Bonus Episode: Try Hard with Erika Casupanan

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Rachelle: Hello and welcome to Normal Gossip! I'm your host, Rachelle Hampton and in each episode of this podcast we're going to bring you an ANONYMOUS morsel of gossip from the real world.

And today's morsel of gossip actually isn't so anonymous. In fact, I know exactly where it came from, because it came from me. Well, me and the rest of the Normal Gossip team. We have finally got a start date for the premiere of season nine. But before I give you the gossip, I know I'm so sorry that was so mean. But before I give you the gossip, I wanted to tell you a little bit about the rest of this episode because, surprise, surprise, it actually won't take me 30 plus minutes to tell you when season nine starts.

Today. I'm so excited to bring you an episode of *Try Hard*, a new podcast that is hosted and produced by none other than dowager queen of gossip herself, Alex Sujong Laughlin, if you listen to the July Bonus Episode titled, A Beautiful Ouroboros of Gossip. You'll have heard Alex tell us all about *Try Hard*, which premiered on July 28. The episode you're about to hear is the second episode of the season, and it features a familiar face, Erika Casupanan, the winner of the 41st season of *Survivor*, and a guest from the fifth season of Normal Gossip.

In this episode of *Try Hard*, Alex helps Erika get over her fear of singing in public. It's a great episode, and Erika really goes for it in a way that should inspire all aspiring try hards. Oh, in season nine of Normal Gossip, premieres, November 12. That is right, we will be running through the holiday season. Hopefully it'll make your in-laws more bearable. Without further ado, here's *Try Hard*.

Alex: How do you know when you're good at something?

I think for a lot of people — myself included — it's when you're told you're good at it. When people see something in you that you were hoping they would see.

External validation is delicious and maybe even a little addictive. I'll admit it!

But when you're a tryhard like me, the desire to be good at something, or even just seen as good at something, can hold you back from trying new things. Especially once you've grown up and are just flailing around in the real world. People aren't gonna just stand around to tell you you've done a good job anymore.

As much as you want to get an A in your hobbies or at work — and believe me, I do — it's not actually possible to do that. So why even try?

Welcome to Try Hard. I'm Alex Sujong Laughlin.

In every episode, I talk to someone about something they've always wanted to do, but haven't—yet.

First, we dig into why they want to do it, and what's been getting in the way.

Then, we set a challenge for them to work toward.

They spend a few weeks prepping, and then we check in afterward to hear how it goes.

This week's guest loves singing but has always stayed far away from one of my favorite things ever: karaoke.

Erika: My name is Erika Casupanan, and I'm a Try Hard.

Alex: Erika is a keynote speaker, media personality and the host of the Happy to See Me podcast. She's also notably the winner of survivor 41.

Erika: So when I was a kid, actually, when people would ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up, I was always like, I'm gonna be a rock star.

Alex: Wow.

Erika: No really understanding of what that meant, but I just always thought I needed to be a rock star. And then when I went to high school, I was part of the church choir, so I was in Catholic school, and I would describe myself as an extremely mediocre member of the choir. I always felt like I had some natural ability, I would say *some* natural ability, but then I just was never one of the students who got the attention of the music teachers to really invest in my

skills, and I never really got to have a solo. I always was just there. I showed up. I worked hard. I had a great attitude, but I was always just one of the many mediocre members of the choir.

Alex: What part did you sing? Are you an alto or a soprano?

Erika: I'm an alto.

Alex: Oh, the unsung heroes of the choir.

Erika: I know, I know. I think people are surprised, because I think that my talking voice is higher, but singing, I am an alto. My dream is to be a mezzo soprano. I'm going to put being a soprano on my vision board.

Alex: I love this for you. I love this for you.

Erika: So then, when I became an adult and I moved to the city, I finally started taking singing lessons on my own, but I never told anyone. I think I told one, maybe two friends, and even I think I was living with a roommate, and I would just like, get up and leave and like, go to my singing lessons and just like, come home and pretend like nothing ever happened. And I had a teacher who I got along really well with. And I love, love, loved taking these singing lessons, and I thought that, oh my gosh, there was finally potential in this skill that I always wanted to develop, and maybe I get to actually develop it. But then, unfortunately, like many people who move to the city and work in marketing communications and are in their early 20s, I had an income that was like $37,000 a year, and I realized taking singing lessons just didn't work in the budget, so I actually had to quit after a few months because I couldn't afford them, and then I didn't really sing a lot after that.

Alex: My God, heartbreaking. When you said that you wanted to be a rock star. What did that mean to you? Because obviously you didn't know exactly what that meant. So what did it mean to like your childhood self?

Erika: I think that in my mind, it meant that I could live based on being me and expressing myself, which is kind of funny because now as I'm an adult and I work as a keynote speaker, as a host, as a podcaster, that is what I'm doing. It's just not in the singing way, but as a kid, I think I always really felt comfortable with idea of being seen and showing up as me and expressing myself.

Alex: Yeah, there's this like validation that you crave as a child, and it seems like the people we give it to most readily are entertainers.

Erika: Yes

Alex: —Actresses, singers, dancers, now, you know, influencers, and I think it makes sense that that's the thing that so many children kind of lock their eyes on as like, this is the goal, because it's, it's not quite that they want to be doing that thing, but it's that they want to be seen. And it's like a spiritual thing, almost.

Erika: But I feel like as kids, we really want to be seen, but then something happens to us in adolescence where we feel like it's safer to not be seen, right, and it's safer to hide and to blend in. I know that that's something that I definitely have experienced. And I think also, after being on reality TV, like the idea of being seen has changed for me a lot too.

Alex: Yeah, was there a point that you remember in your adolescence when you switched from like, "I'm a ham, I'm a show off. I want to be myself in front of everybody," to like, "Oh my God, nobody look at me," because I remember that moment for myself.

Erika: Ooh. Okay, wait, what was your specific moment?

Alex: Well, so, okay, so it wasn't like a moment moment, but it was like sometime in seventh grade, my family moved around a lot, and so in seventh grade, we moved from Kansas to Washington State, and I suddenly—like, I had been very confident before, and it was a combination of, you know, I had just gotten my period, I was going through puberty, and my anxiety was raging and unmedicated, and suddenly I was like, "I'm afraid to speak, let alone like, perform on stage in front of people." That was mortifying all of a sudden.

Erika: Oh yeah. So it's like that moment. It's like the moment we can see ourselves in the mirror for the first time. But I remember, actually, my elementary school was doing a musical. They were doing the Wizard of Oz. And I was like, "Oh my god, this is the first time I can audition for something." And I would always sing to myself in my room and everything. And I was like, Yeah, I think I've, like, got it. And I sang, "No More Drama" by Mary J Blige.

Alex: Oh my gosh.

Erika: And I remember, you know, teachers were watching me sing, and they would, like, nudge each other, and I'm like, "Oh, my God. I think I'm good. I think I'm good." And then I didn't get,

like, what I consider a real part. I think that the part I got was being when they go to the Emerald City and there's the guards, and I think I was one of the guards with this, with one speaking line, and I was like, "Oh, I thought I was good, and then now I'm just a guard." So this was a thing that I thought I could do, and I feel like the realism of like, not getting chosen has affected me, and I think that that really since then, like affected my ability to Yeah, like me showing up as myself and making my choices, and like, realizing that, like, they're not going to be validated by other people all the time.

Alex: Oh, my God

Erika: They missed out.

Alex: That's that makes me so sad, but it happens to so many people.

Erika: Yeah. Well, I mean, show biz is getting rejected, right? Even if you're not a performer, like an actor or a singer or a dancer, we're getting rejected all the time. So I think I had to learn—we all just had to learn how to do it. But I guess nothing, nothing stings quite like the first one.

Alex: So going back to that time in middle school when you kind of shrank back inside of yourself, how long do you think you stayed that way, and how do you think that affected how you turned out?

Erika: It's hard to pick like a specific moment, right? Because I think we all go through those feelings where we're always in awakening, getting to know about ourselves, getting to be a lot more confident. And I think that I definitely did a lot of things growing up that suggested a lot of confidence, like I was a real high achiever, and I think that I really believed in myself. But I think as I got older, and especially as I went through my 20s and my late 20s, realizing that there's so many things that I was doing to meet certain expectations, whether they're expectations I put on myself, or expectations that I kind of just absorbed from other people and started to put on myself, and then I was slowly trying to get rid of all of those things, like, I think about the me who was taking the singing lessons in my early 20s, and I had long hair that was my natural color. I had these straight across bangs. I kept them because everybody told me that they liked my hair, so I was like, Okay, this is how I should look. I would often go to my job where I didn't even like my job that much. I didn't even know why I was working in PR. I just, like, fell into it and was good at it. So I kept going. So I would do this job, and then I would go to the gym, because I just was like, Oh my God. I need to, like, be super skinny and, like, lose weight, which is also one of those things. I look back, I'm like, Why did I think that I was just like, normal. Why did I think

that? So I would work hard, and then go to the gym and work so hard, and then I would go to these singing lessons in my gym clothes, long hair, whatever. And in those singing lessons, I'd have a moment where I'm like, Okay, right now I feel like I'm cool, and I'm I'm like, me. And then it's kind of funny now revisiting singing lessons again and seeing how much that I had changed. But I think if I had to think of a moment where I realized that all of those expectations I had on myself didn't need to matter and I could show up in the way that I want. It was around 2017. I had decided I was gonna leave the job that I had been in for, I think, five years. And right before I quit that job, I actually cut off 10 inches of my hair and I donated it to one of those charities for people who have cancer, and then I added purple streaks to my hair. And just like walked into the office of my job, and I thought the world was gonna, like, explode. I thought that I was not allowed to have that type of hair. And it turned out, everyone was like, wow, that's really cool. And I'm like, Oh my God, wait. I was like, wait, what? I could just do the thing that I always wanted to do, and it was totally fine? So I think that I know that, you know, if anyone is listening and they don't know what I look like. I have purple hair that's in this little bob I've had hair like this for years. It's kind of like a way that I'm easily recognizable, and part of the reason I keep it because I feel like it's one of the things that I did that was purely for me, that probably doesn't seem logical, that, you know, I would always get the slap on the wrist for thinking about wanting to look different, especially being a Filipino immigrant, and I did it, and everything was like, totally fine. And for me, it's kind of like a symbol to me that my instinct and what I want to do is fine and should be seen and actually people are cool with it. And also, if people aren't cool with it, that's okay too. So yeah, it was nice to revisit singing now being this version of me.

Alex: Oh my gosh, yeah, cuz so much in your life has changed since then. Like, you went on, Survivor, you won Survivor.

Erika: Yes

Alex: Legend. You have, like, built this whole career as a podcast host and a speaker, and you came out and yes, like, what am I missing anything?

Erika: Oh my gosh. I feel like those are, like the big public-y ones. But even just like in my own life, like there's just been so many changes, like relationships shifting, moving, like I live, I moved into a place of my own for the first time ever, and that changed so much because I was, I was like a kid who grew up in like, a really strict household, big family, always people around. And then now I get to, like, be in a place that's just mine. I'm like, wow, this is what it's like to have space and to just breathe. So I feel like, even on a personal level, I've changed so much too.

Alex: After the break, it's Challenge Day. Erika finally does karaoke.

Hey, if you are feeling the Try Hard spirit listening to this, I want to hear from you. If you're trying something new, send me a voice memo about it at podcasts@defector.com or you can tag me in your stories or posts on Instagram @alexlaughs.

music/ad break

Alex: So tell me about your lessons.

Erika: Yes, so I okay. So to backtrack when I took singing lessons years ago, I really got along so well with my teacher. I felt like she was just so patient and kind, but I could not find her anywhere. And the singing school that I went to previously, it had closed during COVID. So I was like, okay, can't go back there. And I also know that there's a short timeline to do this project, so I just talked to someone, got one recommendation. I'm like, good enough for me. And I went to this music school, and I think the day after we had our first conversation, I was in my first singing lesson. I was like, Okay, let's do this.

Alex: Yeah, you sent me a video from that, and you were like, I talked to you yesterday. I talked to the school today. My first lesson is tomorrow.

Erika: Yeah.

Erika tape: This is either gonna be the best thing ever, or the worst thing ever, I both love and hate that I'm impulsive and I must grow and challenge myself all the time. But yeah, if you had told me this time yesterday that on Thursday I'm going to be going to a private singing lesson, I wouldn't have believed you. So yeah, life is weird.

Alex: Crazy.

Erika: I was like, you know, if we're gonna do it, we're just gonna go hard. I think that that's always been consistent about my personality since I was kid. I'm like, I'm just gonna go for it.

Alex: Yeah, that's real try hard energy there.

Erika: I'm such a try hard. So I did five weeks of singing lessons. And the first lesson, the instructor told me, okay, we're just gonna talk. You're only gonna sing for like two minutes. At the end, this was just talking about the music theory. And I'm like, okay, but I remember leaving that lesson, and I was like, oh my god, we mostly just talked, and I only sang for two minutes. How am I supposed to be ready in five weeks, so I'm freaking out a little bit. And then the next week I go for my lesson. So this is the first lesson where I'm singing the full time, and like that first lesson, obviously the singing instructor has so much to say about my breathing and about resonance and about all sorts of stuff. And I'm leaving that lesson and I'm like—

Erika tape: Okay, I just finished my week two lessons, and I hated it. I really hated it. It was really overwhelming. Honestly, there's just, like, a lot that's beyond what I learned before, where it's like thinking about breathing and placement, and it just like the approach is so different from how I've done it before. So, yeah, I feel like, overwhelmed and like frustrated, and I hated it, and I don't know what I'm even practice. I'm just gonna practice like, singing. There's just like, Yeah, okay, I guess I'm just gonna go home and practice. Okay, bye.

Alex: Was any of it coming back to you?

Erika: Yeah, yeah. I think that for me — so in the very first lesson, the instructor would play notes on the piano and ask me to sing the same note. So she did a few, and she's like, You can do it. I was like, really? She's like, Yeah, you can hear the note and you're actually singing the same one. I was like, Oh, my God, okay. This is, like, amazing. Like, I was like, wow.

Alex: And just to say, like, this is all working toward a challenge where you're going to sing a song at karaoke.

Erika: Yes, yes. So when it comes to karaoke, I've always loved karaoke, and like, private karaoke room, it is on, I am good. People would ask me, What's your karaoke song? And I was like, just put it, put it on shuffle, and I will sing any song. That is totally fine.

Alex: Wow.

Erika: But I know that when you and I were talking, you had asked how I felt about public karaoke. And I was like, Oh, my God. I used to love public karaoke. I would again, same thing, put it on shuffle, I'll sing any song, because I was like, whatever. You just go up, you sing the song, you sit down, you go back and drink your beer, and nobody cares. But then, to be honest, I haven't done public karaoke since winning Survivor, because I no longer felt like I was an

anonymous person. And I think this is one of those things where we're talking about being seen, and, you know, as a kid, wanting to be seen, and then going back to not wanting it, and then wanting it and going back. And I think that now I have an interesting relationship with being seen since being on the show, because there's no paparazzi following me. I can go to the grocery store totally fine.

Alex: Survivor celebrity is like a very specific kind, where people who know you fucking know you.

Erika: Yes.

Alex: And then people who don't don't.

Erika: Yes exactly, exactly. And I think that a thing that I didn't really anticipate what life was going to be like, no longer being anonymous. And after the show, and even now, it's been like four years since I've been on the show, I have people who still come up and talk to me like at least once a week, they'll come up say they recognize me from the show. Always such a nice interaction. 95% of the fans I've talked to have been so, so, so sweet. But I think that it kind of got built into my brain that I'm always potentially being perceived. So I have to really be mindful about what I do in public, because like anybody, you could see me, anyone could notice me. And I also had the experience—like anyone who's been on reality TV—of just like having people talk about you on the internet at scale, and I don't care what anybody says, there's so many people who are like, oh, have a thick skin. It doesn't bother me. I'm like, no, no, I think it bothers everybody. Okay. There's still this sting of seeing people talk about you online. So I think knowing I'm I'm gonna always be recognizable to some people, and knowing what it's like for people to talk about me, I think that I always became really conscious of who saw me. And then I also created this fear in my head that if I was to ever to do public karaoke, then someone would like, recognize me from Survivor and like, film a video of me and like, post it on Tiktok. Because honestly, that's like, not even far from reality. I've had people like, film me in public and I didn't realize and it ends up on the internet.

Alex: Oh my god. So you had, like, you had done all of this work to sort of arrive into the world. And I feel like going on Survivor, winning Survivor, and like, this whole career shift you've made was, like it was the top of the arc of this evolution that you were on, and then you get smacked with this like new level of scrutiny that kind of forces you back into a cautious place.

Erika: Yeah, yeah.

Alex: Which is, like, something that I would never expect, but it totally makes sense.

Erika: Yeah, I feel like I feel bigger and more expansive in some ways, I also feel like the part of my brain that cares about what other people think of me is like broken like, I really don't care what other people think of me, but I also feel much more protective of my personal life and my boundaries and my own like, private life and my private space. I also publicly came out within the last couple of years, and there's a bar that a lot of the sapphics and the lesbians go to in Toronto, which is so cute. It's this bar called Three Dollar Bill, and they have karaoke on Sundays. So every now and then I would go, but I would never sing, and people would ask me if I would sing, and I was like, Oh no. Like, I don't want to do public karaoke, because I feel like in that setting, it was like the double whammy of doing the public karaoke and all of the fears that I mentioned before, but then also me being nervous about singing in front of the lesbians, and me still feeling like a baby lesbian and feeling almost that imposter syndrome, even though it's now been, you know, a while since people have known that I've been out, and I know that I'm a lesbian, but I still feel that imposter syndrome, and I still would tell myself, like, How can I go up in front of the lesbians and sing when I still am feeling like this? So for some reason, like the combo of karaoke lesbian bar really freaked me out. So then when you were like, Hey, do you want to do karaoke somewhere? I'm like, why don't I just go hard and just aspire to do karaoke at the lesbian bar?

Alex: So brave, so brave. So you are working toward this, like, very vulnerable thing actually, of like, doing something that hasn't been perfected in public in front of people. How did you pick the song that you were gonna sing?

Erika: So when I go back to the singing lessons I did in my early 20s, before I quit because I couldn't afford them, the song that I was actually working on was "Someone Like You" by Adele. And I was like, okay, when I do this challenge, I want to make sure that I'm picking a song that is a classic, you know, like classic karaoke, something that was still doable to sing in five weeks. And then when I thought about "Someone Like You," I was like, Wow, what an opportunity for me to go back and finally close the loop and actually finish working on that song. So "Someone Like You" was the song I worked on for the five weeks up until karaoke,

Alex: Wow, oh my god. When I when I saw the video that you sent me of you practicing, I was like, I cannot believe she's singing Adele. That is crazy.

Erika tape: I heard that you settled down, that you found a girl, and you're married now.

Alex: So tell me about the last couple weeks of your classes, and then we can get to the actual challenge.

Erika: Yeah, so the last couple of weeks of the classes, after the first two weeks, when I was really, really feeling, oh my gosh, how am I going to be ready for this? Over the last couple of weeks, I felt myself gaining more confidence and feeling like I'm actually improving. I'm actually hearing the feedback, applying it, and getting better and better. But there was always a little part of me that was thinking, I really want to find my instructor from 10 years ago. We just got along so well, I have to be able to find her somewhere. And so I was like, okay, the music school is closed. I don't remember what her last name is. How do I find her? And I remember that years ago I had seen her perform in this cover band. So I googled her first name and the name of the cover band, and then I found that she's actually performing in a different cover band, which is called Shania Twink, and it is a queer country music cover band, which means that she also came out as queer within the last few years

Alex: Chef's kiss. Gorgeous.

Erika: When I saw that, I was like, Are you kidding I'm like, Are you kidding me? Are you kidding me? And I reached out to her. I was like, hey, coming in hot. Haven't talked to you in 10 years. Here's what I'm doing. And she responded, and she was like, I'm not teaching anymore, but I would be happy to do like a one off with you if you if you want to come to my apartment and we can sing, I'm like, Yes, amazing. And I got together with her, and once again, I had come from a workout, so I roll in in my gym clothes, but I felt like I was such a different person, and I felt like she was such a different person. And she even noticed with me, she was like, when you would come in 10 years ago, you were like, trying to figure out what you wanted to do, trying to figure yourself out, and now seeing everything you've done, it's like you've grown into the person that you always wanted to be. I'm like, Oh my God, thank you.

Alex: That's so beautiful, oh my gosh.

Erika: I actually completed all my five lessons. And then I sang with her two days before I did the karaoke. And she was like, okay, Erika, you can sing the song like you're able to sing the song. Right now, I think we should focus on making sure it sounds like you singing it. How does Erika want to sing the song? And I was like, wow. And I think that getting that advice right before I went to perform made me feel a lot better, because I'm like, yeah, there's not yes, there's a

technical way to do it. I'm like, but at the end of the day, this is about me trying it and sounding the way that I want and approaching the song that I the way that I want.

Alex: Okay, so let's talk about Challenge Day. How were you feeling that day?

Erika: Very nervous. Yeah, I was really nervous. I had invited a bunch of my friends to come and see me. Earlier that day, I was actually talking to someone who did a really similar challenge a few years ago, and I think that that advice helped to put me in the right headspace, because I was saying to this person, I'm like, Yeah, you know what? I have to just look at it as it doesn't matter what anybody thinks, and I just have to see this as the culmination of my my practice and my hard work over the month, and I have to do this for me. And this person said, yeah, that's like, super important. I think what's also important about this is it's about connection and community, and often that comes from the vulnerability, and you're able to build that level of connection because you're showing up imperfectly, and you're still trying, and you're doing that thing anyways. And I think that that was, for me, the right thing I needed to hear because it put me in the right headspace. Because, as I'm— I wonder if the listeners can deduce, I'm someone who just goes for it, has high standards for herself, works hard, and I really wanted to impress people when I did this thing. And I realized perfection impresses people, and imperfection is what drives connection. And I think with that mindset, I realized, okay, no matter how it goes, no matter if I hit all the notes or not, I still come out a better person, because I'm either, you know, impressing myself or impressing others, whether that matters or not, but at the very least, I'm connecting with people because I'm letting them see me do this thing that's scary.

Alex: Oh, my God that's beautiful! So tell me about the day of — you went to the gym, I know.

Erika: Yes, so the day of went to the gym and then just tried to have a chill day, did my laundry, practice as much as I could. Yeah, then I remember walking over to the bar with my friends, and I got a drink, and my friends are all talking, and I'm talking, but eventually I'm just like, quietly sitting there and sipping my drink and just thinking about the moment that's about to come.

Alex: Did your friends know that you had been taking lessons?

Erika: Yeah, yeah. I had told them about the whole journey. They were all so pumped. I know one of my friends, he was like, What if she's bad? I hope she's good. I really hope she's good. And that's the thing. They were all impressed before I even sang. They just thought it was so cool that I was doing this thing. So I think that's the other thing that I had to keep in mind for myself, that I'm still doing something that is, like, brave, which is, yeah, it is a brave thing.

Alex: Yeah, they were rooting for you. Your friends were rooting for you.

Erika: Yes. And then I had actually messaged the bar ahead of time, and I asked if I could go first. And they're like, yeah, sure just tell, just tell the person running karaoke that you want to go first. So I walk in, I'm just like, walk in, ready to go, and then they recognize me. They're like, yeah, you want to go first. I'm like, yeah. I'm like, Can I say something on the mic before? So I go up on the mic. I'm like, Hey, I'm Erika. You might recognize me because I won Survivor. Everyone applauds. And I'm like, I'm working on this other project. Can't really explain what it is, but I've been taking singing lessons for the last couple weeks, and my goal is to be able to sing in front of all of you on the first day of Pride Month, everyone cheers—

Alex: Oh, I have goose bumps!

Erika: And then I was like, so because of that, like, can everybody please not film me and put me on the internet, and then the person who runs karaoke goes on the other mic. They're like, oh yeah. Also, just so everyone knows this is a safe space and nobody should be filming anybody without their explicit consent. I'm like, oh, okay, thank you. Because I think that was my fear. I was afraid that someone would be like, Oh, that's Erika from Survivor. I'm going to film her, put it on the internet. Ruins the whole even ruins the whole podcast. I'm like, no, no, we've worked too hard.

Alex: Crucially, we did have a friend of yours film your performance.

Erika: Yes, yes.

Alex: —for this podcast. So we do have a recording.

Erika: Yes. Then the song starts playing. It's the first time I hear the song, you know, on the speakers, with the mic at the bar, with people talking. So once I get through the first couple lines, I'm like, Oh my gosh, I'm following the plan. And as I'm singing, the bar just gets quieter and quieter, and I'm like, Okay, I don't know if this is like a good thing or a bad thing, but I'm just gonna go with it anyways, and I just have to remember the plan. And I think that because I had practiced to this plan for so long, I got to really just sing it the way that I practiced it, let it go through. And there were parts that I was really nervous about, certain notes I was nervous about, and I would sing them and I'm like, Okay, not bad. Let's, like, keep going. And by the end, the bar was mostly quiet and it was everyone paying attention to me singing.

And then I finished it. I got off the stage, and then just the next person goes up and sings. And I was like, wow, that was so, that was, like, such a milestone, but at the same time, so not a big deal. Like I had built this up to be the scariest moment in my head. And I was like, wait, that was totally fine. Everyone moved on. Everyone is good.

And the thing is, I was so afraid of singing in front of all the lesbians and all of the sapphics. And it turned out they were the best people to sing in front of, because so many people were chatting with me after whether they recognized me from Survivor or not, and they were just the sweetest, most supportive people, like, why was I scared? This was actually the best place to be singing. This was the best crowd to be singing in front of. And then after a few hours of being in the bar, my friend and I ended up singing a duet. So we went up and we sang "Breaking Free" from High School Musical. So it was like—

Alex: Oh my god.

Erika: —totally the opposite, not the opposite. But

Alex: Were you Troy or Gabriella?

Erika: So originally I was supposed to be Gabriella, but then halfway through the song, we just became both. We both became both, and just went for it, and everyone is singing along, and I'm like, Oh my gosh, so I also did public karaoke again, this time with no preparation, and it was totally fine, and I had the best night. And now I'm like, I should have, you know, it's reasonable, but I realized it was actually the best to be singing at Three Dollar Bill with all of the lesbians. And honestly, if anyone is in Toronto, I highly recommend, if you're a sapphic, go there for karaoke because it was the best.

Alex: Beautiful. I can't help but think of how similar this is to when you cut all your hair off and dyed it purple the first time where you were like, oh my god, am I allowed to do this? Is this gonna like, rock the entire world? And then you do it and you feel completely different, but everyone's like, cool and, just like, keep going.

Erika: That's the thing. They were like, that was really cool. You did that. I'm like, thanks, yeah. And then we just talked about whatever. I'm like, Oh my gosh, amazing. And then afterwards, people were asking me how I felt. I was like, You know what I did better than I expected. I exceeded my own expectations. And even when I went back and I listened to it again, I thought that, wow, I sounded better than I expected. So I will take it.

Alex: You sounded great.

Erika: Thank you.

Alex: Oh my gosh. I was so impressed. And I was like, I was nervous. When I hit play, I was like, Oh God, I'm so nervous, I'm so nervous. I was blown away. It was amazing.

Erika: Imagine you were like, Oh my gosh, we just decided to entire podcast about this, and she was so bad.

Alex: That would have been okay too, because the point was that you were doing it and getting out there.

Erika: That's the thing. Even when I went on the mic before I sang, I was like, I took lessons. Doesn't mean I'm good, but it meant that I was trying really hard, and people were into it.

Alex: So what is next? Are you going to continue taking lessons? Are you going to do more karaoke?

Erika: I would say, if I'm in the right place now, I feel more comfortable doing it. So I think if I was to go back to the lesbian bar without hesitation, definitely would do it. Still private room, I would do it, and then in terms of, like, public I'll suss it out. I'll see. But now it's, it's back on the table, which is really nice.

Alex: Perfection impresses people, but imperfection drives connection. I love that so much. It's such a great reminder that a lot of the things that we want to be doing, the music, the sports, all these hobbies, all of these interests, they tend to be less about the thing itself and more about the connection that you're forging with people while you're doing them. I think that for those of us who are secret perfectionists, even to ourselves, it's such a great reminder that like, doing the thing perfectly is actually not the point, especially in a low stakes situation like karaoke. I hope this is the beginning of many crazy karaoke nights for Erika.

End Credits

Try Hard is written, hosted, and produced by me: Alex Sujong Laughlin.
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I'm Alex Sujong Laughlin - Don't be afraid to be seen trying.