

coverstory

BY GEORGE DICKIE



Ciera Payton stars in "Wendy Williams: The Movie," premiering Saturday on Lifetime.

Talk show host Wendy Williams tells her story in biopic and documentary on Lifetime

How is Wendy Williams doing? Just fine, thank you very much, but it wasn't always that way.

Indeed, the host of the syndicated "The Wendy Williams Show" has experienced many highs and lows over the course of 30-plus years on her way to television stardom, as told in an upcoming biopic and documentary on Lifetime.

In "Wendy Williams: The Movie," premiering Saturday, Jan. 30, Ciera Payton ("The Oval," "A Madea Family Funeral") stars as Williams, a girl from Asbury Park, N.J., who found her niche as a disc jockey in the late 1980s and rode ratings success at radio stations in New York and Philadelphia to the top of her profession. And later, of course, to a thriving TV career.

But the road to get there was rocky and she endured much heartbreak and pain, including rape by an acquaintance, drug abuse, an abortion, two miscarriages, a stillbirth, a husband living dual lives and a subsequent divorce, bad management and health issues, including a very public collapse on her show in 2017.

Williams serves as executive producer on the drama, which also stars Morocco Omari ("Empire"), Rebecca Davis ("Ice"), Liza Huget ("Riverdale"), Drummond Macdougall ("Arrow") and Rothaford Gray ("Mary Kills People").

The film portrays Williams as the ultimate survivor, someone who never let setbacks get to her or get in her

way and who never let anyone tell her who she is. That's illustrated in an early scene in the movie, when she makes a conscious decision to not let her mother's criticisms define her but rather drive her to attain her goals.

"I knew what I wanted to do," Williams explains. "I was very involved with the college radio station and also an internship ... I'm gonna impress them by doing the four years and when I get out of here, my life is totally mine. And I'm gonna show them and I'm gonna show the world. I'll show 'em, I'll show 'em, I'll show 'em.' I'll show 'em I'll be a good jock on the radio. Sure, a good one. Award-winning? I wasn't sure but I'd get an award and win something."

Of course, she did more than win something. Fame, fortune and awards came her way but so did trouble. In the end, her perseverance saw her through, which she says is the message behind the movie.

"If she can do it, I can at least try," Williams says. "Now, what it is, I'm not exactly sure. ... (And) stop being so sensitive. At least until you get in the house, then if you want to cry or be mad or whatever. But stop being so sensitive."

Immediately following on Saturday is the documentary "The Wendy Williams Story ... What a Mess!" which Williams also executive produces and tells her story with footage and commentary by Williams herself.

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