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## Interview with Brenda Robles

Brenda Robles

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**Interviewee:** Brenda Robles

**Interviewers:** Jennifer Carrillo and Paulina Zacarias-Montejano

**Date:** Wed, November 18, 2020

**Location:** Zoom

**Collection:** Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 112: Women and Social Change, From 1890s to the Present, Fall 2020

**Length:** 00:27:02

**Overseen by:** Dr Chrissy Lau

**Biography:** Brenda Robles is a first generation, a Mexican-American, Chicana, born in Hawthorne, California. Her parents immigrated from small farm towns in the state of Jalisco (Mexico) to Echo Park back in the 70's. She was raised in the South Bay (Lawndale). Growing up, her family was lower-middle working class. Her dad was a truck driver and her mom a housekeeper, where she still continues to clean houses in Manhattan Beach. These experiences led her to get her PhD in public health from UCLA and later, join the Auntie Sewing Squad.

**Summary of Interview:** The interview was divided into two sections: her background and how she became part of the Auntie Sewing Squad. Starting from the beginning of the interview up to 10:39 Robles discusses her childhood, interests, where she was born as well as her parents, any challenges growing up etc. From 10:39 Robles explains how she became part of the Sewing Squad and some challenges they faced. Robles then discusses the 2020 election at 19:21. Lastly Robles discusses how the pandemic has personally impacted her at 22:06.

### **Transcript**

Jennifer- My name is Jennifer Carillo

Paulina- And my name is Paulina Zacarias

Jennifer- And we are here with auntie...with one of the aunties for the oral history interview

Brenda- oh, do I have to say my name?

Jennifer- yeah, you couldn't hear yourself

Brenda- Oh sorry

Jennifer- no your good I'm sorry

Brenda- Okay my name is Brenda Robles and I am one of the aunties for the sewing auntie squad

Jennifer- Okay so, do you want to ask the first question Paulina?

Paulina- Sure, so we're going to get kinda straight to it, so one of the questions that we had was, What was your childhood like?

Brenda- Uhh, that's such a, that's a, that's a intense question

Jennifer- If you don't want to share that's okay

Brenda- Oh no

Jennifer- you have, you know

Brenda- Well in summary, I think I had a great childhood, in fact I'm still living in my childhood home with my parents, I have a unique situation going on and um, but um I had a great childhood both my parents are first generation Mexican American. My parents moved to the United States in the 1970's, um when they first moved here they went, they lived in Echo Park, um and then before I was born they ended up moving to the South Bay Lawndale California, which is near like Torrance, Gardena South Bay area of Los Angeles County, um so that's where I was born and raised and overall I had a pretty great suburban childhood um so you know just the first generation um student and um I didn't go to the best schools but um you know I think I did okay so it worked out.

Jennifer- Great! Okay so um well where is your family from?

Brenda- Um, so my dad, well both my parents are from Jalisco, so my dad is from a little small farm town called Mascota and my mom is from another town small farm town called in Jalisco Mexico called La Puerta de Purificación um, so...

Paulina- Oh I've heard of it

Brenda- Oh you have heard of it?

Paulina- Yeah

Brenda- Oh yeah so actually, I've never been to my mom's hometown but I definitely in fact I've literally right before the pandemic I had just visited my family in Mascota near um, it's like really close to Puerto Vallarta aslo close to Guadalajara.

Paulina- Oh yea

Brenda- But probably closer to Puerto Vallarta

Paulina- I kinda know where you're talking about...

Brenda- Oh you do?

Paulina- Yeah kind of

Brenda- Yeah like near Talpa, I had gone for my friend got married in Puerto Vallarta so I hadn't seen my family for almost 17 years, so I was like let me do a 4 day trip just on the fly, and I'm so glad I did cause now you know the pandemic hits who knows when I'll be able to visit again, so I'm glad I got to do that but um so yea, that's that's where my family is from now I mean we are scattered but most of our family lives, I'd say within one mile radius within each other still here in Lawndale or Hawthorne but um I still have family in Mexico and other parts, I have an aunt in like Las Vegas, everybody has an aunt in Las Vegas apparently, um but yea were a little bit scattered but for the most part mostly in LA and some in Mexico, um my mom she was actually raised, even though she was born in Puerto Vallarta, uh sorry La villa, she was actually raised by her godmother in Ensenada near TJ, so I still actually have quite a few family members their so um I grew up going a lot to Ensenada cause we have family there.

Jennifer- That's interesting

Paulina- So the next question, what was your education like? Like what major did you study or are you studying?

Brenda- Yea so um, I went to UCLA I'm a what's called a triple bruins, I went to UCLA 3 times, I did my undergrad at UCLA I did it in sociology and I double majored in Chicana/Chicano Studies um and I mean I didn't know I went undecided, I actually I had no idea what I was going to do, I thought I was going to be a music major cause I used to play piano so I was like I'm going to do music and then I quickly realized that I wasn't gonna do that and then I got involved with um different student groups like you know like actually I got really involved with the American Indian Student Association doing peer advising tutoring, um so I thought for a while I was going to do like educational justice um type of work I worked for a union at one point and then got involved in a student government politics and I was going to be politician anyways in involved, but through sociology and Chicano Studies I um I think that the root I was very much and then my own personal, I mean especially in hispanic latino community you know health is a big issue health hospitality, even my own experience growing up, I, I used to you know be in the higher um BMI category than what the doctor wanted so you know I definitely had my own personal experiences with my childhood obesity so i think throughout my UCL undergraduate experience, i think health was always something that interested me so um i ended up working in between my undergrad and my masters, i actually took a year off and worked at a mental health agency actually um with american indian community in LA um i started off as a case manager somehow i just certain deputy to be honest someone left an evaluation position, they were like do you want it and i was like sure i had no idea what an evaluator was but somehow i got this evaluation position and its pretty much what I do now um but anyways in between i was like getting my masters in public health at UCLA and working and then from masters i part of the practica that we have to do for the 400 hour internship i was actually i interned in the Los Angeles county department public health as part of that and that's actually how i got my current job, i've been at the county for like 10 years now so am right now i am the chief research analyst so typically still doing research and evaluation of health program policies um disble in the county. Mostly related to chronic disease oh yea and while i was at the county i got my PHD

graduated in 2018 so its been like 2 years so i worked and was able to go to school um simultaneously while i did that so yea sorry i kinda rambled so hopefully its fine

Jennifer- no its fine

Brenda- so if you have any questions let me know

Jennifer- no you, so this next question is a little personal and its okay if you don;t want to answer um what was the hardest part of your childhood?

Brenda- ohh, that's a great question I know, i think i skimmed through your thing and i was like i have an answer for that, i think i would say broadly, i think, i think what got me interest in health and hospitality is that, i think especially with the communities of color sometimes disparities in specially in this you know in like an abroad dominant society, um their like stigma or like assumption made up about people of color so i think that for me that's probably one things that impacted me growing up um in some of my personal health issues which i wont get deeply into but i just feel that that that was probably one of the struggles and people not really just making assumptions based on your background and i'm not really understanding that like communities of color are diverse and can have these quote, white people problems, i think um i think was something i definitely had to overcome

Jennifer- yeah

Paulina- okay so what was, what is your favorite hobby, like what do you like to do on your spare time

Brenda- uh thats hard, at, definitely sewing clearly cuz i joined the, but you know its so funny because i well i just in general crafts um and like home, homy type activities um cuz before of this one i was young, i always sowed i used to sow a lot in highschool i used to make my own clothes um and you know when i started my especially my UCLA undergrad up to PHD i like, i didn't have time like i my sewing machine was like gathering dust to be perfectly honest, um actually i'm kind of grateful for that no, i don't want to diminish the pandemic, i'm not grateful at all because this obviously horrible people have died, including my own family so definitely i'm not happy about the pandemic but i guess soberlining i have to see what a pos, some well it forced me to go back to some of my hobbies that i actually really enjoyed like sewing, cooking, i really liked to bake um oh i was a chicken farm at one point, i used to have a house like with 40 chickens at one point like me and my housemate, like i like framing kinda type of things i dont know its a hard question it really depends on my mood um i vary my crafts and my projects my hobbies

Jennifer- okay so what made you design, uh i mean what made you decide in joining the auntie squad?

Brenda- um so originally when the pandemic started well being in public health i worked with government um i was actually, i personally um was frustrated with the government response in terms of masks and i personally felt that the guidance that was given at the time during the

pandemic back in like march of masks don't work was not accurate given empirical evidence in the literature that masks do work that um i look up some, i was just a little spectacle um i don't know if i buy this anyways found some studies and i decided well like, i don't, i see why their are telling people not to buy masks because a lot of people wanna get you know have people you know use up all the PPE that is needed for hospitals i think that clothe masks should be good so i just started doing my own cloth maks and just on my instagram ask friends do you have fabric that you can donate and then through that i went on facebook and one of my friends um actually connected me to cristina and was like oh cristina also sells masks so then thats kinda how i got looped in because i kind of started but then she was starting and then eventually anyways she was way more organized than i am so i was like what, i always originally sewing masks we started with my family called masks for all we were just we had a little what's it called um ah there's like uh a website linktree probably she helped me create like a link tree website to make a website to make it easier for people anybody essential workers to request masks but then it just got to overwhelming and i just got, i now just exclusively make masks for the auntie sowing group because before i used to ship masks to like people like just any individual but it was just like overwhelming i actually preferred working with a more organized group like the auntie sowing squad that you know has like high especially high risk populations um really are more vulnerable um i preferred working with the aunties so yea it was just kind of like i'm being connected with a through a friend so that is how i got started.

Paulina- so um this question you kind of already answered we said how did you hear about the auntie sowing squad so you kind of like already said it like

Jennifer- yeah you already answered the question

Brenda- I am sorry

Paulina- No but tis fine you are good

Brenda- Two for one sorry, i rambled so it's good that i already answered your question

Paulina- yea so i'm going to just go ahead and ask the next one so it was, the next one is what kind of problems do you deal with? If there's any like in the auntie squad

Brenda- Like in the auntie sowing group?

Paulina- yeah

Brenda- Honestly, it's been great like I have no issues with the auntie sewing group. Umm I, I mean in terms with issues with the group itself nothing. I really have zero issues. I think for me now is just you know now with work, work from home. And you know, it's just, I haven't personally I haven't had as much time to dedicate to sowing. As much as i did in the beginning, I think maybe it was just more, in the beginning i had a lot of um adrenaline so me and my family were sowing a lot. Umm now i.. I definitely I'm a little behind on work projects. So I'm trying to catch up. So it's been difficult for me to dedicate as much time as I did earlier in the pandemic, so I think for me finding a balance between sowing umm. I think we were sowing like 50 masks

a day or something. We had a little... operation going on in my house. Actually, I taught my dad how to sew... we bought sewing machines. My mom was our cutter.. So I mean we had a whole assembly line going but it's been difficult to sustain that level of production when uhh... I have a full time job. And it's been difficult and then .. ohh well my husband, he actually lives in Spain.. And so when he.. in summer he came to visit me.. We were quarantining in an air bnb and so it was just hard... cause i haven't seen him in like five months... so it was just hard to like sew at that time.. Um so i took a little hiatus.. But umm now that I'm back home with my parents I'm back. Although as not as like productive as before.

Jenny- Mmm. Okay so the next question is how does the auntie squad reflect upon you?.. like how does it reflect you as a person?

Brenda- Umm I mean I'm really grateful to have found this group. Umm.. I think it gave me a sense of purpose during the pandemic and it was really nice to be able to like make friends.. Umm even though I haven't met every- obviously everyone.. I'm like so impressed that how quickly it's grown umm so i think when i joined i don't know I want to say there were like no more than 15 people. It was pretty small umm now I.. I uhh lost count. I feel like they are constantly adding... you know getting national attention so i think it's super cool that how quickly it grew umm so i think it.. I mean I'm proud to be a member of it. And though I haven't been as productive recently I still you know something I want to be apart off. And umm.. Like.. you know obviously i've become... you know Kristina I consider her someone that you know after the pandemic i'd love to continue meeting up with and there's another auntie who actually came to my house and helped me... taught me how... physically distance of course with mask umm she taught us me and parents had a built in altar for day of the dead. So umm it's been really cool to like to get to meet other progressive minded people. Umm that are also wanting to do something tangible umm so i think that's been really cool.

Paulina- That's nice, okay so what is like your typical day like? And like in the auntie squad like how.. When you guys.. If you guys gather like probably not right now but like i'm sure.. What do you guys do?

Brenda - Ummm well to be honest it's all on facebook so.. Umm before I... I actually... So I deleted my facebook temporarily not deleted the account but deleted the app of my phone because I have a lot of work deadlines and I find myself compulsively checking my social media which is difficult when I have hard deadlines. I actually been trying to delete my social media apps. So i haven't been checking it as much but in the past i .. i mean i know they would put umm... cause there's the aunties from the headquarters they would organize and put out a call like "we need mask for this farm worker org or xyz org" so umm... you know i would usually respond or sometimes if people said like I need fabric ... or sometimes i would put ... I request does anybody have fab- you know... umm but I haven't done that recently. I now mostly communicate directly with one of the aunties from the headquarters. I just dm her and just say "hey like is there umm a particular.. Like ... I'd like to give masks to like the farm workers. Do you have any orgs that you think could use adult masks? And then she'll tell me "oh yeah i have this contact send it to this" and i'll tell her how many masks i made. Like a week ago I think we sent 100 masks to an org a farm worker or here in L.A.so umm usually now that's more of my

approach ill... now that I'm in contact I know I go directly with Jessica, one of the headquarters aunts.

Jennifer- Mmm... Okay so umm... What are your thoughts on the election? Now I don't know hahaha...

Brenda- woohh thats a good question.

Jennifer- I know this question is like so off topic... On what we were talking about..

Brenda- haha no it's okay, no it's actually really all related.. I get you.. I understand why you're asking this..

Jennifer- i felt very awkward.. I was like how do you ask that?

Brenda- umm .. wow I... you know the election has been a rollercoaster of emotion because.. I'll just be transparent. I voted for Obama.. I love Obama however I recognize he's not perfect, he's a politician and same with Joe Biden actually umm same with Hilary Clinton. Actually I voted for Hilary too. I wasn't.. I mean.. I.. my personal.. My political standpoint is just I you know.. at the end of the day they are politicians and especially with congress it's going to be.. Especially if they don't have full control of the senate it's going to be hard to make certain changes.. Anyways it's complicated. I obviously was really pro Joe Biden and i really hate Donald Trump and anything Tump-ism i really im just... so watching the election unfold i.. Itt was very nerve wracking anxiety inducing to say the least. Even now with that orange blob in the white house.. Umm... not conceding. You know I'm just... The last few weeks I let go.. I'm like well you know... I... I have no control over that but yes definitely thought the election was... umm very intense and dramatic and ummm i think.. Oh because my husband his family are from Italy so it's really interesting to like talk to them about politics because i.. I definitely get a European perspective of... you know american politics. So they always... even before.. Even when Trump won in 2016. I mean they know my political stand. They are pretty liberal progressive too. It's not like i have to pump some in these things.. But umm definitely think America is a joke or was a joke under Trump. Umm at least from a Europeans standpoint it seems like but umm im just relieved. I'm hoping we can turn a new leaf and I hope Joe Bieden sticks to his promises umm especially for some more progressive issues... my personal opinion.

Paulina- Okay. last question so how has the pandemic impacted you and the auntie squad?

Brenda- Uhhh me personally.. Definitely increased my anxiety levels cause i'm already to be frank uhh hypochondria so umm i think actually the reason why... not the only reason but one of the reasons why i started to sow that was my coping mechanism to just be a workaholic and do things to occupy my mind so it was actually really good for my mental health to umm be part of the sowing squad and also for my family because my parents are also anxious people so.. And I know I'm sure you have your parents... i don't know if they are the same but my parents ... they are not busy. They get into trouble, especially social, especially mexican parents. Oh my goodness like I had to like i feel like parents... I know they are adults but like definitely trying to hang out with people.. So it was good to get them involved, keep them busy so that they don't go

and hang out with people and don't get infected. So umm I'm doing good.. I mean doing a long distance relationship is challenging during the pandemic like right now i'm dealing with like you know my husband wants me to go visit for christmas but i'm like mmm i dont think thats a good idea... So like anyways I need to navigate that. Umm I mean who knows when we'll be able to see each other, it's hard to predict but umm.. But overall, I mean I'm grateful to have a job that I can work from home, I know that's a luxury for a lot of people. Umm you know i really can't complain, i live with my parents so i'm actually grateful for that. Umm it was.. I used to have a house... and I had some burglaries... And anyways i ended up moving back home for safety reasons.. Umm and at first i was like "ohh no i miss my house" but umm i think it ended up working out that i live with them during the pandemic so umm yeah. So yeah.. It all worked out so i can't really complain. And the auntie group has definitely helped me umm maintain my focus, i would say gave me a sense of purpose during these crazy times..

Jennifer- Yeah, no that's good.. That's good to hear and i'm so sorry for the burglary

Brenda- ohhh yeah, life is wild yeah... but.. You know it happens...

Jennifer- yeah well we are all finished with our question guide, so thank you very much for participating and i learned a lot from you. And I really appreciate that you took your time. I'm pretty sure that you are very busy from what I hear, and the fact that you had the time and like you know you spoke to us and shared your life story... like really... helps me out because i'm also a first generation student and both of my parents who come from Mexico ... umm they don't speak english but... im pushing, im pushing and just motivate me because as you can see did it, you graduated, you have your PHD and your working, your full time. And that's just something that I love to see within my community honestly.

Brenda- that's great.

END OF INTERVIEW

