I can't even describe it.

**SONIA DARA:** September of 2017, you wrote a post on Medium entitled *Beauty and the Invisible Beast* -- I'm noticing a trend in the Disney -- (Laughter.) Which chronicles the sexual harassment and discrimination you faced in your robotics, aviation, and entrepreneurial pursuits.

And as you are obviously very well aware, this is such a hot topic right now as high-profile sexual assault cases are coming to light. So what do we as women have to gain by telling these stories?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** It's different for every woman in their personal gain. For me, it was a way of standing up for myself that I had never done before. I'd been very vocal, but I'd never really shared any of my own stories that publicly.

And, I mean, there are things I was too scared to put into that article. That's certainly not everything, but maybe in ten years I will be able to speak up.

Once you force yourself to share, and once you're ready to share, you can gain a lot of confidence in realizing that you were brave enough to put yourself forward. And if that inspires just one more person to do that, I think we've done good for the world.

So when I published this article, a lot of people from my high school robotics team reached out to me and were, like, "I had absolutely no idea, what can I do?" And the more people that come forward, the more it validates the stories that have already been told. So that's a huge part of it.

So when I published this article, there are many people in my life that no longer talk to me, like, I've called them, I've tried rebuilding the bridge, but they just won't speak to me.

And when I was talking to my mom about it, she's a Chinese immigrant, and she was saying, "You know, there's this saying we have in China where there's a type of rock that you know if --" I don't know, you somehow use it to know if something is fool's gold or real gold. And she said, "Telling your story was your rock. You now know who your real friends are. And the people who are really there to support you, and the people who were kind of using you."

**SONIA DARA:** To pivot a little bit back towards engineering. You've done a lot of grassroots work to advocate for women in engineering. Our listeners are always looking for ways to advocate more. Could you share some of the ways that you've tried to get your female peers interested in STEM and what has been the most effective way?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** When I was in high school, and I came back from my summer, I started pressuring my robotics mentor to let me found an all-girls robotics team. And at the time, I was one of two girls on the robotics team, and the other one was my best friend that I had pulled in with promises of, like, free pizza and chocolate.



And, actually, she is now a computer science student at CMU, so it worked. That was not on her trajectory before.

But there was this big question, like, if we build it, will they come? We clearly haven't had any interest from women so far for robotics, so would we have enough people to fill out an all-women's robotics team?

And we ended up going -- this was my senior year. So we finished the season. We came back from -- we were finalists at world championships. This is time, we need to do it. And so laid down the foundation for this all-women's team, founded it, hosted the first meeting, and 45 people came.

**SONIA DARA:** That's awesome.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Which is already four times the size a team is supposed to be. So there was clearly interest, and that team is still going, and it's still taking off.

And I got a lot of pushback from the community for doing that because there was, you know, the classic argument, "Well, that's sexist, too, you're excluding boys. How's it better if, like, the real world is co-gendered, what are you going to do?" My argument was always, high school is a time of development. And we're trying to raise a career interest in these girls and boys, and like segregated high schools have been happening for a long time, and it's also -- it's not discrimination if you're giving one group something that the other group has always had.

And, yes, a girl could join the, quote/unquote, co-ed team, if they wanted to, but they weren't. Whether it was because of the culture or intimidation or because it wasn't handed to them, I don't know. But it was really, really effective and they're actually talking now, four years later, about making both teams co-ed again.

And when I got to college, I decided that instead of preaching, I was going to do. So I just started joining all these engineering teams and engineering clubs and I didn't really talk a whole lot about being a woman, I just tried to learn as fast and as much as I could.

And my sophomore year, I was elected president of the robotics team here at Case. And the first thing I noticed that no one else noticed is that the first three elected positions -- so the president, vice president, and secretary -- all went to women.

And once I kind of pointed it out, everybody was, like, "Whoa, that's really cool. Let's not talk about it." And the next year, we got pretty much a 50/50 class.

Because we just showed that it was a place where women could thrive and so I've found that to be really helpful.

**SONIA DARA:** I know this past summer, we at Microsoft Surface partnered up with you for the launch of the Surface laptop. To our listeners, if you have not seen this ad,

Xyla is front and center showcasing all of her skills, because he's a Jane of all trades, and she's playing the violin as well as showing off her Parihug website. And, first of all, thank you for partnering with us, we had a fantastic time working with you.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** You're welcome, thank you for having me. It was a lot of fun.

**SONIA DARA:** Yeah. I know for us, we would just be a little bit more interested in why you decided to take part in this specific product launch.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** I had absolutely no idea what to expect. I'm not an actress, and I have never really put any thought into participating in commercials or product launches or anything like that.

But it's an incredible opportunity. Like, not everyone gets asked by Microsoft, of all people, to be a part of a project that they're working on. And once I got farther and farther into the casting process, I started talking to a lot of my friends. And not that I can't make decisions on my own, but you know, sounding boards are always good.

And all of them were, like, "Oh, man, Microsoft has done so many amazing things that align with your moral compass." Kind of a lot of initiatives that have happened and it's one of those things where, one, you'd be stupid to turn it down, but two, being part of a project like that, you learned so much.

And even just going out to LA and filming with the Microsoft team -- we filmed at Hawthorne Airport. So the Falcon 9 rocket was certainly a great addition to the experience. But just seeing what goes on behind the scenes of a product launch, hopefully, like, that will be my product launch in the future, you never know.

**SONIA DARA:** And I know you touched upon this a little earlier, and you've been quoted explaining that femininity and engineering are not mutually exclusive. Can you share any parting wisdom or advice specifically for our female listeners who are considering engineering careers? You were mentioning a little bit of this earlier, but any great advice that they can take away would be awesome.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** I think there's a lot of pressure for us as women to put who we are aside, and be this perfect female engineer role model because we feel like what we do reflects our entire gender.

And I'm going to tell you that's not true, and even though you will still feel it and it might be true, but the key is the more of yourself that you are, the better of a role model that you'll be because people relate to humanity, not to robots.

You want to be confident in who you are, and if you don't feel confident, to be honest, just fake it until you are. Because if you're acting like yourself and you realize people love you and respect you for who you are, and this I guess goes across all career paths, it's just that in engineering, there's so much more pressure to put that aside.

But if you want to wear a strapless, cute sundress with, like, a sparkly cardigan and fierce winged eyeliner, then do it, girl! Like, no one is going to stop you, and that doesn't make you any worse of an engineer. But if you want to never touch makeup in your life, and just wear T-shirts and jeans to work every day, do that, too, because we can't be boxed. You can't take half of the population and box them into one stereotype. We need to show that anyone, whether you're a woman or not, can be a great engineer.

**SONIA DARA:** Xyla, where can our listeners find you online?

**XYLA FOXLIN:** So you can follow me on Twitter and Instagram, I am @flyingrobotgirl, or you can go to the Parihug website, which is parihug.com, or my YouTube channel, which is *Beauty and the Bolt*, so youtube.com/beautyandthebolt.

**SONIA DARA:** Thank you so much. That was great.

**XYLA FOXLIN:** Oh, thank you!

(Music.)

**VOICEOVER:** *Cutting Edge* are stories in the business and technology world.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** In this *Cutting Edge* segment, we're discussing an article that was published by NPR on March 5th entitled *What's an Inclusion Rider?* Here's the story behind Frances McDormand's closing words.

**SONIA DARA:** For those of you who did not watch the Oscars, this is in reference to the speech that Frances McDormand made while accepting the Oscar for her lead role in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*.

She wrapped her time at the mic by saying, "I have two words to leave with you tonight, ladies and gentlemen, inclusion rider."

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** NPR defines an inclusion rider as, "A stipulation that actors and actresses can ask or demand to have inserted into their contracts, which would require a certain level of diversity among a film's cast and crew."

**SONIA DARA:** While McDormand popularized the phrase recently, the concept of an inclusion rider is not new. Stacy L. Smith, who directs the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California, explained the idea in a 2014 column in *The Hollywood Reporter*.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah! And Smith also gave a TED Talk on the topic entitled: *The Data Behind Hollywood's Sexism*. It was published on the TED YouTube channel just over a year ago, so you should definitely check that out. But despite Smith's work, inclusion riders are not yet the norm in Hollywood.

**SONIA DARA:** And McDormand's commentary reinforces this. She said, "I just found out about this last week after 35 years of being in the film business, we're not going back."

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** I am such a fan of this news cycle for a few reasons. First of all, I really appreciate how honest McDormand was about what she didn't know. After 35 years in the industry, there's still more to learn. I think it's so empowering to see someone stand up and say, "I just learned this last week." (Laughter.)

**SONIA DARA:** You're not alone if you don't know what this means.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yeah. Yeah. She creates sort of like a circle of trust, like we're all in this together and we're all learning together.

And then, secondly, this concept was leveraged from the leading think tank in the world studying diversity and inclusion in entertainment. Sonia mentioned that it was Stacy L. Smith of the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative at the University of Southern California.

And, you know, as the entertainment industry and tech companies and the advertising industry and companies more broadly start to think about diversity and inclusion more aggressively, I think it's important to consider all of the work that has already been done. We don't need to come up with the answers ourselves, there are great minds thinking about these topics.

**SONIA DARA:** Yeah, I absolutely agree on both accounts. The final thing that was critical here for me is that McDormand, and Smith before her, handed people a tool. The responsibility for inclusion up until this point was probably fuzzy for casting and film crews, but this concept makes it more tactical. It equips people in power to lend their privilege.

(Music.)

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Thank you for tuning into another episode of *Women in Business and Technology*. I am so thrilled that we were able to host Kate Sommer here in the studio to tell us more about Local Levo. And I'm really pumped that the term "inclusion rider" is now in my vocabulary.

**SONIA DARA:** And, of course, we were honored to host Xyla Foxlin on the show. Yeah, she was just named Miss Greater Cleveland last month, championing her slogan, quote, "Brilliant is beautiful," which is awesome.

Important to note is that she played a musical Tesla coil as her talent. Congratulations, Xyla.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Yes, congratulations.

**SONIA DARA:** That's awesome.

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** That is amazing. As always, please remember to rate, review, and subscribe to the show. All of those actions help more people find us. And speaking of, you can find us on Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Spotify, YouTube, or wherever you listen to podcasts.

**SONIA DARA:** Our website is [wibt.com](http://wibt.com), and if you have any feedback or questions, please e-mail us at [wibt@microsoft.com](mailto:wibt@microsoft.com), or tweet us [@microsoftwomen](https://twitter.com/microsoftwomen).

**COLLEEN O'BRIEN:** Your mission for this episode, if you choose to accept it, is to check out events at your local college or university. Here in Seattle, the University of Washington's Foster School of Business hosts a *Leaders to Legends* breakfast series for students, alumni, and the public, that I love to wake up early for.

If you're looking to get more connected, just do a quick Internet search for upcoming events at the institution closest to you. And double check that the events are not only for students.

Given the nature of this podcast, I almost recommended that you refine your search to the schools of business or computer science and engineering, but then I remembered that my degree is in film production, so learn anything and everything, and we'll catch you on the next episode.

(Music.)

END