Speech delivered by Trisha Prabhu at Safe Tech, Safe Kids event in Washington, D.C., October 23, 2023

My name is Trisha Prabhu, and I am a Gen Z anti-hate activist and the Founder and CEO of ReThink, a global movement with the mission of tackling cyberbullying and redefining internet culture to be more positive. My journey really started back when I was a 10-year-old, growing up in the suburbs of Chicago. At the time, my community was a predominantly white community. And that meant that I knew from a very young age, what it felt like to be excluded, what it felt like to be isolated, what it felt like to be different. That was always very apparent to me. It meant that, as a kid, I faced some bullying and some remarks. And it also meant that when we all got phones, I experienced cyber harassment.

I received mean, disparaging remarks from people I often didn't know or from people who were anonymous about everything from my hair to my cultural background. It was extremely difficult. I was such a confident child. My mom would always say that about me: that I was such a confident child. But when you're cyber harassed, and it's constant, right, it's 24/7, it takes that confidence from you. I suddenly felt like I couldn't depend on anyone. I suddenly felt unsure of myself. I became quieter, more reserved, and of course, I was afraid, so I hid it. I didn't tell my parents. I didn't talk to an adult. I didn't talk to a teacher. I didn't talk to a counselor.

I hid it, and I dealt with it, or at least that's what I told myself. When the abuse finally started to subside, I, like so many victims of cyberbullying, just wanted to forget about it. I didn't want to think about it ever again in my life and I wanted to move on. But it was later, when I was 13, that, one day, I came home from school, and I happened to read online the story of another young woman from a completely different state, who had been cyberbullied for over a year and a half, receiving some of the worst messages I have ever, ever seen: "The world would be a better place without you." "I hope you drink bleach and die." "You are so ugly."

And unfortunately she died by suicide because of that experience. At 13, reading that story, for me, there were two moments of impact: one was, something is seriously wrong here. This is just unacceptable, what is going on. And two, it was a moment of realization for me of, *oh, this isn't just a problem that I'm experiencing*. I had thought for the longest time, *oh, I'm being cyber bullied because there's something wrong with me*. Reading that story was a realization of, no, in fact, online hate is a silent pandemic affecting youth globally. It's something we've been taught to live with, but that we shouldn't have to, because we deserve an internet that is better than this. And so, especially as a young person, I was fired up. I was frustrated.

I felt like there simply weren't enough youth voices in the responsible technology space, that we needed more youth at the table. I was also frustrated by what felt like very reactive, outdated solutions to tackle cyberbullying, like simply encouraging youth to tell a parent about their experience. We know that those types of solutions often don't work, that young people are scared, that they worry that they might get in more trouble if they say something. And so my vision was, my question was: is there some way that I can redesign the internet, so that the burden is *not* on the victim to act, but instead on the bully to pause and think before they say something offensive?

That is what led to the creation of ReThink, which today builds technology that detects cyberbullying before it's sent and gives users a chance to pause, review, and rethink sending it. Put more simply, we create friction in online communication. The idea is that by giving them that moment to pause, we give youth a chance to think about who it is that they want to be online, we give them a chance to set themselves up to be responsible digital citizens — rather than get sucked into a digital environment that can make it feel like their words don't matter, that can make it feel like there are no consequences when in fact, as we've thus far absolutely seen today, there definitely are very, very real consequences. Building this movement has been so, so incredibly fulfilling. It's been an opportunity for me to take an experience that I wanted to forget and instead turn it into something positive.

It's also illustrated for me the power in investing in common-sense solutions that address cyberbullying. In the case of ReThink, our research, which been celebrated by Google and MIT, among other institutions, finds that 93% of the time, youth aged 13 to 18 that receive a ReThink alert change their mind and decide *not* to say something offensive. It is that simple. And so, this idea, that we often hear from tech companies, that we're stuck with the social media that we have, that we're stuck with the internet that we have, that we can't possibly do better than this because it's all just too complex…that's an idea that I reject. I think it's an idea that a lot of us here today reject. So I'm really, really excited and passionate about what we can do moving forward to find these easy, common sense solutions that can make the internet a more safe place for youth, that can realize the internet that I deserved as a young person and the internet that every young person deserves. Thank you.