

How a stuntwoman created a badass community during the pandemic

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Do you want to hear the story of how, during a pandemic, from rural India to New Jersey and small villages in Italy, thousands of people came together to practise staff spinning for 240 days and counting, single-handedly led by a Canadian stuntwoman? As much as this might sound like the trailer of a new post-apocalyptic Netflix show, it's actually a story of empowerment, generosity and community building.

Canada-based teacher, actor and stuntwoman Michelle Christa Smith showed up every day on YouTube and Instagram from the start of the pandemic, teaching not only backhand flips and Double Obi-Ani, but also resilience, consistency, and belief in oneself. Michelle's followers from around the world developed practices and an arsenal of tools that gave us hope in hard times. They were able to re-imagine a new, strong version of themselves to grow into a different future. History has indeed taught us that those who show up to lead when the times are tough are the one we will ultimately remember and look up to.

We Practiced STAFF SPINNING for 200 Days! HERE'S WHAT HAPPEN...



Michelle C. Smith started developing a strong mindset and incredible skills and bodily awareness by becoming top of her field in the sport of baton as a young girl, practising for hours and hours every day. Like many young athletes, she slowly became fed up with the pressure of competition, realizing also that her identity was too wrapped up in the athlete-self. Feeling betrayed by her batons, by her own passion, she retired to look for something different from the black and white winner/loser scenario of the sport world.

This brought her on a spiritual journey, doing the Camino De Santiago, the famous walk across Spain that has inspired and given clarity to many individuals looking for answers, like author Paulo Coelho.

Back to Canada with a new perspective on life, Michelle took advantage of her strong dance, gymnastic and prop-spinning background to join the circus, creating her own acts. Here, she came in contact for the first time with the stunt performing world, and she started harbouring the idea of working in action movies. She started taking martial arts classes, focusing on Filipino Martial Arts, and begun to combine findings from her training with her baton skills to create a combative-looking, highly aesthetic art. She decided to call her brainchild "Freestyle Staff."

From there, Michelle has been juggling stunts in major movie productions such as Deadpool, Van Helsing, Supergirl and Percy Jackson, with building her own teaching business. Her workshops and online courses known as "**The Badass Academy (<https://badassacademy.online/>)**" have the mission of empowering students by teaching them all about her Freestyle Staff.



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This jacket tho!! 🙌

I literally put this combo together in 5 sec FOR this jacket. I may never take it off. It's a part of me now. #notsorry

⚡️ONLINE GROUP CLASSES⚡️

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Gym: @teamonemartialarts 🙌🙏

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Then the pandemic hit. Since the very first days of the lockdown in Canada, Michelle delivered daily, half-hour, free livestreams on YouTube and Instagram, teaching her art to whoever was willing to learn. Not knowing how long the emergency would last, Michelle started with the idea of doing perhaps one week of live sessions. Now, all recorded on her YouTube channel, are 240 livestreams.

The result of the livestreams has been creating an empowered community of people around the world who were able to thrive during these probing times. Even those who joined later are hooked immediately. The joy of trying a trick many times and finally landing it is incredible. It makes the practitioner feel strong like a superheroine in training, even if locked at home. These skills make you look – and most importantly feel – like a badass.

A big part of the success of the livestreams was due to the way Michelle showed up. Sharing her journey in the new pandemic world as the situation has been unfolding, students saw her strength and commitment but also her most vulnerable moments. This made students feel like they were before a real teacher in the flesh rather than a virtual one. In that process of deep honesty, she didn't teach only skills, she taught the value of showing up and doing one's best even if all you have is a small room to practice, even if you are a little down, even if that day the skills didn't seem to work.

A great element of her teaching style is not only the top-notch quality content she shares but also the indication of the modalities of learning, highlighting the concept of deliberate practice. Encouraging a focused, yet compassionate, perfectionism-free approach to the art, her teaching voice also revealed a deeper underpinning, which made Freestyle Staff that closer to a martial art in this sense; you practise not only to look cool in your Instagram videos, but rather to understand the universal principles of life. As Michelle pointed out, the approach to the skills can be seen as a moving meditation, honing sensitivity and giving a break to an egoic, rational, often anxious mind. Her refrains to her students like "Don't force the staff, just let it do its turns, you just softly direct it" or, "We are not going for fast, we are going for smooth. Slow is smooth, smooth is fast," are just as relevant to the specifics of staff spinning as they are to life in general.

Michelle is continuing now her livestreams twice a week, together with uploading new content on YouTube and Instagram. She has just started new subscription intensive live classes, as well as bringing her Badass Academy to the next level and offering one-on-one virtual training. A treasure trove of skills, combinations, patterns and creativity that, as Michelle herself says: "you will use with or without a staff in your hands."

Image credit: [Darkmoonart de \(https://pixabay.com/photos/notepad-mobile-phone-notebook-table-3316997/\)](https://pixabay.com/photos/notepad-mobile-phone-notebook-table-3316997/)

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