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Kristina Wong is Horrified at the Lack of PPE During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Primary Source Excerpt

Historical Context: By November 2020, the U.S. averaged about 1,231 COVID-19 deaths daily. The reported death toll was nearing 300,000. The Trump presidency had failed to properly inform the U.S. public about the safety protocol for a worldwide pandemic, including social distancing and staying at home, much less provide PPE. Masks had become a point of political contention, rather than a health measure. Kristina Wong, a performance artist in Los Angeles, assembled the Auntie Sewing Squad, a collective of mask makers who made and sent homemade masks to vulnerable communities across the U.S. By November of 2020, the Auntie Sewing Squad consisted of 800 members and sent over 300,000 masks to underserved communities, including Indigenous communities on reservations, asylum-seeking communities at the U.S.-Mexico border, farmworkers who were considered essential workers, and incarcerated or formerly incarcerated members of U.S. society.

Listen to Audio: (33:17-35:33)

Interview with Kristina Wong: I'm proud that we exist. I'm glad we exist. We shouldn't have to exist. Honestly, the talk of this pandemic was like the most stressed out I've ever been in my life. Like one, I was dealing with the existential threats too of like, "gosh, does every time I go to the post office to drop off a box, am I going to get myself COVID?" and I remember when Chris Cuomo from CNN got it, I actually wrote to the group and it was only like two weeks in and I was like, "if I go down, what should we do?" I was already not making a will for my life, but I'm trying to come up with a backup plan for the group, like how do we keep sewing these masks? I mean that's frightening right? I had to think about those sorts of things, in addition to the pressure of how am I going to keep, and at that point it wasn't even Indigenous communities, farmworkers, it was just essential workers, like that was the only thing in my worldview. And now, I think I'm glad we exist as a way to get things to communities that weren't able to access federal support before, and that's Indigenous communities, incarcerated communities, undocumented communities, farmworkers. But it just makes me even more horrified that we live in a situation where fabric and elastic, you can't get those basic things on every human being in this country, like what? And at that, some of you don't even, and by "you" I mean the government, don't even think masks work or are necessary, or could be a choice and this is so horrifying, and it wasn't even supposed to be political at the top of this, like to me this was my All Health Matters moment, where your health is my health and we're only strong as our weakest link. And suddenly this becomes like a Trump versus everyone situation again and it's really unfortunate. We actually found this article that said that the U.S. post office was supposed to deliver five masks to every person and that was scrapped, now we're fucking doing it. We are the government, literally.

Discussion Questions: How would you describe the first six months of COVID-19 in the U.S.? Why did the Auntie Sewing Squad make masks? What was it like to run the Auntie Sewing Squad in the middle of the pandemic?

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