The Virtual Campfire | Ep.340 Transcript

Chapter 10: Don’t Go It Alone

Jen Guillemin: We were one place, but we could go so much further by working together.

Michael Hendrix: I feel like a good relationship is not interested in keeping score, but just interested in what can be.

Wendy Swart Grossman: Don't be afraid of people who are different because that's where the conversation gets fascinating.

Panos Panay: The difference between picking it up and sending somebody a thank you note or leaving it there can change the trajectory of your life forever.

Tony Martignetti: Around every campfire, stories have shaped who we have become. They remind us we're not alone. They challenged the way we think. And sometimes they change the direction of our lives. Welcome to this special series of The Virtual Campfire. I'm Tony Martignetti. Together, we'll explore powerful conversations inspired by the themes of Campfire Lessons for Leaders, uncovering the moments of transformation, courage and growth that shape who we are and who we become. The fire is lit. Let's gather where. stories spark transformation.

Tony Martignetti: We often celebrate the individual, the visionary, the entrepreneur, the creative thinker who dares to challenge the status quo. But behind so many remarkable achievements, there's something we don't always recognize. Someone else. Someone who saw a possibility we couldn't see. Someone who challenged our thinking, encouraged us to take a chance, or simply believed in an idea before it became a reality. In chapter ten of Campfire Lessons for Leaders, we explore a powerful reminder we aren't meant to navigate every challenge or pursue every opportunity on our own. Today, we're revisiting two remarkable conversations with four people who have experienced the transformative power of collaboration firsthand. Jen Guillemin and Wendy Swart, Grossman discovered how their shared values and complementary talents could create something neither had imagined alone. And Michael Hendrix and Panos Panay reveal how friendship, creative trust, and a willingness to embrace uncertainty became the foundation for extraordinary partnership. Their stories remind us that the right people don't simply make our journey easier. They make it richer. And sometimes they help us discover possibilities we never knew existed.

Wendy Swart Grossman: Where do we begin thinking about the different flash points? I mean, I think we're all these interesting combinations of personal and professional. And where does it really start? And for me, it started I've been a peripatetic person since I was a little kid traveling and living, you know, before I had a chance to actually have a voice. You know, growing up mostly in Minnesota, also on Long Island. Then we moved to San Diego, California. Moving lots of different places before the age of twelve. And so I think I was always kind of looking for community and connection. In fact, somebody actually asked me one time, am I so interested in community because I came from it or because I didn't come from it? And for me, it was because I wanted to create it, because I wanted to be able to wrap my arms around where I was living. But yet I was continued to move around a lot.

Jen Guillemin: Thank you, Tony, and thank you for having us. We're really excited to be here. So, you know, I was thinking of Wendy's story and how her life might be described by movement. And I think that my life might be more described by deepening and spreading these roots because while she was moving. I was really deepening. I grew up in a small town in upstate New York. The house that I grew up in, my dad still lives in. And I spent, you know, really my whole life that's always been I have. So I

have a very kind of clear sense of home. But really what defined home for me was a very rich creative environment that was centered around community and connection, as you point out. My mom was a voice teacher, and she used her music to help people find their personal joy and also to express their emotion in all of its form. And in our front dining room sat the family piano and my mom would host her students. They would come in. She also taught at a nearby college, but she had private students who would come into the home, and her home was filled with music and people would come in, you know, oftentimes feeling a little beleaguered from the day. And they would leave our house with feelings of joy. And I saw the benefit of this kind of existence, of what my mom did when she died of cancer. And in the last few weeks of her life, she had people and she was born around the Christmas holiday and she died around the Christmas holiday. And Christmas to her was always a big deal. Like in way of the. She was agnostic. She was not religious, but she loved the fanfare around the holidays and at the time of her death, every day people would come by to her house to deliver these little special gifts and they would come. It was all of these voice students that she had over the years and people in the community, and they would deliver little Christmas tree ornaments with stories attached. And there was a basket that one of her friends arranged in the back porch, where every day we would go and receive these basket of ornaments, and my mom would go through them one by one. And for me, that just was kind of the embodiment of what it means to intersect relationships and meaning through the arts. And when I moved to Boston, ironically, I ended up finding another parental figure who ended up being my father in law. His name was Sidewalk Sam, and he did public art in the city of Boston, drawing big chalk drawings and bringing people together. Tony, You may have heard of Sidewalk Sam. He was known in the Boston area for, you know, decades of doing these kind of public art projects. And I had the opportunity to get involved with him and again, witness the magic of what it takes to bring people together to experience the arts together. And that really helped to define my career direction.

Tony Martignetti: What I love about Wendy and Jen's stories is how differently their journeys began. Wendy was searching for community through movement, constantly discovering new places and new people. Jen found that same sense of connection through the deep roots of family, music, and the arts. Different experiences, but remarkably similar values. And when their paths eventually crossed, those shared values became the foundation for something neither could have created quite the same way on her own.

Wendy Swart Grossman: So this is this is the cool part about getting older, right? It's like, okay, I want to work with people I like. I want to work with people I have fun with. I want to work with people who there's just this cool synergy with. And so when Jen and I met, literally our kids were in second grade and now they're both just graduated from high school in twenty twenty. We met, and it's like, who is this person? She's fascinating. And we just could never stop getting enough conversation. And Jen being Jen, we went up. I still remember Jen Guillemin. We went out for a drink at the Vietnamese restaurant in Coolidge Corner, and we over drink. Jen is kind of person who, when you talk to her, she's like looking at your soul and you think you're like the most important person in the world, and she asks you the questions, you know, how is your spirit? How would you be best fulfilled? It was just like a balm to the soul, the way Jen moves in the world. And I'm like, oh, how fun. I'm like, I want to do something that's important and meaningful. I've always loved to teach because I'm a frustrated stand up comic, and that way I figured it out. Now. Now the secret is revealed, my friend. Yes. I have this, like, group of people who had to listen to it. Whatever. And wouldn't it be cool if we could figure out something? And we're both creative people and we're like, okay, we could figure this out. And Jen's like, oh, I happen to work at a university. Oh, score! So we were friends first, and we tried to figure out how to work together because to deepen our friendship and just to have fun. That's how I remember it anyway.

Jen Guillemin: Yeah. And what I want to just say is there is something really powerful, as Wendy says, of just finding people that you really enjoy being around and working with. And what I found and what Wendy and I did like. So we created this course together, which was wildly popular, filled to capacity. Every semester is still running today. But what we found is we would start someplace, but by the combination of skills that we had, we would always make things better. Like I would say something, she would say something. And like, you could just see where we get. We were one place, but we could go so much further by working together. And so we started to see that with what we were teaching, the quality of the teaching, what we are able to produce in our writing, how we're able to support our students, and it would grow and grow. So we would come up with an idea and it was fun. It just makes it fun to be able to do this. So this was really the evolution. I mean, seven years of working together, collaborating together, writing, publishing, presenting together really brought us to this place of, you know, what? We have created something and we're seeing demand for what we're creating. So let's start Creative Reframe. And that's what we did.

Tony Martignetti: There's something important in Jen and Wendy's story that I think we sometimes overlook. They didn't begin with a business plan and then search for someone who could help execute it. They began with a connection. And through that connection, they discovered how much more they could accomplish together. But finding the right people is only the beginning. Meaningful collaboration requires something deeper. It requires trust, openness, and the willingness to allow someone else to shape an idea that might have started as your own. My conversation with Michael Hendrix and Panos Panay explored that very idea.

Panos Panay: And we were both scheduled to talk, so we ended up. After my panel finished, we just met backstage and we had this, I think, intuitive connection like any other two creative beings, if you will. You know, what's interesting is I'm not necessarily sure if we made a conscious decision. Well, let's just do something together. I distinctly remember actually meeting Michael. I think it was either late May or June, something like that. And then in fact, I had come, ironically, to Cyprus. I remember getting an email from him in my inbox. And just the email you get when you meet someone, hey, it was great meeting you. And you know, it's always fascinating because how many of those emails do we get that we missed or we fail to respond to because your inbox is so full and. And I always feel you meet people, you get a business card, you go back to your office, you usually set it there. And the difference between picking it up and sending somebody a thank you note or leaving it there can change the trajectory of your life forever. And I always had that. I always felt that, that it's like this magical act of sending this message to the universe. Then one day you get an email back from that person, and then there's a connection. And then it's always this pivotal point. But we never really said, well, we're there was never an express sort of objective of getting together. Other than that, we both thought that we were curious about what each other was doing. Me at Berklee, Michael at IDEO. So looking and reflecting back on the way that our relationship and friendship has developed over the years. Maybe that's what was striking, that we are friends in the way that you meet a childhood friend, right? You meet somebody on a kicking about a football or, or you go to the beach or whatever, and you don't have an agenda. You're best friends from when you were a kid. As a matter of fact, when I get together with my friends were here who we grew up with. It's not like we don't even ask me about what I do. I don't care. Like it's there's no objective other than just to hang out with each other. Right. Nobody cares what you do. Nobody cares about your job, to be honest with you. I mean, they just care because of, you know, you are who you are. And I think that's the way that it was with Michael. I mean, I think we're both curious about each other and what we were doing.

Michael Hendrix: I mean, we definitely have different skill sets. Yeah. So yeah, I mean, I guess to answer your question directly, yeah, there's different things each of us does. But the interesting thing is I don't really think about working with Panos in that way. It's like, I don't think I have a role and he

has a role that I do this and he does that even though it's probably true, because there's something about that to me that's I mean, I know it happens a lot in work relationships or even personal relationships, but it feels a bit like scorekeeping to me. I shy away from that because I feel like a good relationship is not interested in keeping score, but just interested in what can be, you know? And I think that's the way Panos and I have worked together is we've always been interested in what can be like, we've never really made plans. We started conversation. It's like, oh, this seems interesting. And it's almost organic.

Tony Martignetti: Michael's perspective really challenges the way we often think about collaboration in business. We're accustomed to defining responsibilities, assigning tasks, and measuring individual contributions. And while those things have their place, Michael and Panos describe something different a relationship where trust allows ideas to develop without anyone needing to claim ownership of every contribution. It's less about keeping score and more about discovering what they can create together.

Michael Hendrix: Basically Beyoncé, you know, says, you know, hey Jack, I want to be in a band with you. And I think that's a good illustration of what I'm trying to describe between us tonight. It's not like one of us having an agenda or setting the vision for the other and asking the other to follow along. Like, I have this idea. You do this with me. It would be great, right? I'm the brain. You're the brawn. It's more of two people shared collaborators coming together to make something. That's what I appreciate about the stories about Beyoncé or Bjork as well in the book, who thinks about collaboration as merger. You know, like there's a point in which you can't tell, you don't know who's responsible for what. And that's perfect, right? Because something new emerges from that. So that's the musical mind. I mean, I think that's this is the funny thing. Like Panos and I have written this book, but it's certainly just because we've lived this life, recognized it, and now we've had the joy of being able to talk to the other artists about it, who, you know, have had similar experiences. And we thought, can we share this with other people.

Jen Guillemin: I have to say, we are really like, I think that Wendy and I both have. We place a high value on harmony. So when I think that things are a little off, or when somebody snips or somebody does that, I think we give each other a little space initially, but we always talk about it. We always address it. We never leave anything simmering. And I think that that has been such a gift because I know I can be really, really honest with I always feel safe in honesty. And I always trust that whatever has happened, we both have a shared commitment to getting back to our harmonious place because that's where we can do our best work.

Tony Martignetti: What stands out to me in both of these partnerships is that trust doesn't mean always agreeing. Jen and Wendy acknowledged their differences. Michael and Panos recognized that their individual strengths and perspectives aren't identical. But rather than allowing those differences to become obstacles. They've learned to make room for them. And I think that's where collaboration becomes truly powerful, because when we trust someone enough to challenge our thinking, we're no longer limited to what we already know. Of course, that doesn't mean the process is always easy. In fact, sometimes the most meaningful collaborations require us to work through some very difficult moments.

Panos Panay: The book. Yeah. I mean, there were points. What in what's been a three year journey where and this was a classic example of what I just said. The agents had originally approached Michael to write a book. Michael said, I don't have time, but talk to my friend Panos. I'm the sucker who says yes to everything. So I started writing the book and I'm like, I can't do this on my own. It would be so much more fun if Michael comes on board. We'll geek out together about all these musical joys we share. And then at any point during those three years, we've had multiple false

starts. Times where I got frustrated, I shut down, I couldn't write. And then in times where Michael got frustrated. So there were many, many points where we either of us or at some time, both of us decided we should just walk away. We've asked for an extension from our our publisher. We were like the temperamental rock star who goes into a studio and spends way too much money trying to perfect the drum sound or whatever. And we were we were those guys.

Michael Hendrix: Creativity is hard, especially to be good at it. I mean, it's not hard to come up with a lot of ideas, I don't think. But it's hard to get them to good ideas and then to great ideas. You know, there's a book about demoing, you know, and we use a Justin Timberlake quote, Dare to Suck, which is, you know, basically this idea that you're going to be vulnerable enough to share ideas early. And the reason you do that is because you want other people to be able to respond to them, hear your intention, and then build on that idea. So the yes and concept you mentioned earlier, Tony, it's certainly in our collaboration and writing the book. We had those moments where if you embrace it as an iterative process and you're like, this thing didn't work, but it made you pivot this direction and now you've got something new and then you pivot again. You know, it's still painful. It's still hard, but it's not a blow to your ego. You're not saying I failed, I failed, I failed, I don't think either of us ever saw even those hard moments in the book, in writing the book. I don't think perhaps there could have been like a dark second where like, this is the end. But I think we neither of us are like that. We didn't believe we were going to quit. We knew we were going to push it toward the end, but we knew it was also hard. And that's just part of it, you know, having to to stay committed to the process. That's one thing I appreciate about the demoing chapter is it talks about the value of sharing early, being vulnerable, embracing iteration, embracing experimentation. And if you can embrace the process and recognize, yeah, the creative process has friction. It is difficult, but also a commitment to a result in something new. You can keep going.

Tony Martignetti: I think there's an important lesson in what Michael and Panos have shared. We often admire the finished product without appreciating the uncertainty, frustration, and experimentation that went into creating it. But those difficult moments don't necessarily mean a partnership isn't working. Sometimes they're evidence that we're challenging each other to think differently. The question is whether we're willing to remain committed to the process and to one another. And when we are, something remarkable can happen. Our differences can become the very thing that makes our work stronger.

Wendy Swart Grossman: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. But yeah, I mean, again, it comes up in different times, right? It comes up with usually around writing projects, I have to say. Oh yeah. Because we have, yes, we have very different styles. Kind of learning how we do it. I'm the person who can just go and just throw up all over the page. And then I'm sorry, this is a really ugly analogy, but that's okay. And Jen is the cleanup gal and she's like, I can put the structure out there. I can get us started. I'm not afraid of the blank page. And then Jen will give it the semblance of the order. Then I'm like, okay, good enough. Now we need to push it out there. But that's a hard process. I mean, it's hard process anyway to be a writer and then to do it with somebody else. But also on the plus side, it pushes you further. I never, you know, would I ever, ever written a chapter in a scholarly book. You know, peer-reviewed. Oh, boring. No, but we did it. We did it, you know, and now we've got an articles and journals, and we have another chapter coming out in a book in a couple of months. And anyway, it's cool.

Wendy Swart Grossman: I think our time has come. We've been talking about bringing meaning to the marketplace, you know, how do you get businesses to break open instead of just the profit, but it has to be the triple bottom line of people and the planet. And it's like, this has been the drumbeat that's been out there quietly for so long. And then, right, the world explodes and all of a sudden, oh,

capitalism isn't working. The one percent and then the nine, you know, it's like, so I feel like if ever there was a time, it's now. Things are happening very fast. And how can we help to give people some frameworks to really push forward these questions? But really, how do we bring creatives to the table? It's not, you know, artists not just on the walls, but artists at the tables helping and getting the both the business world to see the importance of the creative practitioners at the table. Because the minute a creative practitioner walks into the room, there's a lot more room for cross-disciplinary conversation. And at the same token, how do we give the skills to the creative practitioners and artists. so they feel and know that they have the skills and the language and the vocabulary that they have a right to be there, and they need to be there?

Jen Guillemin: And to build on that, I would say that I think that the time has come for us to stop pretending that we can live in a world that's devoid of our expressive selves. I mean, we've teased businesses apart from what it means to be human, and we act like that's going to be okay and that's going to work. And we're seeing it actually doesn't work. Fundamentally, people are not happy working in environments. It does not feel meaningful to work in environments that are devoid of any sort of human connection. We also see that it is not sustainable for us to live in a time where we're not factoring in people and planet. That time is over for us. And so we see the potential for the arts to open up those conversations and the connections. And to give you a concrete example of some of the work that artists can be doing is I'm thinking of like in the Boston Medical Center, there are theater performers who are teaching doctors and medical students about cultural awareness and doing role plays and things like this. I mean, visual artists can come in and you can see like creative placemaking as a whole thing, where you can have artwork that is in a community, that can be an economic driver to bring people together within that community, to create spaces that people want to be in. You see the role that music plays, and I think that we're only beginning now to ignite our imagination as to where this could go. And we see so much possibility right now. Our goal is to work with universities, because we see universities as a way to kind of educate people to open up their imaginations. And that's why we're looking at entrepreneurship and innovation spaces that are already kind of designed to do this very kind of work, to be thinking about the jobs of the future. Well, first, what we have to do is we've got to make sure that the artists and the creators see themselves as actually being part of that conversation space too. No, it is not only for engineering and business students. It is actually when these cross-disciplinary teams come together that powerful change can happen. And we are about powerful change for the future.

Tony Martignetti: There's a common thread running through both of these conversations. Meaningful collaboration requires us to make room for perspectives beyond our own. Jen and Wendy have found ways to bring creativity into environments where it might otherwise be overlooked. Michael and Panos have discovered how their different experiences can come together to create something new, and none of them is suggesting that we have to think alike. In fact, it's often our differences that make the greatest contributions. But perhaps the most important lesson is that we have to be willing to invite those differences into our lives.

Michael Hendrix: I guess the trick is not to put a lot of conditions on it. It's like the Jack White and Beyoncé story. Neither of them had a song in mind already written that they were taking to the other. Yeah, right. There was a belief something great would come of that. And I think you have to have that kind of optimism that something good will happen. Not well defined, but amorphous enough that the belief in the outcome is what motivates you. Not a definition of the outcome.

Tony Martignetti: As I reflect on these conversations, I'm reminded that some of the most important turning points in our lives begin with another person a conversation, a shared interest, an unexpected connection. Sometimes we don't even recognize the significance of those moments

until much later. Jen Guillemin and Wendy Swart Grossman showed us how a friendship grounded in shared values became the foundation for meaningful work. By embracing their different strengths, they discovered opportunities neither might have pursued alone. Michael Hendrix and Panos Panay remind us that collaboration is not simply about dividing responsibilities or combining expertise. It's about trust. It's about being vulnerable enough to share an unfinished idea. Being open enough to let someone else challenge it, and being committed enough to work through the difficult moments together. And perhaps most importantly, it's about recognizing that we don't have to have all the answers ourselves. And Campfire Lessons for Leaders. I explore the importance of connection and the role others play in helping us become who we're meant to be. We sometimes convince ourselves that independence means doing everything on our own. There's a difference between being independent and being isolated. The strongest leaders understand that asking for help isn't a weakness. Inviting different perspectives isn't a threat, and sharing the journey doesn't diminish our individual contributions. It can amplify them. So I'd like to leave you with a question. Who in your life challenged you to see things differently? Who helps you discover possibilities you might otherwise overlook? And perhaps more importantly, whose contribution are you missing because you've convinced yourself you need to figure everything out alone? Sometimes the next important step in our journey isn't about finding a better answer. It's about finding someone who can help us ask a better question. Because we were never meant to do everything alone.

Tony Martignetti: Thank you for joining me around the campfire for another chapter of Campfire Lessons for Leaders. My sincere thanks to Jen Guillemin, Wendy Swart Grossman, Michael Hendrix, and Panos Panay for sharing their stories, experiences, and insights. Their conversations remind us how much more becomes possible when we remain open to meaningful connection. You can learn more about each of our guests and explore their work through the links in our show notes. And if today's episode resonated with you, I invite you to explore my book, Campfire Lessons for Leaders, where we dive deeper into the experiences and lessons that shape our journeys. Until next time, keep building meaningful connections. Remain open to new perspectives. And remember, you don't have to go it alone. This special series of The Virtual Campfire is proudly produced by It All Works.