

**EPISODE 1129**

**“WS:** *I think I was just so taken by what was happening around the country and a very diverse group of women all running for the very first time, all different ages, all different backgrounds. To me, it was not just transformative in what it meant for politics but what it meant for women.”*

[INTRODUCTION]

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**FT:** Welcome to So Money, everybody. I'm your host, Farnoosh Torabi. Wendy Sachs joins us again on So Money. She first came on the show back in May 2017, at the time released her new book, *Fearless and Free*, about professional women and their career pivots. Wendy herself has conducted her own professional pivot. Going from her life as an author and speaker, she's now the creator of a new documentary called *Surge*, which chronicles the record number of first female candidates who ran, one, and upended politics in the historic 2018 midterm election. It premiered on SHOWTIME in September and is currently airing on Amazon as well.

Wendy takes us behind the scenes of producing this documentary as a first-timer, raising money, the ups and downs, and why she is hopeful for the future of politics and the role that women will play. Here's Wendy Sachs.

[INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Wendy Sachs, welcome back to So Money. My goodness, what a year 2020 has been for you in particular, coming out with your documentary. Congratulations.

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**WS:** Thank you so much, and it's so amazing to be back on your incredible show. Thank you, Farnoosh. And, yeah, what a wild ride 2020 has been.

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**FT:** Seriously. Now, last time you were on the show, you didn't have documentarian in your bio. So let's just start there. You came to this podcast really as an author. We talked a lot about taking risks. You wrote the book *Fearless and Free: How Smart Women Pivot and Relaunch Their Careers*. I almost feel like your documentary which is called *Surge*, which I totally want you to tell us all about it, but I almost feel like you're living by the playbook of your book.

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**WS:** It's sort of like what they tell writers. Write about what you know. So, yeah, I feel like – Funny enough, *Fearless and Free* came out in 2017 and I was – My last edits for the book, I was writing about the 2016 election and Hillary Clinton and the way she's perceived in the media. She's not authentic enough. She doesn't smile enough, and all of the things that she was dinged for. I wrote about that and we didn't know the results then of the 2016 election. I had to turn in my manuscript in October of 2016. Then a few weeks later, of course, we all learned and we were pretty stunned, I think most of America, that Hillary Clinton did not win.

So coming out of that election and coming out, which was for me the devastating results of Donald Trump winning and Hillary Clinton losing that election. Then what we saw was this amazing turn of events with women marching and then throwing their hats into the ring and saying, "I'm going to run for office." Women who had never imagined that they would run for office all of a sudden felt so compelled, so energized, so motivated, and they felt that they needed to do more than just march and send postcards off or call their members of Congress. But they were going to run for office.

That's really what inspired the film, and it's just very interesting because it's the ultimate pivot really. Women who would never imagine they were going to run for office were really pivoting in their careers. I think I was just so taken by what was happening around the country and a very diverse group of women all running for the very first time, all different ages, all different backgrounds. To me, it was not just transformative in what it meant for politics but what it meant for women to really take those risks at such a big level. It was just incredibly inspiring to me.

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**FT:** I want to get into the behind the scenes of creating a documentary for the first time, which is essentially what you did. But just to stick with this theme of hope and women-led politics, are you hopeful as we now enter 2021? It almost feels – Sometimes, you wish that your books, your documentaries, your creative projects like come out right away because it's very much capturing like the zeitgeist of the now. But then, of course, these things take time, comes out two years later. Books come out years later. In some ways, the timing couldn't have been better for this documentary. Although it looks at the 2018 midterm elections, I feel like the momentum just continues to build with women candidates.

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**WS:** Absolutely. I mean, I felt like the timing was actually perfect for the release of the film because it was right at – We premiered on SHOWTIME in September and then also released on Amazon in October, right before the election. What the film does is it shows the power of grassroots activism. It shows what different leadership looks like and that it's not just white and middle-aged and male. But that it can be young. It can be women of color. It can be women with tattoos all over their bodies. It can be women breastfeeding on the campaign trail. All of that really shakes up our idea of female leadership and that whole cliché. You need to see her to be her. It's very true, right? So when you see more women running and winning and more women who represent America and are just diverse in nature, it makes it easier the next time.

So we saw this surge of women running in 2018, which is what we captured, and one of the women we followed was Lauren Underwood who's the youngest black woman to ever get elected to Congress. But what we saw in 2020 was that the surge was continuing. That, in fact, there were more women running for office than who ran in 2018, and this time more republican women too. So this was not just a democratic blue wave, but it was happening on both sides of the aisle which was also very important.

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**FT:** In your directing of this film and producing and interviewing all of your I guess – What do you call it in a documentary? Cast members or your profiles, your subjects.

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**WS:** The subjects, the characters.

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**FT:** Right, because it's not scripted. But did you come across what I think is still a very strong headwind which is resistance to the idea, the notion that women can be in politics, right? I just wrote an article about how there is this gap between what we say, the progressive values that we say we uphold that we say that we believe in and then what actually we end up doing in our own lives? From my end, from the financial perspective, there's a lot of women in this country who are ambitious, who are career-driven, who are making money, and they defer all financial decision making to their male partners which is against what they would probably say philosophically they believe in. But that's just what's happening.

So through the trail of producing this documentary, what sort of resistance did you see? What are we up against? I think that this momentum is great, but why has it taken us this long and what are the current headwinds?

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**WS:** There is no question that sexism is still very much alive and racism is very much alive. I mean, I think we saw that more than ever in 2020 and in the past four years, the ugliness of American society. We're not post-gender. We're not post-race. I mean, all of that is very much at the forefront. So, yes, I think that women are still being criticized for what they look like, how they speak on the campaign trail, what they wear, the tone of their voices, whether they're authentic enough, whether they're warm enough, and whether they have the credentials to actually be a leader.

So that's still very much happening but at the same time – And by the way, I think that women also will not vote for women. I mean, we saw that coming out of the 2020 election too. Not just 2016 but –

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**FT:** What is that about? Do you think that – Really, I ask this with curiosity. I feel like some women and I can't speak for all women but I feel like there's a part of us. We like the patriarchy because it's familiar. It's comforting. We want to be taken care of. I'm using air quotes.

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**WS:** Yeah. I think that the idea that women are too emotional is still unfortunately very much out there among certain groups of people, among certain groups of women who feel that a women would get carried away. We're too emotional. We're not rational enough. We're just not manly. You know that. So instead of taking those attributes and saying, "Oh, but we're nurturing and we're collaborative. Therefore, we actually make excellent CEOs and excellent leaders because we know how to get along. We know how to compromise."

The flip side of that is we're too emotional. We'll cry. We have children at home. Therefore, we're going to be distracted. We don't have the chops and we don't have what it takes. It is

really stunning that that idea still lives on with women, and I would argue with white women. That's really where you're hearing that. I think women of color and black women, they're so used to women leading their communities and being the activists and being out there and fighting for their families and fighting for their communities. But, yeah, there's definitely something else still happening among middle-class, and I would even argue upper-middle class, middle-class white women where they just don't have those same ideas or the same constructs, and I don't know why.

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**FT:** Lived experience, right.

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**WS:** It sort of is pretty alarming.

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**FT:** Well, let's talk about how you made this film. I want to talk about the fundraising, which in our email exchanges you were like so effing hard, even when I met – We hung out. We had a dinner party we're both at last year, and you hadn't yet released the film. Obviously, you were still very much in the weeds of things and you were – I could tell it was like a real stressful point in the production to raise that last stretch of money to get this out in the world. For somebody who this was your first time, where did you even begin? What's your advice for somebody who's like interested in covering an issue through a documentary but has no idea where to begin? They're doing a pivot.

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**WS:** Right. Yes, this was definitely the most challenging project I've ever taken. Just to backtrack and I'm going to answer all of those questions. But to backtrack, it seemed like such

an obvious story to tell, right? Coming out of the 2016 election and moving into 2018, there were so many stories bubbling up in the media about all of these women running for office for the first time, and it was everywhere. It felt like it was everywhere. It felt like it was the perfect documentary to tell.

In fact, it was, and so many people were telling these documentaries which was part of the challenge of raising the money was that I was competing against about a dozen other. At one point, about a dozen other in production documentaries that were all in the same genre of women running for office. Some of those were connected to very established directors and producers who already had a built-in network of investors, of foundations that they would go to, of just – They had the infrastructure in place. Here I was coming for the very first time, knocking on all the same doors and getting rejected wherever I went.

My advice is to have a sense of where that financing is coming from. If you can't – I would not advocate trying to do a production of film where you're filming around the country which is what we were doing and not be able to finance it on your own, with your partners, and with the other people involved in the film and to really sort of – You don't want to max out all of your credit cards. It becomes very expensive. So you should have a sense of where, at least, that seed financing is coming from and that funding.

We did all sorts of things from a crowdsourcing campaign on iFundWomen to applying to every foundation grant you can imagine, to reaching out to the Women Moving Millions group of women. Then what I really thought was going to be the obvious place where I'd raise money was from democratic women who write checks for democratic candidates and who are part of these giving pods because I thought, “Well, they're going to want to support this film because we're following democratic women running for office.” I could not have been more wrong about that.

Thinking that people who write checks for political candidates will write checks for a political film, even though I was connecting the dots of why it was sort of all supporting the same cause, they didn't understand it and they didn't support the film. What I found was women who

write checks for film are the ones who would support the film. So it was a very small group of people, and that was really surprising to me and definitely stressful because I thought it was going to be much easier than it ultimately was.

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**FT:** What is in it for someone to – I mean, other than just obviously believing in this concept, wanting it to see become successful, but is there more to it than that?

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**WS:** Yeah.

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**FT:** Are they going to make a return? I guess they're not, right? It's just a contribution.

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**WS:** So it can work both ways. Yes, you have just people who donate. We had a 501(c)(3) partner in Aubin Pictures which – So there was a tax deductible way that people could give, and a lot of people did give that way. People who wanted that tax write-off would do that not for the small crowd funding but for the larger checks. Then we did look for investors. We wound up getting one investor for the film, and they are hoping there's going to be a nice return on their investment. When we were pitching that investor, Knock Down The House had just sold, which is a film about that profiled Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and a few other female candidates who are running for office. Also similar to our film in many ways and then different in many ways but it came out much sooner and it was the darling of Sundance in 2019 and it sold to Netflix for \$10 million.

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**FT:** Oh, my gosh.

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**WS:** \$10 million. It was the highest selling documentary film of all time at that time. When our investor heard about that film selling for so much, he was excited to invest in ours. Of course, that we did not get the same kind of sale that Knock Down The House did for many, many reasons, but that was interesting to that investor. But that was also someone who was motivated because he had invested in political documentary films and he really, really liked the idea.

But there's the problem with independent films is you can't really promise an ROI. You really are looking for people who just love the project, and that I think is the difference. To me, that it was a similar mindset to someone who's writing checks for political candidates. You really don't know if they're going to win or not. In fact, they may be really a long shot in that district or for that seat. Yet in the cause, you believe in the cause and you want to support them. Therefore, you're writing the check.

So I thought it would be a similar mindset but I think people didn't really understand. Maybe they didn't have the confidence that the film would actually ever see the light of day. They didn't really know what that meant to give to the film, even though I tried to make these pitches that you were really supporting saving our democracy. You're supporting, showing what a really inspiring hopeful film that will transform the next generation of girls into leaders. I could get my whole song and dance about why you should support this film. Ultimately, it was just people who give to film were the ones who ultimately gave to Surge.

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**FT:** Where do these people hang out? How do you find them?

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**WS:** Is there like a group chat where you're like who gives [inaudible 00:18:24]?

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**FT:** Yeah, another Facebook page.

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**WS:** It took a lot of networking. There are groups like Chicken & Egg. Wendy Ettinger runs this, a film company that supports female filmmakers. I actually wound up – I mean, I did a lot of sort of stealth things because I was really trying to get into the Democratic National Committee's top female fundraisers. So I got myself invited to speak on a panel at their annual conference last October and I moderated the panel. That way, I got myself in the room and said typical like, “Get yourself in the room. Have a speaking role, so you're prominent enough so that you meet the right people.” So I did that and I moderated a panel about women running for office at the local level.

Then in that room was the entire – The women who run something called the Women's Leadership Forum for the Democratic National Committee. So these are the women who are the top fundraisers, and I just gave my elevator pitch to everyone in that room. One of those women, Diane Robinson, wound up becoming one of our advisors, and she helped raise money for the film. So she was sort of a tremendous surrogate for the film because she was in both worlds and she also has the son who's a film producer. She had been a producer on a documentary film about Bakari Sellers who is a member of Congress. So she got it. She understood both sides of this and was really helpful in trying to connect me to women who write checks for film and women who also care about democratic politics.

But, yeah, it was these like weird ways that I was just trying to sneak my way into different groups of women and different networks of givers like the Women Moving Millions group, the

Women's Leadership Forum at the Democratic National Committee. I mean a whole host of things. It was just – I was hustling. I went to Sundance. I showed up at every party.

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**FT:** What? Wait a minute. So what kept you going? Was there a moment or moments you just were like, “I don't want to do this anymore. It's too hard.”?

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**WS:** I that if I didn't love this project as much as I did, it would have been very easy to say, “You know what? It's just too hard. I'm just – I can't raise the money. It's too hard.” But because we just kept filming and, I mean, I was doing crazy things. We ran out of money so many times. I couldn't afford to fly. We were filming in Texas, Indiana, and Illinois, and I live in New Jersey. So like rule number one, if you're going to film something on your own, maybe do it close to home where you don't have to hop on a plane. We were filming. We knew that because it's a documentary. You have to keep going, right? To tell the story, you really can't stop because we were trying to show the election cycle.

So it was summer of 2018. There was a democratic convention happening in the State of Texas, and my candidates were going to be there. I was really – I had like maxed out credit cards. I could not spend any more money but I wanted to make sure that we were filming this. So my cinematographer in Dallas – By the way, we hired only women. The entire crew is female. All of our DPs are female. Our editor was female who's very important to us.

Anyhow, so my cinematographer, I tell her she's going to go film this entire democratic convention. She's going to gather about 10 women who are running for office who I want to interview and I said, “Just FaceTime me when you're ready for the interview.” So she does. I'm driving on a street near my house, I pull over into a gas station, and I FaceTime this interview for two hours as she's filming and she she's propped up her iPhone, so I can ask the questions. I mean, we did all sorts of crazy things like that just to keep the costs down.

There was another time I was in Texas. Also, we were out of money. This time, I think I couldn't even afford my cinematographer. So I was in Texas for a speaking event for that book, *Fearless and Free*. I got in an Uber. I went to meet up with one of the women who we were following in the film. I shot her on my iPhone. So one of the – It actually looks like very creative towards the end of the film because you see a selfie video and you see some sort of iPhone video. It was just because we couldn't afford anything else, so we really just leaned into some of this, the idea that we were very scrappy and had to be very lean, and we made it into the film. It's sort of all worked because we had this very brilliant editor who pulled it all together.

But I just loved the project so much. I loved it so much. The more we shot and the more footage we had, the more I fell in love with this. The more I knew that we needed to finish this, we were going to finish this film. I mean, I was determined to finish this film.

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**FT:** How is it doing a documentary when you don't know what the end outcome is going to be? You're following these races. Were you prepared with either a result and how to sort of put a bow on things?

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**WS:** That's such a great question. Yeah. I mean, when you're following an election, you're really hoping for a winner. We – All three of our candidates made it through their primaries, and then you're hoping someone's going to win in the general election. You are betting on a horse. We were very worried that if we didn't have a winner, we would never ultimately sell the film. So, yeah, you're looking at the polling numbers, but all of our candidates were running in very deep red districts, and they were all looking to flip their districts blue.

Which is unlike Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in *Knock Down The House*, she was running in a democratic district, and that film only went through the primary. We were running. We were

really hoping that one of our horses in this race was going to flip their district. Ultimately, we had a winner in Lauren Underwood and we were nervous. Definitely, we were nervous and we just kept saying, “You know what? We're going to make the most of this. Win or lose, we'll figure it out. We'll figure it out.” But we definitely had those moments of, “Oh, no. What if no one wins?”

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**FT:** What if this has all been for nothing?

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**WS:** I know no one will watch this movie.

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**FT:** Now on the other side of it, Surge is, as you mentioned, on SHOWTIME and Amazon, pitching to those major networks. Or what do we even call them? They're –

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**WS:** Sure. They're networks and streamers.

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**FT:** You mean powerhouses.

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**WS:** Yeah.

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**FT:** How do you get on both SHOWTIME and Amazon? I thought there would be like a competition, a non-compete or something?

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**WS:** For sure. No, that's a great question. We were acquired by SHOWTIME in August, so they bought the film, and the agreement that we have with SHOWTIME was that we were able to do what they call transactional on other streamers after a given window had expired. It was very important to us because, look, SHOWTIME has a great brand recognition. But it doesn't have a massive audience, and we really wanted to make sure many, many people would have access to the film before the election. It was very important.

So we were able to negotiate in our contract that we could then begin our transactional, which is Amazon and iTunes and all these other platforms after a designated window had closed. For us, I think it was 60 days. We're not free on Amazon, unless you're actually a SHOWTIME subscriber and then there's a whole Amazon Prime free thing. But right now, we are – You can rent or you can buy the film on Amazon.

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**FT:** On a scale of 1 to 10 personally, how financially successful was this project compared to, say, book writing and other projects in your past? I mean, considering that this is sort of like a sprint, right? It was like a two-year or how many year project not instantly gratifying, but there is sort of a light at the end of the tunnel and then money at the end of the tunnel. If you don't want to go into like the finances of this or like the –

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**WS:** I'm happy to. I can be –

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**FT:** Tell us everything.

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**WS:** Yeah. I'm super transparent about this. I seem to do projects that don't make me a lot of money. Knock Down The House sold for \$10 million. Our film has not covered the cost of production, so I have not paid myself a fee or paid myself back any of the expenses. When I say pay my fee and for people who don't really know what a director's fee would cost, I think we only allocated like \$80,000, and I worked on this film for three and a half years. So this is not a money maker.

Now, it can be. People definitely make money on documentary films but it's very, very challenging. The market is very – I want to – There is so much out there right now.

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**FT:** Inconsistent.

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**WS:** It's a tough market, and we also were selling in the middle of this pandemic. We were facing so many barriers. We were lucky to have made a sale. But, yeah, unfortunately the immediate financial return has not yet been seen. We hope to make some money on educational distribution, future sales. There is a tale to this, and we believe that the film definitely has a life beyond November. When you watch it, you'll get a sense of what I mean, and there's a great home for this in an educational market. So we're speaking to an educational district distributor right now.

But, again, that's not a lot of money. I mean, it's just – So I think my mindset I was so caught up on making sure I would make money on this for such a long time. I was so worried financially about the toll that it was taking on sort of personal life, my finances, all of that. It was a full-time job for I would say two out of the three and a half years. It was very much a full-time job. So I can't say that financially, Farnoosh, you would probably warn people not to take something like this on. It's probably not the greatest project.

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**FT:** But money isn't everything, right? Wendy, we talk about that on the show too that the impact that you can have with your work is invaluable sometimes, and that sometimes makes it the whole thing worth it.

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**WS:** Yeah. I think when I could let go of it sort of psychologically, about getting caught up in the money, it was very, very hard to let go of that for a really, really long time. When I finally sort of made peace with, “Okay, this is not going to make me a lot of money right now. In fact, I might not get paid back all of the money that I've put into this.” But I'm creating a project that I feel so good about, that I feel like is helping our democracy, that I'm proud that my daughter and my son are watching, and I can feel really good that we've created something beautiful and transformative.

Yes, I do believe at what you're saying. It matters. It means something. It's not going to help my bank account but it is about what's the next project. Now, I am a director. I am a producer. I have some credibility in the industry now. I think people will take my calls more seriously next time. I've also learned a lot.

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**FT:** We can consult on all these other documentaries in the future. If I ever do a documentary, I'm calling you and I'm paying you for your time and your effort.

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**WS:** Thank you. As you should, as you should. I will give free advice to anyone who wants to know. Look, I think it's a great art form. I mean, it changes culture. Art changes culture. It changes the way we think about the world. It's very important. It's important to support it.

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**FT:** Wendy Sachs, thank you so, so much for putting yourself out there, for going out on a limb for all of us, for all of our benefits. The documentary is *Surge*, available on SHOWTIME and Amazon.

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**WS:** Thank you so much, Farnoosh. I loved having this conversation with you and I love all that you do. I need to talk to you next time before I create my next project because next time I'm going to make some money.

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**FT:** Yes. There will be a next time. Thanks so much, Wendy.

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**WS:** Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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**FT:** Thanks so much to Wendy for joining us. Again, her documentary is Surge on Amazon and SHOWTIME. All this information is available at [somoneypodcast.com](http://somoneypodcast.com). While you're there, click on Ask Farnoosh and send me your questions for our Friday episodes of Ask Farnoosh. I hope your day is So Money.

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