

# PORTFOLIO

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**Sarah Siegel-Magness**  
Film, Fashion, and Philanthropy

# SARAH SIEGEL-MAGNESS

## 11 Questions on Making Movies, Making Money, and Making a Difference

By Greg Hamilton

**S**arah Siegel-Magness ('95 marketing) just returned from the Sundance Film Festival happy to pay excess baggage fees for her film's three awards: the grand jury prize, the audience award, and a special jury prize for acting. *Push: Based on the Novel by Sapphire* has Siegel-Magness in the producer's chair, her second drama with director Lee Daniels (*Monster's Ball*). Portfolio caught up with Siegel-Magness the day before what would turn out to be a very auspicious trip to Sundance.

**Portfolio: Do you think that entertainers have a special duty in tough times to lighten the mood, provide an escape, or give people a sense of hope?**

**Sarah Siegel-Magness:** I do. A movie ticket is an inexpensive form of entertainment: for two hours and a \$12 ticket, you can escape. But I think it's also important for filmmakers to tell stories of the things happening right now. This is more important than ever. Our movie [*Push...*] can be deep and dark, but ultimately it's pertinent for our times. For me, this movie really isn't about the darkness, but about how darkness sets the stage for light. It puts my life – and hopefully others' – in perspective: people who have problems much greater than any of ours can still persevere through adversity.

**P: What does it take to get an independent film like this noticed?**

**S:** I'm secondary to the director: Lee's had other very successful films at Sundance. While that helped get our film noticed, this movie is very daring for him. There are moments in this movie that depict African Americans in a very dark light. He has set himself up for criticism in a major way, but I think that is what a daring director does.

**P: What does financing mean to an independent film like *Push*?**

**S:** It's very difficult to be a 'silent investor' in a movie like this. In these smaller niche movies, with budgets of \$1 million or less, people are forced to creatively utilize absolutely every resource they have.

**P: Does that make for more creative films, more daring or challenging subject matter? Does it give you the flexibility to do some things that the big budget studios can't?**

**S:** Absolutely. I think that studios pass up many great films.

*[Meanwhile, Siegel-Magness has signed up to produce her third film, this time with a major studio]...*

**P: Two films completed and a third in the works... does the pursuit ever end?**

**S:** Well, producing is my second business. I have a multi-million dollar clothing company I started seven years ago, which I do in tandem. So I am crazy, really!

**P: Your So-Low styles [see sidebar] were in response to the low-rise pant trend. Do you think the fashion biz – and business in general – is forward-thinking or reactionary?**

**S:** I think people have a wrong view about fashion. Once you're an insider you'll understand that it is far more simple than anyone would think. [Low-rise underwear] just happened to be something I needed, something I knew I could make (or figure out how to make). I find inspiration all the time from things that I need; it's kind of a simplistic view of business, but that's really the way I think of it. I took one idea, one small idea, and made it happen.

**P: It can seem appealing to aim for business success without formal schooling: "make millions without working hard!" Why go to business school if sometimes it's about luck?**

**S:** You know, I don't believe that luck is ever the factor. I do not believe that any entrepreneurs who make a lot of money ever do it easily. To run a business is very difficult. I believe the function of business school is to set a good foundation for your launch into the business world. Business school should be about setting you up for the dilemmas you're going to face.

**P: How would you improve business schools around the country?**

**S:** I am building my businesses to the point where eventually I plan on giving back more to our educational systems. There has to be that synergy between corporate America – or local entrepreneurs – and the educational system.

**P: You've had involvement in both humanitarian causes and cultural charities – and now you want to support education, too. Is there a common theme to these diverse causes?**

**S:** It is really important to have diversity; but, more importantly, be passionate about where you're giving your money. And then you need to give your time. For example, I did a movie with Mariah Carey who has a camp for inner-city kids that teaches them real-life skills. I taught a class on fashion and then I hosted those same inner-city kids on our sets in New York for *Push*.

**P: Your own multi-million dollar clothing company, a third film in the works, philanthropy galore: sometimes don't you just want to slow down?**

**S:** Being an entrepreneur is like a never-ending story. I think, "Why don't I just retire?" but it's never ending. You just want to keep achieving. I think a true entrepreneur is never finished.

**P: It's refreshing to hear somebody who is part of a famous family, often listed among Forbes billionaires, who says: "I've got a lot of work to do."**

**S:** Again, that's why I like to do philanthropy and all those other things, because it grounds me. Money is not my world. It can't be your world because if it is, then you are not living.



# SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL



## SARAH SIEGEL-MAGNESS FILMOGRAPHY

- **Tennessee** (2008), Executive Producer. This was her first film with director Lee Daniels (whose debut feature, *Monster's Ball*, won Halle Berry the 2002 Best Actress Oscar®).
- **Push: Based on the Novel by Sapphire** (2008), Producer. Winner: 2009 Sundance grand jury prize (drama), audience award (drama), and special jury prize (acting: Mo'Nique).

**BUSINESS VENTURE** In 2001 Siegel-Magness founded clothing company **So-Low**, which gained immediate celebrity status by offering women's underwear to match the low-rise pant craze of the time. Less than a year into the venture she changed her focus to casual sportswear, quickly growing the company to multi-million dollar sales.

**FAMILY TIES** Daughter of the co-founders of **Celestial Seasonings**, she's one of five siblings who have either graduated from The University of Colorado at Boulder, are currently attending, or plan to apply. Husband Gary Magness, heir to a cable TV fortune, was once listed by *Forbes* as one of America's 400 richest people and among the world's top 1,000 billionaires.

**SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL** Hosted each January in and around Park City, Utah, Sundance has become the premier U.S. independent film festival.

- Notable grand jury prizes for drama: *The Brothers McMullen* (1995), *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (1996), *American Splendor* (2003).
- Many Sundance premieres go on to box office success, such as: *Sex Lies and Videotape* (1989), *Reservoir Dogs* (1992), *Napoleon Dynamite* (2004), and *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006).