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## Interview with Lilit Yoo

Lilit Yoo

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**Interviewee:** Lilit Yoo

**Interviewers:** Edna Ruiz, Mallory Garcia

**Date:** 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:** 01:23:31

**Overseen by:** Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

**Biography:** Lilit Yoo is a Korean-Canadian woman who recently became a U.S. citizen. She first came to the U.S. as a graduate student to study at the Peabody Institute of John Hopkins University. Her ceremony to become a U.S. citizen was actually done during the time of the pandemic, which meant it was different than what is traditionally done. The Auntie Sewing Squad was the first nation-wide organization that Lilit Yoo has ever joined.

**Summary of Interview:** (00:00:00) Lilit Yoo discusses her childhood and her experiences growing up in Montreal, Canada. (0:11:12) She speaks about her connection to her culture, and relatives. (0:19:40) She describes her education and her time as a classical musician. (0:30:17) She explains her experiences with student visas, and her road to U.S. citizenship. (0:53:43) Yoo ends with explaining how she ended up joining the group, how this group is considered an activist group, and her opinions on how the U.S. handled the pandemic.

### **Interview Transcript:**

**MG:** Alright so we have the Auntie Lilit Yoo with us and we are going to be talking about the Auntie Sewing Squad today and first we're going to start with some general topics like childhood and family and we're going to start off with asking what was your childhood like?

**LY:** I grew up in Canada I was born in Toronto and I grew up in Montreal so my family moved to Montreal when I was about two years old and my parents are immigrants from Seoul, South Korea but they came actually via Germany. Prior to them, you know, coming to Canada, as immigrants, they were Graduate students at the university in Germany. And back in the time, like to give you some context, like back in the 1960s for any student who wanted to leave the country actually had to pass an exam. There were I guess like a number of testing cycles and if you rank high enough you would be allowed to leave the country and I think it's probably because post Civil War from the Korean War, I think the government was kind of worried about you know wealthy people leaving the country or the inteligenia you know in order for them to

kind of help rebuild the country so it didn't matter like what your socio-economic status was like you did have to leave like I mean you had to actually pass the exam. So, my father, he had applied for studies in Germany. I think it was like chemical engineering or something like that or food processing engineering. He actually ranked first in that one testing cycle and I think because of limited funding, I think only top-ranked students depending on whatever funding they had available is when you can leave. My parents had left under that system so that no longer applies. ... But I grew up in Montreal, I grew up on mostly the western part of the island. In the 1970s, the Quebec, French Government came into power. So I'm actually part of the first generation, I believe, to be under Bill 101. Bill 101 is, you know, it was a very controversial bill at the time of the late 1970s early 1980s where a lot of kids whose parents were immigrants, like myself, could not opt to be educated in an English-only language system. The French Canadian birth rate has been relatively low for a number of decades and so I think the premise was in order to preserve the French culture, they actually demanded that if your parents didn't have any formal education in Canada or if your mother tongue was not English you had to go to French school. At the age of 9 was my first introduction to French immersion I would say, I had been educated in English up until that point. The suburbs at the time in Montreal, on the west island, was a primarily white, anglophone community. Not a whole lot of immigrants who were living on the western part of the island, so I've always been used to being of the minority, so to speak. In terms of people of color, at my elementary school, there might have been 10 or 20, at most. At the time, and we're talking late 1970s here. I mean the demographics have changed a lot but, you know, up until high school, because I was part of this system where, and I think for parents like mine, for you know because if you're talking about immigrants who came from a country where there might have been dictatorship there might have been a place of conflict or they're escaping you know they're trying to rise above their socioeconomic station from their Homeland and then being told by a government in which you arrive that you know what you don't have the right to select the language in which your child should be educated. So from the time I was 11 to the time I was 16 when I graduated from high school, high school is a little different in Quebec, you actually graduate in grade 11 or secondary 5 is what they call it. Highschool is actually what you would consider here to be grade 7 to 11 And then you go to two years of what I would call the equivalent to junior college but it's essentially grades 12 to 13 and you kind of pre select the course of study that you will actually do in university. And then you do three years of college so actually the total amount of education is actually the same as in the US it's just split up differently. We don't have middle school or Junior High like they do here in the United States. High School is high school just like 16 or 17 so you know, from the time I was 11 to the time I finished high school, I was with the same group of children. Because we were all part of the same group you know you graduate from a certain elementary school and then because we were part of a system where pretty much all of my classmates, you know we were all, all of our parents were immigrants. So you have to imagine where, you know you are in a predominantly white anglophone High school and all of the ethnics are in your class. So you know if you think about it's like I would say like 98% of all ethnics in your high school are in your class. I mean that not to say that there weren't white people because there were you know. I mean we're talking about people whose parents are immigrants from Germany or the UK, and there were some parents who actually did opt to have the child

educated in French but what I think a lot of people don't realize is that when you are a product of Bill 101 is that everything has to be taught to you in French. Like we're talking, chemistry, math, geography, history, economics, physics, and even gym class. So even if the teachers are actually, their native tongue is anglophone they are obligated by law to teach us in French so, you know their accents may not be as pretty but they are conversant, you know. Like the teachers who had to teach us had to be conversant in French in order to give us instructions in French. And so starting from what I think would make nine here in the United States up until the time we finished high school we had to take exams in English from the English government and also French for the French government for both English and French. So it was a little odd, you know, its sorta like the english exams from the French government would be super easy for us so we would all score the 99 percentile, and then you have the English exams from the English government, which was probably a more accurate reflection of our ability on that subject matter. So all of us we grew up at least bilingual, and if you had kids who were biracial in your class, chances are they were probably fluent in three or four languages, and that has retained with my class and in some respect, you know, as controversial as it was at the time, I think our parents understood the reason for being forced to have an educated. But in some respects, like it has saved our careers, you know, because we have the ability of language so it's not nothing just fluently bilingual in English and French but also you know if you're conversant in your parents tongue like you know, like for example I remember like there is a couple of classmates of mine that they were, you know, one parent was German and the other one is Iranian and so they both spoke German and Persian at home. And then you learn English and French outside of the home or in school so they can speak four languages which is amazing. There's not many people who can do that so that was pretty much you know that if you live in Montreal people in and out speak English and French fairly often. It is kind of like a second skin you know it's just something that you kind of easily pass through like it's almost like second nature. You are usually in a place of business, you might be served in French first but people do speak to you in English if they realize that you can't speak French. I mean they're not going to turn you away. It's a very unusual, I think in some respects like you know, unlike other places in Canada, it is a little unusual but, it is what it is. Like if you grow up in such a place where you know two languages are the norm it's just normal to you, you don't really think about it. That pretty much, in terms of language and education sum the large pieces of my childhood.

**ER:** Another question did you ever visit Korea and if so what was that like?

**LY:** I have visited, I mean for my memory like at least three times. My first time was when I was a teenager, when I was 14. That was like my first ever visit, it was with my younger sister and my mother and that was for I think about a couple of weeks or so. And then the second visit was I think when I was about 18, it was to accompany my cousin's daughter back to Korea. She had lived with us for a while before her parents were coming to move over to Canada and so I was just bringing her over for a visit. And the last time was actually 20 years ago I was in graduate school at the time I presented a paper at a conference that was being hosted in Seoul. So that gave me a chance to actually spend time with my relatives. That was the last time. I mean I don't speak the language well at all. I mean it's what I would consider, you know my level of

understanding and vocabulary is so low that it's I think my best ability to understand what I think when someone pretty well described it as kitchen Korean so it's like very basic, domestic stuff. Like, 'did you eat', 'did you sleep', 'how was your day', you know, those are the things that I can understand fairly well. I understand it better than I can speak it, it's certainly very difficult with relatives who may not understand the immigrant perspective because even though they understand that for example like you if you are the child of parents who left the motherland or if you drop in an area where there are not a lot of people who look like you. But the problem is you know, for me the feeling was there was a lack of understanding on their part that, just because I look like them doesn't mean that I speak the language well and so you know Korean culture is I think the parenting style is very much a shaming culture in a sense. It's like well if you're Korean and you've heard Korean in the womb why can't you speak it. So, the grammar structure is entirely different, you know, the language isn't even close to English and French. It's very very hard for me to express, even though they say to me, 'you know it is evident that you understand what we're saying why can't you speak it'. But they only speak one language, you know, so for them and it's a source of pride for them right it's like you know your language is part of your cultural identity so if you look like us why can't you take pride and not be able to speak the language that your parents grew up with. So I'm assuming that kids whose genetics are from all over the world, we struggle with everyday. Like in some places because I think if you have a very strong sense of identity and culture I think it's much easier but if it grew up in a culture where most people don't look like you it's it's much harder to explain that to homogeneous country and society that don't know what that is like. They have a very strong sense of self you know, they don't have the burden or the, how should I say, the struggle of trying to define for yourself where you fit in within society. That's how I that's how I see it, in a way, so my relationship with Korea is, you know, I am proud, I'm not ashamed of it, even though I probably felt like I really didn't like the fact that I looked different from a lot of my friends because my physical differences were always pointed out. And you know, you don't feel as attractive or as smart because it's not what you see on TV and you know I am thrilled that there is more diversity on streaming media than what I grew up with in the 70s and 80s. Like in the 70's and 80's there wasn't a whole lot of it. I hear of like you know some friends who okay, when you see an Asian-American actor or something and their like 'well that's not representative of our culture back home' but you know what I tried to explain to them but yeah when you look at, for example K-dramas on TV back home in Korea. They all look like you, everybody looks like you. But for us like here it's a big deal, I don't care if this person is Vietnamese-American. If this person is just playing a regular person in life I don't care if you know if that person is like Filipino-American. I mean I don't care about that I mean, I'm just happy to see a regular person that doesn't yeah that doesn't know martial arts or you know whatever. I mean I don't know martial arts, I mean you just want regular people representation. It doesn't matter what they look like. In that respect, it's kinda hard for me to like relate to my family, like I don't know many of my Korean relatives actually very well. It's partly because of the language, distance, also I kind of lost track of where they are. I do have many many relatives in Korea, I would say 95% of both sides of my family have remained in Korea. My parents were the youngest in their families and actually the first to leave. And now that my Mother passed away, it's even harder you know it like, I agree with my Dad that once your mother dies your connection to I think their country of

origin gets cut. It's kind of like an umbilical cord that is severed, you know, probably forever and especially if you don't speak the language well like I do. So it's the difference is that they know immediately that you're not from there you may look like them but it's how you act, how you dress, how you comport yourself, all of these things that people will immediately look at. So they're gonna treat you differently, not necessarily because they're doing it to be mean but I think it's because it's just that they know that you are not from there and so therefore there is the sense of I think tying and cultural distance and I think even generational differences well. Because I think what a lot of people forget is like my parents left in the 1960s so their cultural I would say norms and customs and expectations on me and my sister is formed from the time of what Korea was when they left. Korea has changed you know, like my Dad would not remember, like he admitted, he would feel like a country bumpkin, if he were to go visit Korea today. Because it's changed so rapidly to the point where I don't think he knows where he would fit in anymore. Because he's old-fashioned, right, like I think some of the expectations he still says to me and my sister would be considered old-fashioned, it's just from a by-gone era, so to speak.

**ER:** Thank you so much. Okay, next question, could you tell us a little bit about your time as a classical musician?

**LY:** Yeah so I would consider myself, I call myself a failed classical musician. I never made it you know, and a lot of it has to do with like, talent, a lot of it is like giving up on certain ambitions. It's no one's fault, it's just life you know. It's like someone who trained so hard because you have to put a lot of time a lot of energy and a lot of discipline into trying to achieve a certain goal but you come at a point in your life when you realize this is not going to happen. And so I think for me I mean, I learned the violin at a, since a very young age. I mean on my fifth birthday is when I received a violin, technically my dad was my first teacher because he learned the violin when he grew up. He never got to be a musician, because you have to understand that it is not considered a stable profession and certainly not in Korea. So that's why he ended up being an engineer. And I think for my father that the reason for him to push me to learn music was because of frustrated ambition you know for him not being able to learn how to be a musician. He couldn't be a musician so, you know, is this something that I would have chosen for myself? I don't know, you know, I would have loved to have an artistic career but it just didn't work out that way. But I did get to, you know, have two degrees in music so as far as effort. So yes, I mean, I studied music extensively throughout my childhood, you know, did all the music camps. I do pride myself and having a probably a better than average music education, I did have some very good reputable and some well-known teachers. I've had a very good walk in having like the people to be my mentors, so I've been very fortunate in that regard. I had a solid education by being accepted at the Conservatoire de musique du Québec à Montréal which is basically a taxpayer-funded educational system modeled after the Conservatory of Paris. So the same subjects that you learn at this Music Conservatory, is the same subjects that they teach at the Conservatory of Paris in France. Of course, everything is taught in French, but, you know, you also do music theory, you know, there's a whole curriculum involved so you do go to regular school. But then like after school, they would arrange classes like on the weekends. And, you know, there's like a significant age range

because it's based off of ability so if you're young, you come in at a young age and you end up doing these courses like, I mean you can finish those courses very rapidly. And so if you so choose you can and if you, I guess, have taken up credits in certain areas, you can choose to study in France if you want, if you audition for it. I believe if you just study within the conservatory Montreal type of degree, which is not a full degree, it's like a certificate program, depending on your major. So I did that for a while like throughout my teens and you know did regular High School and all of that. I did youth orchestras, summer music camp, so you do see the same people that you kind of grew up with, who had a lot of the same interests. And I ended up going to McGill University, and I have a Doctor degree in music education but it was more for as a fall back. I never felt that I was going to be a good music teacher. It's just something that kind of scared me a little. I have to give a lot of respect for those who are in education, because I just kind of felt like a fraud, in the sense that If I'm a trained classical violinist why would I be teaching woodwinds to a 10 year-old. I can barely play the clarinet you know so I'm like thinking like this is nuts like I mean I can't really play the clarinet. I mean you know in University you take like a semester of like woodwind technique, and then the next semester you learn percussion techniques, so you know how to play a little bit. And you do have some performance exams. I just felt like for me to pursue you know teacher certification, it just didn't feel like it was the right fit for me. So I decided to pursue a graduate degree at Peabody in Baltimore, which is I think part of the John Hopkins University. And to do a graduate degree in computer music research, so I decided to do that and I continued performing in the sense of like being part of like the Peabody Symphony Orchestra and going to Lincoln Center was like probably one of the biggest highlights for me as a performer. I like being part of a group, I know that for some of my friends, the desire is to be a solo artist you know or a recording artist. I was never going to be able to do that I just don't have, I think the talent to be able to do that. So I thought like, but I actually liked doing chamber music, I liked doing it. I liked doing orchestra, I liked being a part of a section. So for me that, that was probably like the pinnacle. Like what I felt like I could achieve. And I think partly, you know, throughout my childhood and my teens, and we can probably get into this later but, I grew up with a lot of financial instability in my household. So I think for me to pursue degrees in music was kind of indulgent on my part. You know, social justice issues were never really part of my thinking because I was just so focused on my performance aspect. Like, could I become a better performer? Or like, what do I really want to do with myself? But like the social justice part like, when you're an artist, it's like yes I do think that there are some artists who are very much into activism where it's actually kind of hard to find a career. Or it's one way to kind of highlight these types of issues, but I actually think a lot of artists are very, they are introspective but I think the goal for the artist is to communicate to the audience what he or she is expressing. You know, it's to tell a story, so whether it's through an instrument or through some other form of art medium it's to be able to make a connection to the audience of what they're trying to say. But I think for those who actually, you know, I think there is intention for those who do kind of highlight social justice issues but I don't necessarily think that musicians do in a way generally. It's a very selfish medium in the sense that a lot of them talk about, they compare themselves to athletes, elite athletes, which it is in some respect because there is a lot of muscle memory, there's a lot of memorization. You know, it's work. It's a lot of mental hard-work and discipline to be able to

achieve a certain level of performance, so a lot of them, I don't think that it's necessarily within their worldview per se because it is a very insular profession. So, you know, for me like, you know social justice issues, like it was kind of there but like, it wasn't, you know as I was actively performing, my goal was, you know 'do I have enough money to pay my rent or my utilities?' So yeah I did do a lot of gigs like a lot of weddings, you know, when you're a student, that's the kind of where you kind of learn, the more you perform the more you get better at like the performance aspect, how you can put on a show, can you improvise on the fly. Because you have to understand that like, the wedding is the show right, like the bride comes in you know you have like the whole wedding party you know you may play some religious music or you might play at the reception. The goal is just to provide the mood. It's not to, you know, it's not necessarily to shine but you still actually have to perform. So you know for me, that kind of existence as a classical musician is just kind of, it didn't appeal to me in the long run. I kind of felt that was pretty much what I was, you know, I didn't want to do that for 20-30 years and be worried about like if I was going to be able to pay my rent so I decided that after my graduate degree I didn't want to pursue an academic career in research and so I decided, like I'm just going to hang up my violin. I got to do something else you know so that's how I kind of fell into International Development which is completely by accident.

**MG:** Thank you, so next we're going to actually have like a two-part question and we basically wanted to know what was the process like becoming an American citizen, the swear-in ceremony, what was it like during a pandemic?

**LY:** Yeah so I decided to apply to become an American citizen about a year ago thereabout or like really early this year. You know, you pay the fee in the application and you know it takes a while for it to go through the system I had been on many visas, like I first came in with a student visa in the 1990's. When I decided to say like okay, music is not going to be it for me, the student visa gives you one year to find a job, within the US. You are kind of, given a year in reprieve, well I think immigration laws were a little bit more loosely goosey back then because I don't think they would allow this now. I somehow made that so that you know, because of my student visa it might cause a problem for me to actually be hired by international development. I had applied for a starting position in the publication's department. So I was responsible for, you know, overseeing the entire production of their proposals to bid on contracts by USAID, the US Agency for International Development. And so I was on that visa for a year, but then they thought well, technically speaking you aren't working for us. It has to be within your field so they changed my position to multimedia because it has something to do with audio. So you know it's like I said like it was kind of, you know, they wanted to keep me but it had to be legal so they thought, okay let's get you in on a NASA visa, so the NASA visa is the easiest visa to get. At the time like you had, they changed the rules but, you had to come in through a US Port of Entry every year, I think it was only valid for one year. And I think now it's valid for 3 years or something like that, which actually makes more sense, but you actually have to come in and out. So the first time I didn't get it, and I think it was probably because of the firm inexperience in not knowing how to handle foreign workers, like even under a NASA visa where it's supposed to be easier to get, than getting on a H-1B. So I did NASA for a few years and then



they said okay, if you want to continue working for us, we'll sponsor you for an H1-B. So I did, I did do an H1-B, and then I renewed it for another, you know, I let it pass for seven years. And I think like most people decide that, oh you should apply for American citizenship during H1-B, but I didn't, you know, I resisted. Part of the reason is because as a Canadian citizen, I don't come from a place of conflict, you know, what do I stand to gain from being an American? I have as many rights under the Canadian charter of freedom, I have as many rights as an American as a Canadian citizen, maybe more in some respects. So why do I need to? But then I decided, like, okay I'm gonna, and you know getting the H1-B is a very arduous process. It's very hard to obtain a H1-B under what we consider like professional roots, so you have to, the company has to basically put an ad for your job and then has to argue to the Department of Labor why they think that you are the best person to have a job instead of an American citizen who has applied for it or someone who's already green card holder. It's very very difficult because the labor categories, for your position like some of those labor categories are not always updated. So the term multimedia specialist, I mean, the internet positions were not updated in the Department of Labor like labor categories. So where do you put someone like myself in, who has two music degrees and somehow ends up in International Development. Like those two don't mix, they just don't compute whatsoever okay. At first, you know, if you get the department of labor certification, then you need to pass through stages two and three to get the H-1B visa. But I failed to get it the first time around, the department labor apparently refused my application based on a technicality so I had refiled. So I did the H1-B, I mean I ended up staying at this company for 13 years. And then during my second renewal for the H1-B, I applied for the I guess like the green card and I did it again, me as a single professional which I have started 10 years prior to that process. And then my husband we decided to do the what's it called, the fiance thingy, you know, for the green card. And what kills me, is that my process as a single professional woman that was 10 years in the making, I got that approval for a green card 2 months after applying you know receiving approval through the fiance route. You know I get it like when people say marrying an American citizen is easier because yes, in that respect it is. And I totally understand why some people may decide to take a shortcut, but it's not an easy process and I think the whole rhetoric about, oh, they're giving away green cards like jellybeans. I mean, have you talked to people who've been through the system? You know, it takes a really long time, so I think when my decision to become an American citizen this year came from a place of many factors. By this time, I left Montreal in 1996, so we're talking like close to 25 years here. I think when my, my 46th birthday, this was a couple years ago, I realized that the scale started to tip on how many years I've been in Canada versus how many I started staying in America. So, you know, the question then becomes, do I feel any less Canadian than I do as an American? I still wrestle with that every single day. Because do I feel less of an American even though I have American citizenship now? I don't know that. In some respects people can interpret that as being disloyal, but I think people have to understand when you are a newly American citizen, during a COVID pandemic, where it's under an administration that doesn't want you here, that blames people who look like me as being a virus carrier. I didn't tell members of my own family, for several months. Because I think the idea of an American citizenship during the time of COVID, I think most Americans feel like, well why aren't you celebrating? Why aren't you being joyful about this? And I tell them! It's because, like again

I'm not coming from a place of conflict, so you know, it's not like an easy leap for me, to say like yeah, I want what you have. Then I look at America and I'm like, what is it that you have that is so much better than what I came from. Because, you know, my life didn't really change from day to day. The way it happened, like through the progression, at first I was given an interview date. Then I got these letters, you get a series of letters from USFIS. They were like, well you come in for your interview, they ask you a bunch of questions, they say that you pass. You sign the oath of allegiance, I did not sign the part where it says like, would you take arms on behalf of America, I said no. I had said to my husband, I don't wanna kill someone on behalf of America. But then I got another letter saying that because the pandemic was worsening, because this was like in the Spring. And I kind of remember this because I received this letter on the same day where President Trump had said that everyone had to stay at home. I was getting alarmed by the increasing racialized rhetoric on the part of the Trump administration about immigration, about what was happening to people of color. It was a lot of these alarming things that you're reading about like in the newspaper, that I didn't feel that it was celebratory. I mean like what do I have to celebrate? Both my husband and daughter desperately wanted to tell people that I had become a citizen and I wasn't I happy about it. And I think it's partly because I still struggle with what it means to be an American. Is it a joyous time to be one, I don't think so. I think there's a lot of ideals that people admire about America, it's something like you believe in the idea of equality you know is that it's the land of opportunity but I think it's also a land of pain. When I dropped off my mail-in ballot is the day that I actually told people, like on Facebook and the rest of my family. My husband's family celebrated, but I think he told them to temperate it because I didn't see me getting the citizenship under these circumstances the way they see it you know, I think it's sort of like when people tell you that they're becoming an American I think people say, they believe that they're kind of like gifting you with something. Like it's something bountiful it's something beautiful that you're going to be receiving but I don't know if they fully understand what it's like to be a minority you know. Because I don't think they understand you know what it's like to struggle, in the sense of not being treated equal under the law and also within society because you know I can move freely relatively unscathed. I feel a little uncomfortable with their stares, is that gonna change in the future? I don't know. I do worry about it for my children who are biracial, you know they still look Asian enough to look different. Unlike my niece and nephew and my husband's side where they're only 1/4 Thai, they can pass for white. You know what I've come to learn you know in recent years is your identity as a minority is very different, can be different from your lived experience so it's very surprising for me to learn of like people who identify culturally as something else. I think you know, being middle-aged now, I'm 48. I kind of sense for me is I've become comfortable with discomfort, it's an oxymoron. It's a paradox in some respects but I feel more comfortable with discomfort than being comfortable, you know. Like to be truly comfortable is when I sense something is wrong and I feel strange but it's like that's the way it's always been like that for me. I think it's just part of like how you grow up you are the only kid who looks very different after awhile you become used to it. So like you the way you are in a group of people who do look like you is very different and in some respects its very freeing but on the other hand and you do feel like you've missed out on a lot. Because I do think when you grow up in a culture with a lot of family you know a lot of friends who do look like them, is a very very strong sense of self I wish I had you

know. I wish I had that kind of strong self-assurance of identity that you know I may look different from the larger society but I know who I am right. I don't think I've ever had that like in that respect. I mean I give credit to my parents, you know for doing the best they could, but I think for me I'm still trying to navigate that you know, even at age 48. Like I live in a predominantly white suburb, there is some diversity but, diversity by what? You know like I now look at this way again within the context of diversity within a suburb, but how many are homeowners? Who rents versus who owns the house you know and they need you academically well and I numbered them, how many are homeowners in my neighborhood but actually a lot of them rent you know. What is that kind of awareness is something that I never really thought about in my twenties you know I didn't. Am I ashamed of it? A little bit you know. It's not like these problems haven't occurred but it was not within my fear, at the time and I am a little bit, I'm a late to the party. But I'm more aware, self aware of this and you know. I kind of admire the younger generation, like yourselves, I think they're more attuned to this. It's something that this I think it's more part of being awareness you know that's in the media, social media. We didn't have social media back then, like Gen Z. So it's kind of funny to have like one foot in and one foot out. Cause I saw the birth of the internet. It wasn't pretty at the time. It's just something that I really feel like you know the millennials, even Gen. Z you know information happens like really really quickly. So I'm kind of excited in some respects that you know as many problems as America has right now, that there is opportunity for change. We are kind of at that place where you are struggling a lot. Which direction is it gonna go?

**ER:** Okay, so now moving towards, like, the Auntie Sewing Squad. In what ways do you feel that the Auntie Sewing Squad is like an activist group?

**LY:** Yeah, what I really like about the Auntie Sewing Squad, I mean I first joined through the sister of a friend of mine, who is actually also an Auntie Sewing Squad member. She suggested I join, and I mean I do like sewing as a hobby, garments and things like that. But I kind of felt like I could have been doing more. You know, there's a shortage of PPE everywhere but I feel that it is an activist group in the sense that it does highlight social inequality. What we are realizing with this pandemic specifically is that it really affects those who have systematically been ignored by government and society. It's not like, these problems are not new. It's the issue of not being able to afford a \$5 mask for example. It's not the mask that is the issue, it's the not having the extra 5 dollars to buy the mask for your loved one. So if you're living in a multi-generational home like many cultural communities do, they can't afford it. So you know and a lot of them because of their socio-economic situation you know we know that they work in low-paying jobs Or they are working in jobs where they are exposed more. But at the same time it's like they don't have a choice you know they can't afford it so I do think in that respect the activist group does highlight those particular issues so that people are aware.

**ER:** Okay, so going off of that, How do you feel knowing that you're helping countless people by participating and distributing so many masks?

**LY:** It feels pretty good. I mean I think that like many people we experience a vast array of

emotions you know helplessness, despair, anger. And I think being part of this effort has kind of made me realize that it's a good way of relieving stress and anxiety. Like if you do something for somebody it kind of keeps your mind occupied on the topic at hand so if you're pledging let's say like 25 masks for kids or 30 for adults somewhere it's something for you to shoot for to keep your mind busy so you think you can focus on the negative. I mean we all have factors which stress us out today and you know like dealing with your children or with your job but if you have something to do something like okay this isn't for me there are people who need this who to do something else for their respective families at the house keeping safe. So why not make the masks. Do something to help somebody so that you don't just keep having that kind of nervous energy directed outward you know the kind of pay it forward so speak even though you don't really primarily benefit in any direct way. So I'm happy to do that you know and for me it's a great motivator. I deal badly with stress you know I at least me down a path of where you know you can kind of think negatively about your place in life and in the world and I think this is very reflective of humans in general that if you focus on the negative things instead of the positive things you can kind of going downward spiral. So if you have a pledge for example where you're saying like okay I gotta make these masks in two weeks. You know so that means tomorrow, I'll focus on cutting out the masks, tomorrow the elastics. So you have a goal to keep your mind busy on the task at hand and so that when you do ship them out. I did something good and hopefully it'll benefit you know the recipients in which they were intended for. So you know from a personal level I think it's at that is as much benefit to me and giving some peace of mind from all the other problems of the world because there's only so much one person can do. Its not to say that you know one person can't make a difference but I think you do have let's say skip the other people who are working to pledge on a campaign to benefit let's say a thousand ships for example. You know we're more than happy to do that you know in any kind of makes me feel I don't know if it's the halo effect, so to speak, like oh I did good in the world. You know you give yourself a pat on the back you know there is something to that but for me it's just a stress reliever it's like it's like the people who know when they get angry they clean. Or you organize like you or we fold all your clothes but I think it's like that kind of personality probably best responds well to this activity

**MG:** So we're down to our last two questions, so they're kind of heavy so the first one is do you feel like this country could have done better in handling the pandemic and if so how?

**LY:** It would have been difficult for any president or administration to handle a global pandemic but I think where the difference lies is in the messaging and the plan of action. My main criticism of this particular administration is not only did they have the information ahead of time but to dismiss the science, to dismiss I think people's concern and what made me particularly angry was the dangling of PPE stock to state governors, to bribe them for their loyalty because to me this is not a joke you know it shouldn't matter which states are loyal to you or not you know for a pending re-election. What should matter to you is that as a national leader and administration is you are to represent all citizens or all people who are living under your roof you know. That is what I am most angry about and the other thing is demonizing a group of people whose genetics look like a place from where this virus originated from. It comes to the point where you're

thinking it is just a pattern of behavior where you just feel like it's the last straw and so I think when it comes to a global pandemic what I feel very strongly about is number one you should say okay this is a very serious health crisis let's pull our resources, and you know you have to check for your message and expectations. There is a global shortage everywhere of PPE so let's rally behind and do what we can to kind of give it to the people that need it most you know. Put a plan in action to prevent infection you know, listen to the experts, and then let's see what we can do to help each other to get through it. But I just feel that with this Administration none of that happened you know, or kind of, excuse my language, half-assed. A half-hearted approach to say like we will do part of this but not of that you know. We're going to give your state 3 times the amount of PPE like in Florida versus like you know outbidding State Governors on PPE taking their stockpile you know and not telling them where it went. I mean like to me that is the biggest crime because you know to say that which is a red state or which is a blue state is like chances are, that state has your supporters too. So you are hurting yourself because I think you know for somebody I may not agree with so much politics and for supporting a president that I may not like but on the other hand what I strongly am opposed to is that at the end of the day this person could be my neighbor. So you know what is of most benefit to me okay so it's like they're saying like I may not agree with my neighbors politics but if that person needs a mask, I'll make them one. He has as much right to be here you know, I may not like him as a person but if that person is here. I just feel with this Administration the messaging is all wrong so you know have these problems existed before? Yes. Without a doubt. It's just out in the open you know, people were very careful to hide it or it's something but then they've been thinking about it but I think what we're seeing with this pandemic is what we're seeing right now. And I think the Auntie Sewing Squad highlights really well, is that every kind of inequality that you see whether is lack of money, housing, access to health, you know adequate living wage. Covid-19 rides along on those inequalities it doesn't care what you look like you know but it's certainly rides it because people discriminate and because institutional policies that are put into action, discriminated a certain subset of a group of people. Covid-19 rides along that and so you see the people who are most likely infected and are dying tend to be the people who have been marginalized for decades and I think that's what we're seeing right now. And so you know when people talk about like with the terms of how this pandemic was handled. Who is saying what, like in terms of how he's doing a great job, he's not doing a great job, depending on the politician. I don't expect any to get it right but would I do expect from a politician is to say we are in this together you know. We don't have to like each other but this is the plan. And there was no plan and I think that's what bothers a lot of people because it feels like you're left on your own. I think for some for some people they may say like, well that's pulling yourself up by the bootstraps right, like you know it's up to you to figure out how to handle yourself. But my argument is, you know when they tell you to teach a man to fish you know that's far better than giving him a fish. But the man has to eat first, he has to be well fed, you know in order to learn how to fish I mean if a person is starving it doesn't matter if it doesn't matter. So I think when it comes to you know the response can you kind of see the same thing you know is there going to be unrest, of course but you're talking about decades and decades of inequalities and frustrations that boiled over to the point where their physical existence is actually actually a life-and-death situation. So I think there, there needs to be a better understanding of the psychological motivation of people when they don't you know act what is

considered 'correct'. They have my empathy and understanding it may not be what's morally correct but it's something that you do have a better understanding of where they are coming from, and I think that is lacking. Because I just feel like it's like these two camps right you know, this is like we're taking actually what is rightfully ours no more takers and versus the other camp is like we weren't takers. I think that's where the Auntie Sewing Squad kind of bridges that understanding a little bit you know. Not going to move and shake people right away but I consider it soft power in the sense that it's a small organization of ordinary people where in some respect, like yes you are addressing a short-term need but I do think it has a long-term thing power in ways that we haven't seen yet. Because to give someone a mask is just it to provide a little bit of basic dignity to say like I believe that you have the right to you know be healthy you know as much as little as I can give you. You know and if it's just that two layer mask I'd rather you be safe so that one day when your situation improves hopefully not only will you survive but to thrive to better society I think. I think that's the hope I think in some respects, that is my sincere hope.

**MG:** You know just to piggyback off of that how do you think the results of the current election will affect the way the country handles the pandemic?

**LY:** That's a good question, I mean you know it's the election was very very close I mean it's still not certified election results or refuse to. It's a very messy end you know in my respect for the past four years. I kind of wonder was this was what supporters wanted because I believe that those who may have voted for him twice are saying that it is for the economy right. The reason the economy argument, Ferguson tax regulations, he's putting more money into my pocket therefore I'm able to hire more people or basically saved my business. The problem with the pandemic is it has affected so many people, we're not talking about red states are blue space it's just people all over. I mean you, you can't work, grandparents can't come to visit, day care centers aren't open so you know if you have two working parents one of them is going to be the primary caregiver. Most of the time it's going to be a woman, like in my case for example, I am in a much much far better position than most, in the sense that my husband makes enough to support us, even if I didn't work part of the time so I'm very fortunate in that regard. As someone who is considered comfortably middle class right now it is hard emotionally and mentally because you are with children everyday I think you're going to see a lot of angry women out of this pandemic because women up and down you know it doesn't matter if you earn like six figures, or if you earn below the poverty line. You are the most impacted mentally and physically because grandparents cannot visit out of their safety and well-being because you don't want anyone in your family to get infected but you can't work because if you have young children, someone has to watch the children. Children require you know, if they want snacks, they're bored, you know, they want attention. So women's careers you know I feel like women's careers in general have been set back by at least ten years. Which is sad because women only earn 73 cents to the man's dollar. Women of color earn even less. If it's the cultural norms dictate that the women stay home to take care of the child. I think when you talk about the election when the President says like we're going to put your husband's back to work, it kind of rubs me the wrong way. Because in this pandemic who is doing the bulk of the labor. Okay I mean who is making

most of the masks, the PPE? The women in the factories right, like, and it's usually women of color and they don't get paid a lot of money. So who is watching their children? This is I think one of the biggest tragedies of the pandemic and you know like incidence of domestic violence and sexual abuse, it's very high right now, worldwide. I feel like there is opportunity to better society but this election has certainly highlighted that we're at this point where we have two major groups struggling right now. I think my understanding is that the demographic of America is that the whites are no longer a majority they are a minority majority. So they have a lot of institutional power so I think we're entering a period now where neither political party in America can survive without coalition votes from minority groups and it's just kind of interesting to me to read certain articles. I mean it's been almost a year, time went really really fast. I can't believe that we actually did it but we are doing it right now you know I am hopeful because there's so much energy going on in finding a vaccine. Multiple pharmaceutical companies around the world are working on a vaccine. I think there's hope but there's a lot of mess I think where the next administration, it's going to be hard, it's going to be hard for them. I think that yeah, we're going to be moving in the right direction because like there's a plan and I think that's what people were looking for. Was like is there a plan. As opposed to having no plan, no platform. I think that gives a little bit of reassurance anyway.