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Interview with Jackie Bell Johnson

Jackie Bell Johnson

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Interviewee: Jaqueline Bell Johnson

Interviewers: Aja Whittaker and Sierra Wilson

Date: November 23, 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 :56:58

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Jackie Bell Johnson was born in Baltimore into a community that sustained themselves by being honest and hard-working people, including her father, who was a carpenter. Johnson also grew up being a part of Girl Scouts and earned her Silver. Johnson is currently living in Los Angeles, California, as an art teacher at the local community colleges and is a mother of two. Johnson has used her art as an act of protest and activism; she has carried this ideal into her role as an Auntie in the Auntie Sewing Squad.

Interview Abstract: The beginning of our interview was essentially introducing Jackie Bell Johnson to our listeners, establishing how she became an active member of the Auntie Sewing Squad, and how she was able to get supplies to make masks during the pandemic (00:00-12:00). Johnson then goes on to explain the Auntie Care exchange program, and how that allowed her to get more involved with other Aunties, and to ensure she is taking care of herself during these trying times (12:00-19:00). We then go on to explore the ways in which the Auntie Sewing Squad has influenced her views on social issues, and how she used her art to express herself (19:00-22:40). After showing how important her art is to expressing herself to the world, we get to take a look at her childhood in Baltimore, Maryland; she gives us a glimpse into her life as a Girl Scout, and how she used that to make a difference in her community (22:40-31:40). To close off our interview, Johnson explains how her family feels about her being an Auntie, and we get to experience how Johnson creates a sense of normalcy during the pandemic (31:40-57:00).

AW: So much for agreeing to meet with us. Really appreciate it. Also appreciate changing dates for us, really helped so thank you so much. So I'll go ahead and start recording and then I'll just do a quick little intro and then we can get started.

BJJ: OK.

AW: This is Sierra Wilson and Aja Whittaker interviewing Jacqueline Bell Johnson on the 23rd of November, 2020, over Zoom. And we are here to talk about the Auntie Sewing Squad. So um first question we have is, pretty easy - When did you join the Auntie Sewing Squad?

BJJ: It was late- late March, early April. I have to get somewhere a friend of mine who's also an artist posted about the Auntie Sewing Squad and I think they were putting together a caravan to go to Navajo First Nations. And then I saw. So I'd liked it, you know, and started like, what is this? And then I- I saw, I guess, Kristina Wong as like public right? not friends, but a public post and saying that they're recruiting and join because we're sharing patterns and stuff. And so I join like, "OK, I don't know if I can really like commit too too much?" But I did want to learn better ways to make things um I can sew, as in like I know how to thread a machine and do straight lines. But that's that's really it. Like I, it's more on a very minor functional level and so like doing patterns and actually. Making things is, is...it was tricky. Now, it's not so bad now. You know, you do it.

AW: So how many masks do you think you've made so far?

BJJ: I'm going to count the ones that are, they're kind of like finished shells. I just need to put the elastic on. So probably I'm getting very close to 500. I'm probably a 450 right now.

SW: Oh, wow!

AW: Oh wow, that's awesome!

AW: Over this six month period. That's. Wow, that's also very impressive.

BJJ: No, I'm impressed. Yeah, I, most of my material has been sourced from donations. Um I - so I'm a mom of two. I work part time and like, we're, we're not on a tight budget. But I was like putting my foot down because fabric is expensive, you know?

SW: Yeah.

BJJ: And I found people to donate old clothes and old sheets and stuff. And then Kris- Kristina's sent me a box of fabric, most of which I don't even like. So, so I've been mostly using the donations that I have and, um, you know, um. I think it makes it more comfortable, too, because the fabric is broken in. You know, so I'm pretty proud of that, too.

AW: Yeah.

BJJ: I try to recycle, you know.

AW: That is an amazing achievement. So what is your part time job? What else do you do besides the Auntie Sewing Squad?

BJJ: I'm an art professor. I teach it to local community colleges and so I'm teaching sculpture right now online with zoom, it's terrible. It's you know, it's it's not meant to be taught this way.

Um. But I work at a school that- and they don't invest in their art department. So it's not much different than what they get, normally in a sculpting class; we don't have a woodshop, you know, that kind of stuff. So it's yeah. It's more of just I feel like it's a student outreach program at this point; just trying to ground a couple of students to, you know, pummel through the pandemic.

AW: Right. That's awesome, that's really cool. So, um, going back to the Auntie Sewing Squad. So what was the process of becoming a member of the Auntie Sewing Squad?

BJJ: Just joined the group

AW: That was it?

BJJ: That was it. I mean, now I think you have to do a couple more hoops. Um, When I asked for something- so I, I was looking at the patterns that they were posting. Um, I saw that- oh, I forget- I think his name was Ryan? But he was an uncle in the group, and he was doing laser cut stencils for one of the patterns. So I snatched that up! Well I snatched up his pattern, and then I did my own laser cut, but then I needed elastic because I was calculating. They sent me pre cuts, which was really cool- because that's the slowest part of the process for me. And then I was like, "well, crap, I don't have any elastic!" So I had to ask for elastic. And I had several different um- well it was one conversation. But- but Kristina Wong asking me, "you're not going to sell these on Etsy? Right.?" I swear I don't even have an Etsy, like. So there was concerns, I know, about people getting the elastic because at the time, back in March, everybody sold out! Because-

AW: Right.

BJJ: people were scrambling to jump on the bandwagon to either make because they needed them to make because it was an opportunity to make up lost income or, or what have you. But anyway, so um they finally sent me a role, and um, I'm almost done with it.

AW: OH wow and that's lasted you from March or- ?

SW: And those are big roles too-

BJJ: Well um mostly and then I have a nurse that I was donating masks to. So I guess long, long story here. My husband is immunocompromised. And so when masks were becoming a thing and I finally figured out a pattern and found all that, you know, gathered supplies and stuff, I, I made some. And I use the elastic that I took out of the fitted sheet to do it. And I made like several for my husband and for me. And then I had two toddlers. So I actually, there's quite a fitting process there to get that even pattern to fit them. Um, um But it might- my husband is, you know, at risk. And so I just wanted to make sure we, like, lined our defenses up. And then a friend of mine, her husband was interviewing and possibly going to get this job, which he did. But it was like they were making him go to the warehouse is really stupid because he's a marketing guy. Like, you don't need to go to a warehouse. But anyway, like um so I started making for them. And then a friend of mine, his wife is a nurse at Loma Linda for dialysis, for kidney stuff. And, you know, these stubborn Inland Empire people that think everything is fake, the nurses, you know, attack them when they walk in and be like, where's your mask? But I made a bunch of masks for them to give to the patients to walk away with, you know, and they preferred the, um the, the potholder loops. You ever did that as a kid like you leave those loops together. So. So those are really soft, but they're also really stretchy and they are comfortable in the ear. They don't cut as much. So I made some for the nurses there and also for their patients. And that's kind of like how

it all started. And, and that's why. Also, like, I didn't need the whole role and why I've been able to pace it a little bit.

AW: Very- Oh well that's awesome using your resources, very cool.

JBJ: Yeah. I mean, I'm lucky I, I have a community of artists and we always are, you know, hoarding supplies and stuff.

AW: Right! So definitely your job as an art teacher has influenced the way you, I guess, make masks and also kind of your mindset. That's also very cool.

SW: So I know you mentioned a little bit in the beginning how um your friend kind of posted on Facebook for the group to join the Auntie Sewing Squad.

JBJ: Right.

SW: Right? OK. So did you know any other Aunties before joining the program? And, like, do you talk with any other Auntie's regularly? Like, how do you talk to people?

JBJ: Um. So um, no, I don't. I know of- like there is a person named Badly. He's the- they are the person that has run the vans like out to the First Nations in Arizona. And um, uh they have exhibited in a place that I exhibited. And so they are a mutual friend of my other friend that posted. And then I know, uh, a few other art people that have posted because they know Kristina Wong in Performance Art Circles, which I am a sculptor. So like, you know. Right. We don't talk. So um, But anyway. And then I joined in. And you're right. I don't like I'm starting to learn who's doing what in the group. And I got a friend of mine to join. And um, so she's not really like technically a member, but she's uh, been doing some local community work of, of social justice in Glendora. And has started a coat drive for the Lakota nations that they're sending out to, I think, at the end of the week. But, yeah, there's a lot of instant messenger. And, you know, I follow all the posts. I'm just like. I don't want to steal the spotlight and be like, look at me, and so I- and I don't have like- I don't know these people outside of, of this Internet community. So, you know, I'm, I'm trying and I'm also I can be a little shy in that sense because I'm like, am I pushing too much of myself on these people or, you know? But, you know, it's more of a virtual relationship, I guess you could say. And it is nice. Like, I, I checked the posts all the time. There's so- there's the working group and the public group. Right? And the working group is for people actually making and they're coordinating supplies and the Auntie care, which is something, you know, they're getting really famous for. And they've started these Auntie care gift exchanges; kind of like a Secret Santa thing, but not holiday oriented. And so I did one of those. At one point. And, yeah, it's, it's a nice community. I just, I'm a little shy. Sorry. My dogs are like they're, they're a little weirded out now.

AW: No, you're totally fine. We have cars. I mean this is so hard over Zoom for anyone. No, totally understand. So can you explain kinda explain little bit more about the Auntie care and then um what you- I know that you mentioned that you did an Auntie Care. So what you did-kind of how, your experience of that.

JBJ: All right. So um, I have a, I have a garden and um I...I wound up having pumpkins grow. I thought I was planting squash and then it turned out to be pumpkins. So the squash didn't- didn't grow. But the pumpkin seeds in the compost from last year grew! Back in April, they were coming up and at first, all squash leaves look the same. Yeah, And then all of a sudden there's,

that's a pumpkin. Anyway! So like June and July, I'm sitting on like six giant pumpkins. And my, my husband's a cook. And the Auntie Care thing is bust your ass and make as many masks as you can. Right? Don't stop. Don't take a break. But at the same time, it's like, OK, clearly at some point you're gonna need to take a mental and physical break. And so um that was kind of. Um Kristina, put that in the Auntie Sewing Squad right away, because we had people that were like, well, how can I help? I don't. So I don't have a machine. Some people were cutting. Right. And directly making products, if you will. Um. You know, this isn't stuff. But then there was like somebody doing a virtual yoga class.? And she still does it like on a weekly basis. There was a couple of other like there's a stitch and bitch and there are people performing Kristina offered like, "hey, I'm going to be doing this virtual show for, you know, some art talk thing. Here's the link if you want to join in!" So there's that. And then they were sending out like merch, if you will? You know, like little sewing squad buttons. I'm looking to see if I have one right here- I don't think so. But like little buttons and stickers and stuff, just to kind of build a camaraderie and keep people focused on the cause. Which I mean, these are really like legit tactics that a lot of groups will use. Right.

AW: Right.

JB: Um, And they were mailing them out. And then for- there's a huge concentration of Aunties in L.A. and I'm not a part of that. I hate driving. And I'm also like, we've been hunkering down in our house because of my husband since everything started, like St. Patty's Day. Right. Um. But I, I made a well- I didn't. My husband made a bunch of pumpkin loaf, from those pumpkins. And since they were already starting to like, give away things, like people would make a batch of something and give it out, like. So let's establish this is part of Auntie Care. And I was like, hey, if somebody wants to come pick this up, I got all these things. And then at the same time, they brought some more fabric to me. Right? And they brought me some thread- because I needed some thread- you know, so. So there was an exchange there. And then it turns out like a newer member she just joined like a month ago, lives down the road for me. And she doesn't sew but she volunteered to be a runner. So whenever something comes up like supplies and stuff, I can send her over there to go pick up things for me and bring it back. Which is cool.

AW: Yeah, that's very awesome. Yeah, definitely doing some research on the Auntie Sewing Squad and being able to kinda be in the moment. See the, the way the organization has kind of changed definitely. Obviously from the beginning, it's starting pretty small. But now that we have you guys have such a big community and so many people, aspects that's awesome. You're definitely in an area that people are able to access and able to do different jobs, to kinda do things diligently. And like you said, you have your husband's at risk, so you don't want to go out running around, putting yourself and your whole family at risk. But you are also helping! So that is very awesome.

JB: Right. Thank you. Oh, and to continue that so they started a Auntie Care exchange program. And basically you sign up, you get. You fill out a questionnaire. You get paired with someone else. And um. They are - you read their questionnaire, OK? And they send you or you send them like a little gift package, care package based on their questionnaire. And they wanted to keep it like ten bucks or less. And most of it homemade. So I made a little pencil pouch with some leftover canvas and I made a little patch. She's a teacher. She likes Hogwarts and, and Harry Potter. So I did this. I found this really cool patch of, like, um Hogwarts wasn't hiring. So I teach Muggles instead. And I totally stole that, but changed the art around, like, I drew a little,

you know, with my fancy art pens on a piece of canvas. Then attached it to the thing; she likes to color, so I drew her some outlines, drawings that she could color in, and I got her a set of pens to color with. And, yeah. So, like little things. There's somebody up in Oregon that has a bee farm. And so she's been sending out little honey jars, um you know, and there's a lot of baking going on. Um, we've also been extended discounts. There was somebody that was related to a T-shirt printer. And so they were giving us, like, discounts if we wanted to get an Auntie Sewing squad t-shirt. Um You know, there's, there's all kinds of stuff like that going on and um I mailed some people- I'm with the kids, we've been doing experimental art process, painting, things and postcard size, and then I've been mailing them out to people. So I've been doing that for the Aunties. Somebody else was just sending basically thank you notes like, "you're a beautiful person" and "thank you for making masks." You know, like those pick me up. They seem a little cheesy and they- they also seem a little like too self-referential. But at the same time, they really do function to kind of brighten your day a little. Give you the energy to get back to sewing.

AW: Right. Right. Remind you why you're there.

BJJ: Yeah

AW: Awesome. All right, cool. That's great. That's really cool. Um so um kinda going off. So uh what have been some positive and negative? I'm sorry. I'll do a different question. So how has aspects of your life affected your perspective on issues today, like social justice, government, the election, and has the Auntie Sewing Squad? Has that changed your perspective on anything?

BJJ: Um. No, uh. Auntie Sewing Squad is extremely politically aligned and um I mean, I agreed with that well before I met them. Right. I also, as an artist, and as a person that even in art circles, I argue about craft and having the hand involved in the making of things. So I view, um you know, making, as an act of social justice, as an act of protest, as an act of activism. Right. And I think being an artist is also an act of protest because it goes against capitalist and patriarchal structures. Right. Why the hell would anybody choose to be an artist? It doesn't fit our society. You can't really function. I mean, I'm working part time, right. I can't even get a real job doing what I do. But at the same time, like, it's the choosing to be this and to not conform, is- is an act of social justice, if you will. I think there's- Facebook has a format. If you know how to use it right, can be a way to be more informed. Right? And that's something that I've always been trying to be is like better informed, especially with language and, you know, not just being "woke" right? It's not just the concepts, but the language that people use. Right. Because you have to type when you're on Facebook. So that language to me is really important because I think in pictures. But seeing it, I can grab those sentences. I can grab those phrases and then use them to articulate that concept. You know, in my own conversations and I think Auntie Sewing Squad does that right, as does, you know, most social media, if you know where to look. My, my background as not just an artist, but like, what led to that? You know, my- it's always been about like, why are we doing this? You know, this, this critical thinking. It's a very simple question. But this is like the basis for a lot of critical thinking. Why? Why, why are we doing this? Why is it this way? Right. And constantly asking that question. That's led to my ideas from my work. But it's led to, you know. Challenging social norms that have led to certain political ideologies, if you will. Um. Does that answer your question?

AW: Yes, it does.

SW: Yeah.

AW: Yeah. No, definitely gives us yeah, your perspective on how your side of issues, how you think. So um sorry. So how has- you mentioned that you're a Girl Scout? So how has being a Girl Scout kind of prepared you for being part of the Auntie Sewing Squad? And how is that, how has being a Girl Scout kind of affected you to where you are today?

BJJ: Well, even so, I was a scout for 10 years. I got my silver, but then I had to deal with college applications, so I never went for my gold. Those are the two highest. It's kind of like the Eagle Scout thing. And then all through Girl Scouts, there's- My, my sister, my, my mom was a scout, and she actually was like. Um, What do you call that? Like Vice president? Troop leader.

AW: Oh wow.

SW: Yes, they call them like Troop Leader.

BJJ: Yes, for a minute, but it was a close knit group of people. We all went to high school and middle school together. And, um you know, we were all in scouts for a long time. And um because of who the troop leaders were, and because it was my friend's moms. Right? We maintain this community and um- we all were interested in pursuing crafts like more than anything else, but we would go camping; and I remember one time somebody's dad was a mechanic and he walked us through like we learned how to change tires and oil and stuff. And on top of that, like, my dad is a carpenter and so. It's not just scouts. But it's like the local community and then like my home environment. There's people making things. And the town I grew up in, which is Dundalk in southeast Baltimore. It's all about the labor of your hands and, and, you know, like physical labor. Like, this is honest, good, hard working people. And this is honest, good work. Right. To, to work with your body and your hands and those kind of skills. Um, scouts kind of pushed for that. But it was like an all girl environment. And we got to pick what we wanted to explore, to pursue. And then, you know, with not just the troop leader, most of the moms would be there. Right? So whatever you wanted to do, we had several people to pull from to do it. But even in that structure, they have like the opening and closing ceremonies, which, you know, we learned all that stuff. It's not as rigorous or strict as Boy Scouts. It's not as army-like. But it is still rooted in Christianity, which I was raised Catholic, but I kind of grew out of that around 12. And, you know, so I was constantly like, why? Why does this have to be attached to this? You know, so that I think that also led to some of my rebellious streak as well. And in the Girl Scouts, too, you got a- you're constantly like, what is it to be a girl? And, you know, like there, those girls are different than me. And, you know, like you're kind of in this all girl environment, which for me, like public school and stuff. So I wasn't otherwise. And being in that all girl environment kind of examines like those definitions of gender and also like what we were taught. And as we were older in the Scouts, we were constantly expected to watch the younger scouts, like at big community events and be the teachers. And it was like we don't get any events or aspects of events like, you know, segments or whatever that are programming for us- that are interests for us. It's all about the little kids, you know. So that whole introspection thing. Um, I learned to sew from my mom and then we did a little bit more sewing in scouts and Home Ec but we mostly did like jewelry and beads and art and a lot of things that had to do with finding leaves in the woods, you know, printmaking and that kind of thing. Um, And a lot of music, there are quite a few musicians in our group. And so like hardcore like doing theory and stuff, though. So there is a lot of that level in, you know, and going in that direction instead of crafts as much. And a lot of cooking. A lot of cooking.

AW: So you've always kind of been in the arts, crafts with your hands. That's very, very cool. I actually grew up. I was a brownie. I started as a brownie. Went into girl scouts then it became too much cookie selling cookie and stuff that I pretty much had the same perspective. I wasn't feeling like I was getting out too much. So it kind of pulled me out. But definitely, I mean, aspects of it still stay with you.

JBJ: I've heard that story before, so it definitely does matter. Like the troop you're in. I mean, we weren't a rich troop. We did a lot during cookie season. We were out in front of everywhere selling and pushing cookies on everyone. But at the same time, we did a lot of things by trying to be really cheap, by like, OK, who in our circle knows how to do this or has a friend that does, you know-

AW: Right, connections, yeah.

JBJ: Right. And that resourcefulness also works really well with Aunties too, to throw that in there.

AW: Very cool.

SW: OK. So I'm a little curious. You mentioned that you got your silver for Girl Scouts. Is there a project for that one? I know there's a big project for the gold, but is there a project for silver?

JBJ: Yeah. It's, it's basically it's the same thing. It's just the gold one is expected to be bigger. So um, in Baltimore, Chesapeake Bay. There was this abandoned military fort called...Fort Carol; I think there is a fort on the, on the shore and then there's this island fort...and I think the island forward is Carol, but that might have been the name of the one on the shore...anyway. There is, um, you know, like a rock bed that this- because it's a manmade island. And this is in the middle of the bay and the oysters, they seem to like it. So there's, you can promote oyster procreation by putting more oyster shells and creating a larger shelf, if you will, an oyster bed. So we, you know, this is, this is Baltimore, Maryland. It's all about seafood. Right? So we went around and we gathered a bunch of bushels and bushels. Which is not just a bucket. It's you know, it's like several gallons per bushel right of shells from restaurants and stuff. And everywhere. And we took- you could do a rowboat, it was so close to the shore. So we would roll out there with a couple of buckets at a time and dump them in certain spots. We flagged them where we were dumping to build out the oyster bed there. And we did that for like a day or two. Yeah, it was cold. It was wet. It was miserable. But um yeah, so we, we expanded out the shelf a bit. And, which- that was in the 90s. But even then the bay was not taken care of for a long time. And it is- go? That's my kid- It, it was fished almost bare. I mean this is still a problem. Right? The Maryland crabs and stuff. Most of ours come from, actually, Louisiana and Texas because the bay doesn't produce enough. And part of that is because of like, Maryland shares the bay with Virginia. And while most of it is in Maryland, the mouth of it is in Virginia. And that's the more ocean level versus the freshwater level. Right. So there is a significant power that Virginia has over that little portion that they own.

AW: Right.

JBJ: And they're not as interested in conservation. Right. And the laws now, they've been really released a lot because jobs! Right. But it's the same problem as everything else. You're picking jobs and economy over, you know, environment, over people.

AW: Right

BJJ: Anyways...

AW: Definitely, kind of going back to the Auntie Sewing Squad. So how does your family feel about you becoming an Auntie?

BJJ: Um. I, I think it's- they're used to it? Go find Daddy. Go, go find Daddy. Sorry.

AW: You're fine.

SW: They're cute.

BJJ: Is he outside? OK. Watch out. OK. Sorry.

AW: No you're fine.

BJJ: Just use the restroom. And now she needs help anyway. Um uh. They know what I'm doing. They know the importance of masks. I mean my, my husband of course like really comprehensive. But the kids understand and they see me sewing. Right. And they know not to touch mommy stuff which is a, that's a big one. But I we, we have been like self-contained. So we haven't, we haven't really put the kids in, in positions where they're going to see people with masks. And even like when they're playing in their front yard, most people aren't wearing masks when they're walking or, you know, riding around the neighborhood or whatever. So I don't think they get it at that level yet? But my daughter is three and a half and my son is, is four and a half. Something like that. You know, so, like, how much would they really comprehend anyway? But they understand that masks are important, which is really good. And they understand that mommy's trying to help people, which I think is really important for them to learn that, you know; we should always try to help people, you know all those, those good mushy values, which importantly do instill.

AW: Yeah. Definitely being a role model for the first hand.

BJJ: Yeah

AW: Very cool. Yeah. Um, so what does being an Auntie mean to you? Pretty much like I know we've heard talked about, um you know, making masks and stuff, but kind of. We haven't talked about ideals, but what does. I guess if this makes sense: what does being Auntie mean to you specifically?

BJJ: Um. So one day when the pandemic really looked like it was going to blow up, you know, you're- you can see it coming. Um. There is a Facebook group that I'm part of called Academic Mommas, and it's professors that have kids because those two things are very incompatible. Right. And it's an international group. There's like 10,000 people. And there are people from Korea and China that were posting about stuff with Wuhan back in December. Back in January. And so I'm watching this. And you could see it blow up and then spring break happened. You know, so I could tell. And I even made an announcement to my class in the spring, back in the spring, like, "OK, so right now they're planning on having us go virtual in two weeks. But I bet you they're going to come back tomorrow and cancel classes from now. So we're going to talk about certain things today while I still have you." Right. So, I mean, I'm very fortunate that I could kind of see that coming and pull the kids out of daycare right away. My husband was

already working from home a couple days a week. But um, you know, we pulled him out, too. Sick days for that first week until they made the announcement that they were going virtual. What I'm saying, though, is that like, OK, you can see it's happening. You can see it's starting to grow and blow up. You can, you know, I'm very lucky to have kind of witnessed that. And so I could play it safe even well before it was a risk. Um well, you start looking around, it's like, well, [INAUDIBLE], what can I do? You know, how are we gonna get out of this? It's not just the panic of that, but it's like, OK, I know something these people don't. What can I do? And also, like, how do you reconcile what needs to be done with what you as a person are capable of? So, for instance, like, I'm not one to go out and stand on a pulpit. I'm, I'm not that kind of person. Right. Think Kristina Wong is and she has absolutely used her platform that way. In fact, that tells she's, like, collected these sewers. Right. So for me, it was like, OK, I'm going to make masks and start with that. I'm going to look at some videos, start researching, um gathering textiles. I was also working on an art project that involved a lot of fabric. So I took everything that looked like it'd be appropriate- cotton. And I pulled it out of that and started planning. Right? Washing fabric, because there's a lot you can do even if you haven't started cutting out or identifying a pattern yet. So- like it- I knew, like, that this is something I could do to help as well as, um you know, having that, that moment. That three hour class, um my, my classes are at night. So, like, it was really the last time that students got to interact. They weren't even sure earlier that day if they were going to stop classes and go virtual. But I knew. And so having that three hours and talking with my students and just like, OK, it sounds scary, but us staying at home is safe. This will make things better. You know, and like using that platform to and, and then and I mentioned the science hadn't come out about masks yet, but people were starting to follow it. And I noticed a lot of those professors in that one group were talking about people were wearing masks in Korea. They were giving people masks right away. And in China. Yeah, that, that one, Wuhan, was, was quarantined and locked down, but they were also giving out masks to everyone there. So I knew, like, that could be a thing. And so I encourage students to go, you know, find something to wear. I've got it in an art. A lot of students have this kind of stuff because you needed for, you know, your processes and stuff. I had a couple of disposables lying around that I've used for, you know, doing plaster and such. Anyway, so. I forget what the question is. You know, you're looking around and you're like, well, what can I do to help? And I also didn't want to commit my money because it was like, clear. Well, if everyone goes on lockdown, the economy is going to stall. And I might lose my job. And I- my husband might lose his job. And it's like we need to be able to keep food on the table for the children. I started planting a whole bunch of seeds in the garden, like immediately. And it was March. So it's a good time anyway. But I like I turned my flower beds into vegetable gardens. And I'm still doing that, you know. But I was just, like, really worried because, I mean, one thing about science fiction is we've been able to see through the eyes of these creative people about, um you know, what does an apocalypse look like? It doesn't mean that it is an apocalypse now. It doesn't mean that their vision of it will be correct. But you can see it's the social experiment that people have turned into entertainment. Right? Zombie movies or something. And you can see those moments of transition and what boxes are ticked. You know, to get to a point of full on crisis. And so, um you know, I was frantically like trying to plan, trying to come up with. OK, so I need to educate the kids at home. I need to create a level of normalcy. We needed to turn- we gave up on the office. And we've actually turned the kitchen table into the office so we can double dip while we're virtually doing stuff with the children, you know? So like a lot of planning. But um having

that, that quick insight there was, was really helpful to figure out what I should be doing and what I can do to help. I think that was the question.

AW: Yes. No, definitely. You answered and more, it was originally what does an Auntie mean to you. But you definitely brought in a lot of-

BJ: So the Aunties kind of made me feel like I wasn't crazy. It also helped me with resources and um I was weighing like, what mask do I make and how do I make it safely? Right. And so there was talk of the, the, the poly, the polyester bonded fiber because it's bonded almost as tight as of tight cotton can be. And in fact, that, it doesn't hold moisture. So it's very effective. That's what the surgeon's disposable masks are made of. I found a source for it because of the Aunties. I got a whole roll of it and I put it in between the layers of cotton. Right. So. So the Aunties kind of confirmed a lot of my ideas of, of what was going on and how to help, right? It also validated me in that I'm not just sitting here crazy and being this paranoid mom because um they were seeing it, too, and they were acting on it right away. And I mean, it was something to behold. I learned so many tricks from the Anti Sewing Squad because these guys are- there's a lot of professional sewers in the group. There's a lot of people that just lost their jobs at American Apparel or what have you. Um There's a quite a few theater and, and um movie costume people in the group. And, um, having that community to in that crisis and watching everybody go through those same things and have that venting space, you know, it really helped and helped focus me a bit more.

SW: Yeah

AW: Yeah. That's awesome. That's very inspiring, definitely to see, because, I mean, not very many people knew ahead of time were, you know, or at first, too, like, oh, it's fine. It's not going to reach us. I remember thinking, I was just in class and I just it was like, oh, like I'll be fine. But then next thing you know, it's not, you know.

BJ: Right.

AW: Very inspiring. So I guess our last question will be, um what are some ways that you have been able to bring some normalcy to your family and you've been able to bring some normalcy into your life during this pandemic?

BJ: Um. There's a lot of shopping. I get mad at myself about that, but that has helped. So I was working on a big project. I was basically making a giant pillow fort. And I mean, of course, that that's not going to happen now. Right. Having, teaching helped a little to keep the normalcy because I had a certain level of responsibility. I say helped. I'm not teaching next semester. I just got laid off. So that's over. You know,

AW: I'm sorry about that.

BJ: No it's, that's a whole other rabbit hole of talking about adjuncts and exploitative labor and academia being this holier than thou. But, you know, anyway, normalcy. We had Amazon Prime and Netflix and cable because cable is the fastest Internet out here. Um. And then we got Disney+. Right. So that was huge. And we're, the kids have the summers that I had as a kid just sitting and watching TV. We'd go out and play a lot. My husband has taken over teaching the kids, which is cool because, you know, it gives me a mental break. So we call it "daddy teacher time" and um the daycare. We still send them some money to kind of like hold our place. And

right now- they, I think it's expanded. But like in the middle of the crisis, the only kids going to the daycare were kids of the local hospital. The San Antonio hospital. And we didn't want them to go out of business. Right. And um we are lucky enough. My husband's work declared we're gonna be working from home just like Google. So, you know. And they're not getting hurt. Right. So we knew that, like we're now in a financial stability that other people might not have. And so we were kind of trying to use that. Um, any way to support them? But they were sending him dittos. What do you call them? Worksheets. Right. And so he would sit with the kids and that way they're kind of kept up with what they should be learning in preschool or I don't even know. It's like pre pre-

AW: Pre-Kindergarten, yeah.

BJ: Right. Right. We got some more activities for I mean, the kids. There's a lot more family time. There's a lot more of my husband and I staying up late as a way to kind of have time for just us. Um. We do order out a lot more. We're saving a lot of money on gas.

AW: Yep.

SW: Yes.

BJ: Yes. We are not going anywhere. So we didn't, we would go out like twice a month. Right. But now we're, we're ordering out once or twice a week and we're going to all the favorite places: the sushi place down the road, you know, and the Indian place and stuff. And that, that's a good, normalcy for the kids because they miss going out. They miss, you know, because they would wave hi to everybody. Um. The sushi place has all these crazy laser lights on the ceiling. It's bizarre, but it's like really fun. And they have, like, these star stickers all over the walls and stuff. You know, mermaids and things. And so the kids and remember that, like, OK, we're gonna order from that sushi place that has the mermaids and the sharks on the wall, yay! You know, those are, those are some ways that we've been trying to normalize. My family's not a really close knit family. So my kids don't often talk with their grandparents. But now it's kind of normalized that- that when we do talk, they use the video because they figured out how to use it.

AW: Yeah.

BJ: So the kids really like that. I don't know if that's really normalcy or not? But it, it helps. And, you know, we try to do something that is a change every week and, and try to do something that's like a favorite, a regular for the kids. We eat all of our meals together. Um. We have- we're lucky that we have a front yard and a backyard and it allows them to kind of just go around and everything. I've been tapping into some of the online communities so I'm texting a lot with my other art friends. Um. But there's- there's an art, you could say, of a business called Shoe Box Projects, and they do PR and marketing consulting for artists. I've written articles for their sister company, Art and Cake, like, um you know, as an art critic, I guess so anyways. So they started doing a lot of online programing like, an email exchange collaboration project. And in fact, they're doing round 10, but it's called call and response. And so I participated in a few of those just do like. Make sure that I'm not leaving my art practice behind, because that's normalcy for me. It's not big sculpture stuff, but it's something and it's also like a way to have conversations, which for me, that's what art is, it's a conversation generator, you know. So that helps. And um I joined a group that's kind of like a peer mentorship thing. So we just kind of chat about, you know, our, our values in making art and tips and that kind of thing. Um. For my husband, I've

tried to carve out more time for him to play video games. You know, stupid guy things. And he's really into beer. And there's a lot of microbreweries around here. And they have streamlined their service. So you can order on the phone app and they'll just put it in your trunk when you drive up so he can go and still do his beer runs and get a local microbrews stuff. Um uh, he's been doing a lot more fancy cooking and he's always been good at cooking, but like, it's really become more of a creative practice for him. And so I think that's like a- a level of normalcy for him. Um we, we drink wine. We joined a wine club-

AW: Oh nice-

BJJ: And we joined a cheese club-

AW: Oh, awesome!

BJJ: But like they mail it, you know, through FedEx or something. And so, you know, during our time when the kids are asleep, sometimes we'll make a charcuterie like, you know, it up. But, I mean, like, that's that's really it. Like. I'm looking like we're gonna be doing this for another year. You know? Um. So it's OK. It's mundane. You know, uh normalcy has a different definition in these times.

AW: Right. Right. Well, awesome. This has been- you are such an inspiration and um we appreciate you taking your time out of your day to be able to talk to us and kind of give us more info. This is awesome! We'll be using this, people will be using this in the future. And so um once again, we'll close out. And once again, thank you so much. You're awesome, keep up the awesome work! And we wish you the best of luck. And we um hope that, you know, we keep in touch. Please let us know if you have any questions about the oral history or you want to keep updated anything like that.

BJJ: So I do have one if you don't mind.

AW: Yeah of course.

BJJ: Will there be like a link, a Website, a book like how is the archive going to be compiled and then accessed.

AW: Right. So that's going to be it's, it's going to be like digital. So it's going to be through the CSUMB library kind of um articles. So we're not the ones who're going to be putting it altogether. We're just being able to provide the videos to, like, the librarians. And they're going to be able to archive it. So, um- but um when we get back to school next week, I can definitely talk to uh Miss Chrissy Lau, um and kind of talk to her, um, about kind of the process and being able to let you guys know when the link is available, and when you guys can access the whole archive. But I'm not 100% sure about the timeline of it, but I'll definitely ask her and get back to you on that.

BJJ: Just out of curiosity, cause I know it's become a new thing, like the Smithsonian has an archive project and they're recording people's voices. And my husband's uncle's part of that for Saturn V. And so it's, it's just interesting because, like, they have it and they made an exhibition out of it at the D.C. mall. But like, how does it live otherwise? Like, you know, and it's not really useful if it's just a temporary exhibition in one little location. And so, like, to me, this is a really curious evolution of, of what, you know, preserving history is. But then how do you make it

accessible, so that we don't forget our history, and it's not as exclusive or an access kind of thing, you know?

AW: Right. So um- so we actually use a lot of oral histories for class. And some of them are more recent, it's kind of I mean- storytelling has always been a part of history, especially for a lot of I mean, Native Americans and stuff like that. But I think now, especially for a lot of the history, we've been learning about, for women's history. A lot of it's been oral histories about maybe from like the 80s, talking about World War II. And so things that aren't the textbook like we're used to. So definitely this is becoming a lot more popular. So that a lot of history isn't forgotten. Like the Auntie Sewing Squad. I mean, in history books. It's probably just going to be, you know, COVID-19 kind of talking about the economy, politics, but not going to grasp the social justice or the actual people, the citizens, who are making that change.

BJJ: Right.

AW: Especially the women. I mean, this is majority women: the Auntie Sewing Squad. I know there's a few Uncles, but, we want to make sure that, like, this is not forgotten and that when especially for CSUMB and the women's studies- like the class we are in- that they can use this in the future, that because I mean, half of the stuff that we have learned through oral history we didn't even know about-

SW: Yeah.

AW: Until we learned about the oral histories. So it's definitely a new thing, but it's really awesome, because it is archives. It's more like videos or transcripts from a video. And it's not easily accessed because a lot of it is through like academia and stuff. So- but hopefully, like the more popular this gets, the more accessible this is to people who are curious about, you know, if that is a question.

SW: And we are gonna go in and, and we're going to transcribe it as well and write everything down.

BJJ: Oh cool

SW: So that people could read it rather than only listen to it.

BJJ: Right.

SW: Yeah.

BJJ: So, cool. All right. Well, thank you guys for, you know, working on this project.

AW: Yeah.

BJJ: Makes me feel warm and fuzzy.

SW: Thank you.

AW: We appreciate you being a part of it and volunteering! Because I know it's not always easy to find time or even to really talk about personal things and such like that. So we really appreciate it.

SW: Yeah.

AW: So I'll stop recording oops- that's my video. Um.

SW: Me too. Me too.

AW: Perfect.