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**Annie:** Hi friends! Welcome to another episode of That Sounds Fun. I'm your host Annie F. Downs. I'm so happy to be here with you today.

Before we dive into this episode though, I've got to tell you about another podcast I think you're going to love that just joined our That Sounds Fun Podcast Network, The Fortitude Podcast with Micah and Sarah. You may know the host, Micah and Sarah from TikTok or Instagram, where you see their hysterical bits singing Broadway tunes and Disney songs. Also, they're not just bits. They're both ridiculously talented.

But you've also got to check out their podcast, The Fortitude Podcast. Every Tuesday they're having conversations with each other or with friends about life experiences that have tested and strengthened them and built their fortitude.

They also love answering your questions about relationships, faith, mentality, trauma, healing, basically all the things in life that make up the human experience. When you're in a tough season, it is so important to know that you're not alone and that you're capable of making it to the other side. And that's what these two love to remind us.

So listen and subscribe to The Fortitude Podcast with Micah and Sarah wherever you're listening to this one, and do not miss their new episodes every Tuesday.

**Intro:** Today on the show, speaking of podcasters I love, America's favorite government teacher, Sharon McMahon is here and we are all the better for it. And there is not a more perfect time than right now for her to guide us through election season and talk about her brand new book, *The Small and the Mighty: Twelve Unsung Americans Who Changed the Course of History, from the Founding to the Civil Rights Movement*.

We are big Sharon McMahon fans around here, and I know a lot of you are too. So I cannot wait for you to hear this one. Here's my conversation with my friend, Sharon McMahon.

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**Annie:** Sharon McMahon, welcome back to That Sounds Fun.

**Sharon:** Oh, I'm truly so excited to be here today. Thank you for inviting me.

**Annie:** I'm so grateful. Happy book launch season. You're doing it.

**Sharon:** Ooh, it's coming up fast.

**Annie:** It's so much, right?

**Sharon:** It's a lot. But it's exciting. It's very exciting.

**Annie:** Tell me about you just posted a reel as we're recording of signing all the pages they insert into autographed books. So when I get to do that, our whole team watches a show, we pick a show, everyone sits around while I'm signing, they're working, we're watching a show. What was your rhythm? How many did you end up having to sign?

**Sharon:** I want to say it was like 3,000 or something like that.

**Annie:** Which is insane to sign 3,000 pieces of paper. So what did you do? Did you just sit and look at the wall? Did you listen to something? What did you do?

**Sharon:** No. I had my laptop and I had Netflix. I made it through quite a few episodes of TV shows. I ended up binging... What is it called? *America's Sweethearts*, like about the Dallas Cowboys cheerleaders. I caught up on *Bridgerton*. I think I caught up on some *Real Housewives*. It was just trashy TV central, which you got to make time for.

**Annie:** I think you're already friends with them, but John Green, when his... let me think which one it was. It may have been *Turtles All the Way Down*. One of his books, he said, "I'll sign every copy of the first printing". And then had to end up signing like 150,000.

**Sharon:** Yes, yes. I remember this.

**Annie:** He had to go to a hand doctor. They had like a sponsorship from Sharpie or something. It was wild. So was your hand tired after your 3,000?

**Sharon:** Oh, it definitely was. It took a few days. I couldn't do it all in one day, but it definitely was... Yeah, the idea of having to sign like 150,000 or 200,000 copies, that's crazy. I remember him saying sometimes he was doing it in the basement and he would sometimes come up from the basement to show his wife of a particularly good signature where he was like, "Look at this one." Like a little kid would do, you know. I signed it so good. And his wife was like, Mm-mm.

**Annie:** Congratulations.

**Sharon:** Congrats on signing your own name.

**Annie:** When I'm doing a bunch in a row, there's a time where my hand stops doing it correctly and starts writing a different name and it's always the same other name. It looks like Amy instead of Annie. It's not the same name. When I get there, I stop. Whenever I have one that is the other woman's name that my hand just releases, I'm like, "That's all that she can do today because now someone else has started signing and we need to stop."

**Sharon:** My hand has been possessed by an unknown [inaudible 00:04:51].

**Annie:** That's right. That's right. It only shows up when I'm out of energy.

**Sharon:** Yes. As long as it's not Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*. What? Like it's hard?

**Annie:** Okay. So then they send those off and they get inserted in the books. Where did you sign it for? Is there a particular bookstore that has all the autographed ones?

**Sharon:** Books A Million and Barnes and Noble. Barnes and Noble has already sold out, but Books A Million still has some in stock.

**Annie:** I mean, when I was reading your book, *The Small and the Mighty*, which I'm sure the majority of our friends are already reading, first of all, it is so good.

**Sharon:** Thank you. Thank you for reading it.

**Annie:** Oh my gosh. I get to read a lot of books, I read some quickly and some slowly. If I want to really read every word, I say, "Can I take this one home?" And I took yours home. I've had yours at home with me for the weekend.

**Sharon:** Thank you.

**Annie:** Why are people craving good history teaching? Why am I craving this?

**Sharon:** It's a great question. I think it just stems from this idea that we've realized that there's so much we don't know. I think a lot of us as adults are asking ourselves the question of like, why don't I know this? There's a number of answers for that.

Of course, no one can know everything. Of course, that's true. But I think there's also this idea that many of us are realizing that we've been served up sort of a whitewashed version of history that is the great man version of history of like, well, then we have George Washington. And you know, George Washington is worth learning about. Of course, he is. But he's not the only guy on the roster. There's a lot

of people who have done really incredible things that we don't know about for a variety of reasons.

And I just think people are ready and willing and wanting to know the whole story and not just a little portion of the story that, you know, somebody, some textbook writer cooked up. They want to know the whole story. That's really what I do a lot on Instagram, I do a lot on my other writing work. And that's part of what I think is happening in this book. It's the whole story.

**Annie:** Can you give us a day in the life...? Because the amount of research that went into this book... I have a team that helps me research things. I'm sure you do too. But still, the amount of research you do for this, the amount of reading you must do every morning to tell us the new stories you tell us. Can you just walk us through like, what does your day actually look like?

**Sharon:** Well, it depends a lot on the day, as I'm sure it's true for you. It depends on what I'm doing that day. But it starts early. I'm usually up early in the summer, even earlier than the winter, because it's so light outside. But I get up-

**Annie:** And you live so far north, it gets light real early.

**Sharon:** So early. Right now I'm noticing it's September and it's still kind of dark outside at six. But in the summer, it's sure not. So I'm up early. When I was writing this book, I was getting up every morning at 4:30 or 5:00 and working for a couple of hours before anybody else in my house was awake so that I could have that sort of uninterrupted time, which I love. I'm a morning person. I can't do productive work at night, really. That's when I'm doing my knitting and my needlepoint and things that don't require the same amount of brainpower.

But when I'm done with my sort of morning work, when I'm not writing a book, I'm reading the news from a variety of sources. I always try to read 7 to 10 news sources a day from across the spectrum from sort of like-

**Annie:** Just the headlines?

**Sharon:** I see what's happening in the world, get a sense of what's going on in the world, dive a little deeper into specific stories. I will read the same story from multiple news sources to see how it might differ. Just last night, there was a headline about a legal case. I was like, "Oh, that is an update that I need to share. When I read the summary that a couple of very reputable news organizations posted, they were different from each other. They said different things. I was like, "That's weird."

So I actually went and found the legal document. It was a judge's opinion, a judge's decision. I actually went and found it and read it. I was like, "Both of you are wrong."

**Annie:** Wow.

**Sharon:** Whoever is writing these stories on the fly did not actually read this document. Sometimes it involves randomly reading a legal brief that you didn't know you needed to read that day. Some of them are 100 pages long. I see where my day is going to lead based on what's happening in the news.

I'm usually spending time reading books for work, for podcast episodes, as you do, reading books for work because I am writing about something. I'm usually recording podcast episodes. Either I'm being interviewed or I'm interviewing somebody or I'm recording a docuseries. I'm creating content for Instagram slides. I'm creating content for my private group. I'm writing articles for the preamble.

And then there's a lot of research that goes into some of those. So I spend quite a bit of time reading for research purposes. So it's a very brain-power-intensive job.

**Annie:** Yeah. So on a day where you're working at your office or at your house, it's 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Are you sitting there for 12 hours?

**Sharon:** Oh, it's more than that. Oh, it's more than that.

**Annie:** Sharon! It is more than 12 hours a day?

**Sharon:** Oh, yeah. Easily. Easily.

**Annie:** What?

**Sharon:** Mm-mm.

**Annie:** How are you doing? I mean, do you feel like you're in a season where your job has taken the front role after your family and your own health?

**Sharon:** Well, I did do something for my own health in the last year, which is I got a walking pad for my desk and I got a tray for my treadmill. So I have a walking pad at my office and I have a big tray that goes across the arm things for my treadmill at home. And I do quite a bit of my work while I'm walking. So that's made a huge difference. So I'm not just sitting like being sedentary for 14 hours a day.

But my kids are in school and they also have... you know, I don't have two-year-olds anymore. This is not a life that you could live if you have a new baby. And it's also only a life you can live if you really, really, really love your work, which I do.

So most of the time, I would say it's somewhere between... You know, I take breaks during the day to attend a thing, go to a doctor's appointment for a child, pick somebody up, eat the dinner, and then I put some more time in after dinner while kids are doing their activities. But I would say probably 14 hours is roughly average.

**Annie:** Man, that is...

**Sharon:** No one will say at my funeral, Annie, Boy, what a lazy git.

**Annie:** That's exactly right.

**Sharon:** Nobody is gonna say that.

**Annie:** They will say a lot of things about me, but Annie didn't work hard or Annie was lazy is probably not two of them.

**Sharon:** That's right.

**Annie:** There are some things I will be very accused of at my funeral, those will not be two of them. I mean, the amount of research, that's one of the things that blew my mind reading your book. I love footnotes and backnotes. So I kept one hand at the back for the entire book. Talk about the research of this. The 12... is it 12 people? Yeah.

**Sharon:** Yeah.

**Annie:** The 12 people you picked to profile. I'm sure you've answered this a hundred times. I'm sorry to have to ask you a question you already answered a bunch. But how did you find those 12? And then how did you get into the research of them?

**Sharon:** Well, thank you for noticing about the research, because there are almost 500 footnotes in the book, which are...

**Annie:** They're just as enjoyable as the book, honestly. It's such a treat. You just flip back, flip back, flip back.

**Sharon:** If you're a lover of footnotes, this will be very satisfying to you. Or endnotes, I should say. Side note, I recently read a history book by somebody very, very, very

well-known person and it's about a fascinating topic, and there's not one footnote in that whole book. And there's a lot of direct quotes from history, and I'm like, "From where are you getting these quotes?"

**Annie:** From where did these come, sir?

**Sharon:** I'm not accusing anybody of anything untoward. I'm not saying like, oh, they plagiarized. I'm not saying that at all. But I was supremely dissatisfied that there was no original... like there's no backup for like the person said that. How do I know the person said that?

**Annie:** How do I know? Because every time you have quotes, just about every time you have quotes, there's a little number next to it.

**Sharon:** That's right. That's exactly right. So anyway, it was like a personal value that I wanted to be able to have.

**Annie:** I would have been bothered by that too. I would have been... yes. A version of me that is not the you and me we are right now as public people, the version of me would have sent a DM and said, can you tell me where all your sources are? I'm not willing for that to be screenshot into the public. So I don't do that.

**Sharon:** Where's your list of sources? Otherwise, it seems like you made this up. The research took me a couple of years.

**Annie:** Really?

**Sharon:** Honestly, it took me a couple of years.

**Annie:** Were you working on it before you had a book deal?

**Sharon:** Mm-mm. I've been working on this book for three years, though.

**Annie:** Wow.

**Sharon:** So yeah, this has been a three-year process. I got a book deal in 2021, October of 2021. So yes, this is a three-year endeavor. A couple of the people really took me a long time because they are not well-documented people from history, as in nobody has pulled together all of the little threads that exist. That took me a considerable amount of work to do all of this digging to be able to create a portrait of somebody that had never been written before.

Some of the people in the book, I tell stories about them that maybe you don't know, but there are a few people whose names you might recognize. For example, Booker T. Washington, a lot of people know who he is. But I bring him up because there is a story about him that most people probably do not know. And that was a story that I really wanted to tell.

So some people like him. He was a prolific writer himself, wrote his own autobiographies. He was famous in his lifetime. This is a key thing here is if you're famous in your lifetime, there is a lot more source material about you because you're in newspapers and you're doing your own speeches and you're doing your own writings. And so you're putting your own name on things when somebody is famous in their lifetime.

But people who are not famous in their lifetime, they're far more difficult to profile because nobody is thinking to themselves, I gotta make sure that I write down that stuff about that woman who lived down the road for me.

**Annie:** That's right. I mean, he was the only one I knew by name recognition. Once I read about Katharine Lee Bates, I was like, Oh, yes, I've known of her. But most of them, I was like-

**Sharon:** "Never heard of them."

**Annie:** "Sharon found people from the bottom of a haystack somewhere and pulled them out and featured them and the massive impact they've had in the shaping of America.

**Sharon:** Yeah. I mean, and these are people where you're like, Dang, that is actually really, really impactful. Why is their name not on the side of a building?

**Annie:** Yes.

**Sharon:** One of the people that I think is a great example of this, this is not from this book, but the book *Hidden Figures*, which I'm sure you read or have seen the movie, *Hidden Figures*. Katherine Johnson was an incredible figure in the history of NASA. You know, she's out there calculating the trajectory of Apollo to figure out how we're going to get it back to Earth.

Now she's finally getting her name recognition. Now there's a campus, the Katherine Johnson Campus named after her. But it took a really long time for people like Katherine Johnson to get the name recognition that she deserves. And I really do think some of the people in this book deserve to have their names in the lexicon of greats, you know, next to many of the more famous big names of history.



**Annie:** Okay, so that was one thing I was going to ask you, because all these people have descendants. Have you heard from any descendants? Have you reached out to any descendants of these people that are... you know, Alexander Hamilton's kids, grandkids, great, great, great, great, great, all that are well documented on earth and have very much enjoyed probably being Alexander Hamilton's people in the last decade. Have you heard from any of these people yet?

**Sharon:** Well, a few of them don't have descendants because they died without children.

**Annie:** Wow.

**Sharon:** They died without children. So they have other relatives that are like, That was my great aunt or whatever.

**Annie:** Sure.

**Sharon:** In terms of have I reached out to any of the specific families, there are a few people that I have reached out to and I've gotten like an email back or, you know, just sort of almost like a perfunctory like, "Yeah, I'm aware that I'm related to them but I didn't know them or anything like that. It wasn't even like they don't care. They're just like, "I don't have any insider tea to give you. There's no like secret trove of letters.

**Annie:** That's right. There's not like a... what are they called? In the attic? Like a whole box in the attic

**Sharon:** Yeah. There's nothing in the attic tied with a ribbon covered with dust.

**Annie:** Wouldn't we hope for it, though?

**Sharon:** Every writer would love to discover that secret cache of letters.

**Annie:** That's exactly right.

**Sharon:** So, yes, I've emailed with a few people, but ultimately, the relatives of people ended up not being a particularly fruitful thread for me to pull.

**Annie:** That's so interesting. If I was a betting woman, which I'm not because I don't want to use my money that way. I'm curious, once your book is out — you don't have to say any of this. Annie is saying this — will they come back around once they read? Maybe?

**Sharon:** Yeah.

**Annie:** Once they read and once they see how many of us have purchased a book that has a whole chapter about their family, we'll just be curious to see.

**Sharon:** I am curious.

**Annie:** If it becomes interesting.

**Sharon:** I have wondered that if there will be somebody who comes out of the woodwork that maybe I had not tracked down or somebody who is inspired to tell more of their family's story once they see that people are interested in it.

[00:19:46] <music>

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Now back to our conversation with Sharon.

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**Annie:** Why is it important for us to read histories of people that are not known? Like, you know, it's so much easier to pick up a Hamilton history or a Susan B. Anthony, a name that everybody knows from school. Why does it matter to read books and watch documentaries and listen to docuseries about people that are actually not remembered from their time?

**Sharon:** That's a great question. I love that question because I think so often when we read history, we read this history of famous people, we see their heroics, we see these great achievements. And they seem like those are things that other people did. Those are things that other people are capable of. I'm no Katherine Johnson, right? I can't calculate the trajectory of a rocket.

Those are achievements that other people are capable of, but not me. You know, I'm no Marie Curie. I don't have that kind of mind. I'm not out here trying to... and I'm not inventing all kinds of physics and things like that. That's just not how my mind works.

But I think when we are confronted with people who, in many cases, lived lives that we would never want to trade places with, they were not born into wealth privilege, they did not experience lives that were made easy by simple circumstances. In fact, quite the opposite. Many of these people lived lives that were filled with tragedy and they had ordinary jobs. They had ordinary lives and ordinary jobs. Many of them were just teachers. And I say "just teachers" in air quotes because nobody is just a teacher. But it's a common job is all I mean by that. It's a job millions of people have-

**Annie:** Including you and me. We both have been there.

**Sharon:** Yeah, that's right. That's right. You know, there's somewhere around four million teachers in the United States right now.

**Annie:** Wow.

**Sharon:** So lots of us can relate to the idea of being a teacher. But the idea that you need to somehow have achieved wealth, fame or been born into those kinds of things, elected office in order to be a great American is a lie that too many of us have believed. That if you don't have a statue or a marble bust or a plaque on the side of a building, then you can't be a great American. I think it's important for all of us to know what we are truly capable of if we just decide that we're going to keep doing the next needed thing.

**Annie:** I mean, I'm not going to read your whole conclusion because it is... I want people to have to, like, get teary when they read it themselves. But you said, "I'd want you to

know that the American experiment is full of ill-equipped people." That feels profound for our time. But that also feels like, Oh, yeah, the change I want to see in the world feels very hard to make because I don't feel equipped.

I'm going to reference this a couple of times. I was at a dinner last night, it was really interesting. A lot of leaders in Nashville. And it was led by two people from England. And they said, "Why would we lead this group?" Because if Americans lead it, it's partisan. And if we come and lead it, it's not. And I thought that was really interesting.

But one of the things they talked about is how often leaders actually what they do is they just try and fail. It's what sets you apart is you try and fail. And you talk about that so much in this book, Sharon, about like all these people that you profile did not do this perfectly and actually made mistakes along the way, and yet they still shaped the country that we live in.

**Sharon:** It's an important takeaway for all of us. So many of us think that we need to have all of the right circumstances before we can do something impactful. We need to have our financial house in order. We need to get the right education. We need to be stable in our relationships and have the children or, you know, whatever it is, these goals that we have for ourselves.

But those people rarely make history. The people who are waiting for the right circumstances to align are often not the people that we look back on and are like, "Wow, they really did something so impactful." But the other thing I think is really important to remember about this is that, you know, many of us might think we're afraid of failure, that we're afraid to... like, well, I tried it and I failed.

But in reality, we fail at things all the time. We fail at cooking a recipe. We fail at returning an email. We fail. We fail at karaoke. We fail at relationships where we are. We fail all of the time. It's not the failure that is really fear-inducing for us. It's having other people watch us fail. When we have people watch us fail, that's what produces the anxiety and the judgment. And that is what keeps us frozen.

But almost all of the people in this book had the audacity to just let other people watch them fail and to keep moving forward anyway, despite the fact that other people were talking about them, despite the fact that portions of their community were opposed to their efforts, despite the fact that in some cases there were entire government organizations that were trying to bring down the efforts of that person. They just had the audacity to keep letting people watch them fail. And these are just ordinary people.

**Annie:** I can't wait for people to read through the book too the parts where you talk about a name we don't know, that we do not recognize from history, that the American government was trying to stop in their time. I mean, it is wild. It is wild.

It makes me hope, and this is not to put an assignment on you, it makes me hope this is one of a dozen that we're going to get of you just like continuing to show us the small and the mighty because I just... Oh, I just loved it. I will publicly say how honored I was to see my name in the acknowledgments, Sharon. You did not have to do that, but that was very, very kind of you. I feel the same about you. So I feel very honored to be your friend.

You mentioned a second ago that when you were doing your research that you were looking at trusted news sources. When I read *The Small and the Mighty*, I trust this because I trust you, you've done your research. And conversation online a lot right now is that we don't have trusted news sources. So will you help us? Let's talk for a few minutes about what's going on right now in the world. Because we are the small and the mighty now, like we're the ones now. And so talk to me about how we figure out trusted news sources today.

**Sharon:** That's a huge question that a lot of people struggle with for sure. Right? Well, the first thing is, is that nobody, not a politician, not in a certain news organization should be free from your critical eye. There is nobody who... Anybody who's like, "I alone can save us," that person always has dictatorial aspirations. That person from history that... they are not taking you anywhere you want to go.

**Annie:** That's exactly right. We read about those. They were not the small and the mighty. They were the loud and the angry.

**Sharon:** Yeah, that's right. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and then you look back and you're like, why did I go along with that? That has never worked.

**Annie:** That could be a news source, too, telling us this is the only source you can trust.

**Sharon:** That's exactly right.

**Annie:** That should give us a red flag.

**Sharon:** That's 100% correct. Anybody who claims to have a lock on the truth and only they know the truth, that person you should regard with suspicion. Everybody who is worth, you know, trusting in any capacity should be honest about their limitations, they should be forthright about what topics they know about and which ones they do not know about. Anybody who claims to know everything about everything, that person definitely does not know everything about everything.

Don't take advice about heart conditions from me. What do I know about that? Nothing. Do you know what I mean? If I start trying to give you medical advice, don't trust me.

**Annie:** If I'm giving medical advice-

**Sharon:** No, don't trust me. You should be like, "That's not in your lane. That's not your wheelhouse. Get out of town." There's a lot like don't trust me if you want help with your calculus homework. Don't trust me. I cannot be trusted. And so anybody who is claiming to know everything about everything is somebody you should not trust. They should be forthright about here's what I do know about and what I do not know about.

Another thing that I think is important is that people really do need to learn to distinguish between news reporting and editorial and opinion content. I think sometimes people's frustration about the news is that they're watching or reading editorial or opinion content and thinking that they're reading the news. And then they're like, This is a biased news story when in reality they're reading an opinion article. It's supposed to be biased, right, because it's the viewpoint of that writer.

So I do think some of this is related to some people, certainly not you, but some people's lack of media literacy where they don't understand the difference between editorial opinion and fact news reporting. So if you're watching evening cable news thinking that you're getting fact reporting, you are in for a sad realization.

Programming on news channels varies throughout the day. Early in the morning, you're getting short hits of mostly factual news because people want to get started on here's the news you need to start your day. Overnight, the following five things happened around the world. And then often those news organizations will throw in some quick little hits of like a morning tidbit. You know, Sara Blakely invented high-heeled sneakers. It's so interesting. You know what I mean? They will throw in those-

**Annie:** I cannot shoes, by the way. We don't even have time. Oh, they're terrible. Yeah, I do. You may see them in me someday. I don't know. But as of right now, I can't imagine. I cannot imagine.

**Sharon:** Spanx. Great invention, Sara. Spanx are great.

**Annie:** I'm almost there, Sara. Keep going. Okay, yeah. So they'll throw in things like that.

**Sharon:** Yes.

**Annie:** I am learning in real-time as you're talking that the time of day does show you a totally different experience. Especially when we're talking about cable news networks and as we get into the evening hours, it switches over to be almost completely opinion and entertainment-driven programming. And they throw in some headlines. And you might be under the impression that this is the news because they're talking about headlines, but it's entirely their opinion about headlines.

There's a lot of contempt and a lot of anger for people who are outside of the viewpoint of that news organization. If you're watching MSNBC, NBC in the evenings, you're going to get a lot of contempt for Trump and the people who align with Trump. If you're watching a lot of Fox in the evenings, you're going to get a lot of contempt for Kamala Harris and other congressional Democrats. That just is what it is.

You also have to be aware that if you're watching Fox News in the morning, you're going to get a different experience entirely than if you're watching Fox News in the evening. And the same is true for the other networks.

So that's another thing that I would just say, if you're like, I don't know what to do. Stop watching the news. Just start reading it. Start reading the news instead.

**Annie:** At least there's not personality to it. It's just words on paper.

**Sharon:** And it's way easier to click away when you realize like, oh, this is just an opinion story. You don't have to sit through it like you do with the news to get to the next thing. You can just click away. I also think those clicks really help inform the news channel what is performing for them. The less time you spend reading their opinion content and the more time you spend reading fact-driven content, that's trackable to the news organizations, right? It's harder to track eyeballs on TV, much harder to track, in fact.

So it's way more trackable for them to see like, what are people actually spending time reading so that they can, you know, theoretically better tailor their content so they can maximize their own ad revenue based on what people are interested in? Stop giving them your eyeballs. If you don't like that kind of content, stop paying attention to it. That's how you vote with your dollars on news channels is stop paying attention to the content that is not fact-based if that's not what you're looking for.

**Annie:** You introduced me to AllSides on socials and that AllSides helps me a lot. Because I will go and look and say... when they do the charts that show here's where the



news source actually lands. And so then that helps me... In fact, you scored very well on all sides. You were like high research and right in the middle between leaning left and leaning right. It was amazing to see. That has helped me a lot too.

**Sharon:** I also really like Ad Fontes. That's a similar site to AllSides of slightly different mission. But Ad Fontes is Latin for "to the source". They have ranking charts that... If you want to check them out on Instagram, it's Ad Fontes Media. They have that sort of bell curve of left to right. But in addition, they also have not just a bias axis, they also have a reliability axis.

**Annie:** Oh, wow.

**Sharon:** So it's either they will tell you it's extremely opinion-driven content or it's very high fact reporting. There's nothing wrong with opinion content if that's what you want to be consuming. It's not that there's a problem with opinion content. It's that when people are consuming opinion content, thinking they're consuming fact content.

**Annie:** Yeah, that's right.

**Sharon:** There's nothing wrong with Honey Nut Cheerios if that's what you purchased. But if you purchased Honey Nut Cheerios thinking you're getting regular Cheerios, you're going to be sadly disappointed.

**Annie:** Or very happy that you made the choice. Yeah, you're exactly right. You're exactly right.

**Sharon:** So it's just a matter of knowing what you're signing up for so you're not being misled, right? You just don't want to be misled.

**Annie:** Some friends and I were riding in the car this weekend, and we were talking about the election coming up. And we were saying... I would love your opinion on this. We were saying that we wish there was a quiz you could take online that was just platform-based. That we couldn't see which presidential candidate. Or even locally for us, there's some important elections coming up. But because everyone listening is voting presidential that's in the US, we wish we could see just their things and remove all the personality and all the color commentary and just see platform. Is that a wise way to vote? Or do we need to pay attention to the person who is going to run our country? Is that an okay question to ask you? You can totally not answer if you don't want to.

**Sharon:** No, it totally is fine to ask me. Of course. Here's the thing. Are people's policies an important consideration? Yes, of course they are. If you are running on a platform of I want to bulldoze all the national parks so that we can build strip malls, then

your idea is dumb, right? And I don't want that idea. If somebody's platform has banana pants ideas, we need to know that.

So we should not discount the ideas that somebody has for the country. But neither should we vote based solely on ideas, based solely on platform. And there's a couple of really important reasons for that. One is that any president is going to encounter things, crises that happen during their presidency that are going to... their response to those things cannot be pre-planned.

You know, George W. Bush could not have pre-planned his response to September 11th. So who somebody is, the character of a leader really does matter. The character of a leader matters in times of crisis, especially. And those are things that you cannot just say, well, the policies were what I wanted.

**Annie:** That's interesting.

**Sharon:** If somebody has good policies, but poor character, it is far easier for them to lead people astray. And one of the reasons for that is because the number of policies that any given president will actually be able to achieve is probably not that high.

**Annie:** Got it.

**Sharon:** They can be like, "Everybody gets free ice cream for a year." And you can be like, "That is the best policy I've ever heard. The American people will be so happy. We're just going to be a nation of joy because every ice cream for a year."

What's their ability to actually achieve free ice cream for a year? Just about zero, right? Because they don't get to spend the money. They have to go to Congress and ask them for, like, "Hey, I'd really like to have you guys introduce a bill that gives everybody free ice cream for a year." And half of Congress is going to be like, "Are you kidding me? Get out. Get out of our chamber. We're not coming to see you up at the White House. It's a stupid idea." They're going to give a bunch of speeches about what a dumb idea it is to give everybody free ice cream.

So the president is not a king. The president cannot just wave a magic wand and give everybody free ice cream. They need the cooperation of Congress to be able to achieve the vast majority of what they want to achieve. And how will they achieve what they want to achieve if they do not have the type of character that can work with other people to achieve goals?

The presidency has a lot of sway over a certain category of things. The president has a lot of sway over foreign policy. But the president has a far more diminished

amount of sway over things like the national budget and what we're spending money on.

**Annie:** Whether we're getting ice cream or not.

**Sharon:** Right. Exactly. Whether we're getting ice cream or not. And their ability to talk Congress into giving people ice cream actually says a lot about what kind of relationships have they been able to build with members of Congress, who gets elected to Congress.

All that to say, the leaders that history smiles kindly upon, when we look back on the Lincolns of history, they did not always have the most popular list of policies. In fact, half of the country hated Lincoln's policies so much that they would rather risk their own lives in battle than go along with Lincoln's ideas. They would rather be like, you know what, I might have my leg shot off, and I would prefer that over going along with your ideas.

Every single policy the United States has ever had, ever, every single one ever has changed. Policies are a lot easier to change than your character. So who you are ultimately matters as much or more than the ideas that you have.

**Annie:** Interesting.

**Sharon:** So that's not to say policies should be completely ignored. Again, nobody should be advocating for bulldozing the national parks and putting up a bunch of dollar generals. That's a dumb idea. But we also-

**Annie:** It's a yes and. It's both.

**Sharon:** Yes. We also cannot ignore who somebody is, how they represent the United States on the world stage. That's also a really important consideration.

**Annie:** Those leaders from England last night at dinner, one of the things they said is the world is concerned about this election-

**Sharon:** Totally.

**Annie:** ...because when... I wrote down their quote to say to you today. They said, "It's better for the whole world when America is at peace."

**Sharon:** That is absolutely correct.

**Annie:** It did not shock me like I've never could have considered. It shocked me like, Oh, we're being watched that closely. I don't think I realized that. But they said the world is invested because the whole world is actually in a better spot.

**Sharon:** That is absolutely right.

**Annie:** ...when the U.S. is at peace. I thought that was shocking.

**Sharon:** I went to the NATO conference. I was invited to the NATO conference in Washington, D.C. this year. And so I got to be in the room with the prime ministers and world leaders from all of the member countries, which is, you know, like all of the heads of state, almost all the heads of state of Europe, Canada, etc. Very interesting endeavor.

But there's no question that the rest of the world is deeply invested in what the United States does. If they are an ally, they are deeply invested in our well-being because the United States' well-being impacts their well-being. And if you are an adversary, which, of course, there are no adversaries within NATO, but they have collective adversaries, right? Like NATO understands that Russia is their adversary. China is one of their adversaries. So if you are an adversary, you have a vested interest in doing the opposite, in trying to sow discord within the United States, in trying to make sure that the citizenry of the United States turns against each other.

Because when you ignite this friction between people inside the United States, they don't have the bandwidth to pay attention to what's going on over here. It's like somebody create a distraction so I can do the pickpocketing. You know what I mean? That's the mindset. Create a distraction so that they're not noticing that we're doing these other things over here. Those are all things that are absolutely true. The world benefits from a prosperous, peaceful United States. It's not just us.

[00:47:37] <music>

**Sponsor:** This podcast is sponsored today by [Daily Look](#), which is the number one highest-rated premium personal styling service for women. I need you to know, y'all, my first Daily Look box arrived last week. I literally, hand to heaven, love every piece they sent me.

I had my own dedicated personal stylist who curated a box of clothes based on the style quiz I took. You know we love a quiz. They asked questions about my body shape and my preferences, what colors I love to wear, which, you know, I had an answer because of my color analysis from Create It Colorful. And then their real personal stylist, not AI, picked out clothes for me and they nailed it. Seriously,

everything fit, which blew my mind. And I really loved what they sent, like love what they sent.

And you get the same stylist every time, which is so cool. Shout out to Esmeralda. You can drive to 12 premium pieces per box. It is all shipped right to you. They also have a ton of sizes from extra small to 3X from 0 to 24. It is time to get your own personal stylist with Daily Look. And it is so fun, you guys.

Head to [dailylook.com](https://dailylook.com). Take your style quiz and then be sure to use the code THATSOUNDSFUN, and you're going to get 50% off your order. Once again, that's [dailylook.com](https://dailylook.com) for 50% off. And make sure you use our code, THATSOUNDSFUN for that 50% off, and so they know that we sent you.

**Sponsor:** Listen, I need y'all to know I love [Prose](#) so much that I keep bottles of their shampoo and conditioner in both New York and Nashville. Because no matter what city I'm in at the time, I do not want to skip washing my hair with my favorite custom hair care.

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So take your free consultation, get your one-of-a-kind formulas, and see the difference custom hair care can make with 50, 5-0% off at [prose.com/ThatSoundsFun](https://prose.com/ThatSoundsFun).

And now back to finish up our conversation with Sharon.

[00:50:21] <music>

**Annie:** I listened to an interview on the New York Times podcast. They do these interviews on Sunday, and it was Jelly Roll, the country artist. Did you get to listen to it? Did you hear that one?

**Sharon:** No, I haven't heard it.

**Annie:** In the interview, the guy is asking about voting because Jelly Roll is a felon. He was in jail. Does that make him a current felon? No. No.

**Sharon:** You are a convicted felon, but he may have completed his sentence.

**Annie:** Yes, that's it. So he can't vote. He does not have the right to vote. And he makes a joke seemingly and he says back to the interviewer, "Man, your vote doesn't matter either. Your vote doesn't matter. You didn't..."

So after they do the interview, on the New York Times pod, they always call them back two weeks later and do some follow-ups. When they call Jelly Roll back, he kind of circles back and goes, "Hey, man, you know I was kidding about that, right?" And the guy says, "I don't know if you're kidding or if you're just trying to clean up after yourself now saying that votes don't matter." So Sharon McMahon, does my vote matter?

**Sharon:** It's a great question. Of course, your vote matters. Your vote matters for a big variety of reasons. I know that sometimes with the electoral college, it can be like, Oh, I live in a state and I already know how it's going to go. And so sometimes it can feel like it doesn't matter if I vote for Bob or if I vote for Lisa because they're electoral college.

**Annie:** Because my whole state's going to elect Lisa or Bob.

**Sharon:** Right, exactly. I understand that. First of all, whether Lisa or Bob is elected depends entirely on who shows up to vote. You know what I mean?

**Annie:** Yeah.

**Sharon:** When you look at the difference between certain candidates in certain states, even states that you think are like safe red states, like Texas, for example, Joe Biden almost won Texas within a few hundred thousand votes, right? And you can point to the same things where Donald Trump took a state by a couple hundred thousand votes. And that's a healthy margin.

But ultimately... and some states are much, much, much closer than that. You know, Georgia, 11,000 votes.

**Annie:** I was about to say Georgia is a - what are they called? A swing state or whatever. And it wasn't historically. And so obviously those states that used to be...

**Sharon:** They change over time.

**Annie:** Yes. And it depends on who gets out and votes.

**Sharon:** It depends on who shows up. So you cannot just be like, whatever, it doesn't matter. Actually, it really does matter because who wins based on who shows up. That's the first thing. The second thing is that your daily life is far more impacted by your state races than they are by presidential races. Like, yes, we do pay a lot of attention to Congress and the president, and rightfully so. But ultimately, do my kids have safe schools to attend? Are the streets clean? Does this a community that I feel is invested in my well-being? Is this a place that I can put down roots? Do I feel welcome here? Does my trash get picked up?

**Annie:** Does my trash actually get picked up?

**Sharon:** Is there a park that I can walk my dog in? You know, all of these actual quality of life issues, those are being decided at the state and local level. And while Congress and the president certainly have big impacts in certain factors, there's way more of your daily life that is being controlled by state and local government that most people are not paying that careful of attention to.

Your votes actually matter. The person who represents me in my state legislature, won by 32 votes.

**Annie:** Wow, like one classroom of kids.

**Sharon:** 32 votes. That's right. Like this happened in 2022. 32 votes is what they won by. Previously that seat had been occupied by a single person, a single woman for a very long time. And she considered her seat so safe that she didn't even need to do a lot of campaigning because she had so much name recognition. She'd had that job forever. And ultimately, it came down to who showed up on election day.

**Annie:** Wow.

**Sharon:** Didn't come down to polls. Because if you took a poll, more people probably would have said the other lady. But it was who showed up that day. So showing up really matters.

**Annie:** I wear my since 1920 shirt every time I vote because that's when White women got the vote. Not all women, but White women got the vote in 1920. And I'm telling you, I sing sister... You know this about me. I sing Sister Suffragettes from Mary Poppins and I tear up every time I vote. Because I think my grandmother and for sure, my great-grandmother, literally because they were born female, did not get to

vote. That is enough of a reason for me to stop by on my way home from work and spend 10 minutes in my public library voting. I mean-

**Sharon:** That's right.

**Annie:** Because I get to.

**Sharon:** That's right. Because that was worked for by our ancestors. That was fought for by the women who came before us. I have a whole section in the book about the Women's Suffrage movement. And when you read some of these stories about what people who went before did on our behalf. You know, they crawled or walked so the rest of us could run. They put in effort that they never saw the fruits of with the hope that someday it would pay off.

You know, when you plant an apple tree, it may not bear good fruit for years, but it's an investment in the future. And that's what so many of the people in this book and women's suffrage workers did. They invested in the future, even if they never personally benefited. To me, it's the least I can do to show up to say thank you to the women who came before me.

**Annie:** I actually really enjoyed... I mean, it's probably been two or three elections since the light switch went on for me about how important local is. I think as the presidential got louder and more divisive, I kind of was hearing you and hearing Michael Ware and some of these people being like, But who is your mayor, and who is your representative?

And I have actually really enjoyed... when you go and read their websites, you go, oh, they're talking about adding sidewalks to my neighborhood.

**Annie:** I want sidewalks, so I'm gonna vote for him or her. When our garbage was not being picked up at my condo complex, our HOA said, "Here's your representative's phone number, call her. Here's why it's not getting picked up." And my gosh, as soon as our neighborhoods started calling, it all got fixed.

**Sharon:** Something changed. Your ability to impact your state and local government is far greater than you realize. We all think like, "I could call the White House, and nobody... Joe Biden would not answer." And that's true. He's not gonna answer because that's just how the presidency is. But let me tell you, you got a city council member, they have to listen to their voicemail.

**Annie:** Yes, that's exactly right.

**Sharon:** They answer their emails way more often.



**Annie:** Yeah, that's right. Okay, I want to ask you two final questions. Are you okay on time?

**Sharon:** Yep, I'm fine.

**Annie:** One of them is more fun than the other. I'll ask you the least fun one first.

**Sharon:** Okay.

**Annie:** What are you worried about when we're walking toward an election season and what's going on in the US? What are you worried about?

**Sharon:** One of the things that's a concern for me is that people will devolve into cynicism and nihilism and animosity and vitriol, that that will become a default state for too many people. And positive change does not come from that perspective. We don't make positive change based on cynicism, right? We don't make positive change based on the belief that like, well, nothing will ever change. It'll be terrible forever. That's not how we move the needle.

Imagine if Martin Luther King was like, well, it's just going to be this way forever. You know what I mean? There's been too much prejudice for thousands of years. Guess we'll just stay home and not march, you know? Like imagine if our ancestors who've gone before us just gave in to cynicism. They had every right to give in to cynicism and it's remarkable that they didn't. And the people who didn't are the people that were worth remembering.

So I worry that there's a propensity to devolve into this cynicism, this cynical mindset that is not a fruitful place from which positive things can grow.

**Annie:** So what are you not worried about? What are you watching that you go, oh, I'm not worried about... this is going to go like... this is going better than I thought. What are you not worried about?

**Sharon:** You know who I'm not worried about is the governors.

**Annie:** Listen, I'm a proud one. I'm in the secret group. I'm ready to go. Like every time that I spend interacting with people in this community, I'm like, "Gosh, dang it. These are the good people." It just fills me with hope to see that people... that there are literally tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of people... for all of the loud, cynical voices online, there are people who are like, that is actually not how this story is going to end. It's not going to end that way because we're the plan. Whether we, you know, want to accept it or not, this idea of

like, there's a man on a white horse with a plant. No, no, no, no, no. Again, let me repeat. The person who says they have all the answers is the person you don't want to follow. We are the plan. It is us.

And so when I look at the people with the plans, I just get teary thinking about it, quite honestly. Every day. Sometimes when my energy flags or my spirits are dampened, I am buoyed by people in your community, in my community who legitimately look at the world and ask, what can I do? Instead of who can I tear down, they're asking, who can I uplift? And ultimately that is who history smiles upon. The people who were the doers, not the critics.

**Annie:** I want to tell you, you are the queen of that. You are the queen of being friends with people that I think, "Well, that person really annoys me. I can't believe Sharon's friends with them." And every time that happens, I think, man, that's who I want to be. I want to be like Sharon, that I am friends with people that other people say, well, I'm kind of offended that Annie is friends with them. Oh, oh, good, good. And you're modeling that for me. You are friends with people that offend me. And you're friends with me. So there are people out there who are offended that you're friends with me.

And so I'm just really grateful for how you model that we can learn from everyone. That doesn't mean everybody gets your phone number and it doesn't mean everybody gets your vote, but we can learn from anyone. I feel like of all my friends, you modeled that probably the best. So thank you for that. I'm so grateful for how you rubbed me the wrong way like that sometimes in the best way. In the best way.

**Sharon:** Thank you. That's so kind.

**Annie:** It's really good.

**Sharon:** Thank you so much. You have earned a spot in my acknowledgements, Annie.

**Annie:** I can't believe it. I was so honored. I said to the team, "She said my name."

**Sharon:** Aw.

**Annie:** Okay, Sharon, the last question we always ask, you got to tell me in your 14-hour work days because the show is called That Sounds Fun, tell me what you're doing for fun.

**Sharon:** Oh my gosh. Needle pointing.

**Annie:** Oh yeah.

**Sharon:** I have taken up needlepoint and I'm obsessed with it.

**Annie:** Have you switched from knitting to needlepoint? Because you just made a sweater.

**Sharon:** Yeah. I do both. I've discovered that I can't really needlepoint on a plane. It's too fine. Like the detail was too fine. And so as I'm heading into my book tour season, I just started another sweater project. It's way easier for me to knit on a plane. So I still love to knit and I generally knit in the cold months, like it's very cozy to me. But earlier this year, I just decided, "You know what? I've always wanted to try that needle-pointing. I'm just going to give it a try."

**Annie:** So can you define needlepoint versus cross stitch versus... Is it just that you're not making X's?

**Sharon:** So both needlepoint and cross stitch are a form of embroidery. So embroidery is this umbrella term for a variety of needlecrafts. And embroidery often happens on fabric. You know, like you think of the little, like an embroidered collar on a shirt or something along those lines.

**Annie:** Or like a words on a pillow.

**Sharon:** Yes, tablecloth, you know?

**Annie:** Yeah.

**Sharon:** So embroidery often happens on a solid fabric of some kind. Cross stitch is done on a specific type of cloth that has an open weave to it. And it's flexible like a fabric, and yes, you are making X's with the cross stitch. And I have done plenty of...

**Annie:** With needlepoint, are you going straight up and down?

**Sharon:** With needlepoint, you are using a firm woven canvas that is... you know, it's not like a piece of fabric. And there are hundreds of different stitches you can make with needlepoint, as opposed to just one that you make with cross stitch. And so...

**Annie:** Well, before our cross stitch community gets up in arms, I have to tell you as a cross stitcher, there are multiple X's. But they are just X's.

**Sharon:** True enough. True enough. I've done plenty of cross-stitch.

**Annie:** I don't want to deal with those emails.

**Sharon:** Yeah, I actually love cross-stitch. It's actually quite fun.

**Annie:** I love it. I love it, yeah. Okay, so what's your current needlepoint project? Do you have one going?

**Sharon:** I have multiple going right now.

**Annie:** Do you?

**Sharon:** Oh, yes. I'm working on a big one that will become a pillow. And it's two sparrows landing on a branch with apple blossoms. And there's like a little nest of little baby birds. Yes, it's very apropos. I basically want to needlepoint birds and flowers because I am extremely cool.

**Annie:** Hey, listen, you are. I've been on a multi-year... as long as you've been working on this book, I've been working on a cross stitch project.

**Sharon:** Have you? What are you making?

**Annie:** I'm making every city I've lived in. So there's four, Edinburgh, Atlanta, New York, Nashville, doing them all on black canvas. So it's like four-night scenes. It's hard. That's what slowed me down is it is so much harder. I finally bought glasses that light up. Sharon, if you want to talk about being cool.

**Sharon:** You need the special... I just bought a new light, like one of the lights that are... I've had a bunch of portable ones and I was like, we are getting a floor lamp. We're getting a floor light.

**Annie:** But yes, you need to share that link for everybody and do your Amazon affiliate so we can all buy that lamp. I'll share my goggles too. My glasses have been very helpful. I was like, I am now 75 and I do not care.

**Sharon:** I love so much. If this is what 75 is like, bring it on.

**Annie:** Bring it on. Friend, well, I'm so happy the book is out. Thank you. Thank you. I just love you. I'm so grateful to be friends with you and grateful to learn from you.

**Sharon:** Likewise. I love you too. Thanks, Annie.

[01:06:13] <music>

**Outro:** Oh, you guys, isn't she amazing? On the off chance you haven't already gotten your copy, make sure you go get your copy of The Small and Mighty and go follow Sharon on social media. Tell her thanks for joining us for this show.

If you enjoyed this episode, I think you'll love our last episode with Sharon. It's Episode 442 or any of our episodes with Michael Ware, including Episode 855.

If you have any questions from this episode, you can drop them in the Q&A box on your Spotify app if you're a Spotify listener like me or send them to us on Instagram @ThatSoundsFunPodcast. You got to be following over there. It is a fun place to be.

If you need anything else from me, you know I'm embarrassingly easy to find. Annie F. Downs on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook. Anywhere you may need me, that is how you can find me.

And I think that's it for me today, friends. Go out or stay home, do something that sounds fun to you, please go do something that sounds fun to you and I will do the same. Today what sounds fun to me is packing up for a lot of weeks in New York City. I'm getting packing starting today. So I am really pumped.

Y'all have a great week. We'll see you back here on Thursday with my good friend, my brother, [Matt Broth?]