

11-17-2020

## Interview with Martha Peck

Martha Peck

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### Recommended Citation

Peck, Martha, "Interview with Martha Peck" (2020). *Auntie Sewing Squad Interviews*. 19.  
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**Interviewee:** Auntie Martha Peck

**Interviewers:** Paloma Ronquillo, Victoria Bartindale-Guffey

**Date:** November 17th, 2020

**Location:** Zoom call

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

**Length:** 41:33

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

**Biography:** Martha Peck grew up in a middle-class family in Connecticut during the 1960s. She is a retired clergywoman and now lives on the rural outskirts of Vermont with her husband. Peck joined the Auntie Sewing Squad through a friend in Los Angeles, California. She loves helping and advocating for individuals from sewing mags to standing up for her beliefs.

**Abstract:** Martha Peck first discussed how the election and the pandemic has impacted her family and community (7:36) Then Peck reminisced about her kind of activism: vocal opposition to the death penalty and her strong faith for inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community in the church (20:10). Peck then explained how she mentors ministry members, how she joined the Auntie Sewing Squad, and her mixed feelings on the appointment of new judge Amy Coney Barrett (29:01). Finally, she shared her opinions on abortion rights as well as what it means to be a feminist.

### **Interview Transcript**

Victoria: (laughs) Now we are all good. Okay, um I will start off with the first question. Um how has the past few weeks of the election been affecting your work and personal life?

Martha: well um, I volunteered at the polls this year, which I have never done before... umm and um... It was really interesting I... Vermont mailed ballots to every registered voter and then keeps the polls in place until Election Day, by signing a piece of paper that said they hadn't already voted. So I was in charge of like... having people sign that affidavit and then giving them a ballot and um... I was really impressed with like all the system in place for covid protection and like um... redundancy in the counting of ballots and who had already voted and who hadn't voted yet. So, I was like um... I felt moved to be more active in the process this year um.. We also put up Biden Harris sign at the bottom of our driveway with the American flag and um again we have never done that before. Our, our, first Biden sign was stolen and um then we... then our... then our flag was stolen which was pretty outrageous and then um... we... we replaced both of them and took them in every night and they lasted unto the election but um... I guess I guess my... my reaction since the election has been a kind of mixer of hope and... disappointment. Like you know I'm glad that things are going to change in washington but it is really depressing that only 50 percent of voters voted for Trump including in my town so uh it

was a slight advantage for trump... And Vermont as a whole is very demoractic but I live in the most rural part of the state and tends to be more conservative and ... so... I think... part of what I struggle with is like I just don't understand how people can think that Trump is an acceptable leader in any way ..and you know it's just it's just hard to imagine what they are thinking... I like to think that they are not all racists and bigots... But you know maybe they somehow have some other convoluted logic why they are supporting him.

Paloma: Thank you. If you don't mind me asking where are you from?

Martha: Umm I grew up in Connecticut but I lived in northern Vermont for the last 40 years.

Paloma: Oh okay.

Martha: And I live right on the border of Canada... Umm in a rural area our county has 30,000 people in the whole county.

Paloma: Wow!

Martha: It's really beautiful.

Paloma: Yea I bet!

Victoria: Yeah.

Paloma: I have always wanted to go to Canada.

Martha: (laughs) Yeah.

Paloma: Alright so this question that we have, I guess it can kind of ties into it. Um what are some griefs or losses you have experienced during covid during this pandemic, uh, whether that be a death or a loss of a job or loss of contact with friends?

Martha: Well... I'm retired... and um for a long time we had virtually no covid cases in our area. I've known of a few people that have had covid and have recovered, so the grief and losses are mostly around not being able to see my family. I have two sons. One lives in Joshua Tree, California and the other lives in Main. And um... I... they each have a child and one is two and one is five. So, not being able to see them at all for the last year has been hard. I am also a pretty active musician. I sing in a choir, a community choir that has now had to cancel two rounds of uhh... rehearsals and concerts. 1 last spring and 1 this fall. That's our really major of my life.. Umm I also usually take a couple yoga classes a week and that's a major community thing two and I am active in my church so.. I, we have virtual church services but not in person so... And I also love to cook for people and have friends over for meals so like all these things have been distrubed and altered soo... Over the the summer we were able to get together with some friends and family and mostly outdoor settings. And this fall we just like took some chances and took the Amtrak to California to see the family there and that worked out really well but um it's been really isolating. And um I you know I really glad that I have my husband and we have a lot of

activities we like to do together and we go for a walk or a bike ride or hike almost everyday so that's helpful but um.. We have been much less impacted by many people because of where we live.

Victoria: Thank you I am glad you are coping with all this grief and losses people are experiencing right now. And um another question um were you involved in any of the social justice movements during the 1970s or 1980s as a young adult and if so how active were you or.. How did you actively participate?

### 7:36

Martha: I think I would.. I would.. describe myself as a quiet supporter of those movements umm.. I was in divinity school umm... From 1979 to 81 no um... Yea 81 and um there was a very strong kind of emphasis on um simple living and sort of like identifying with um .. the poor and you know not not ... not... Being into like a lot of consumption or luxury but also a lot of um.. commitment to passivism and I went to one protest for um a new nuclear disarmament that was at a sumbine base and it kind of wasn't my thing. I just I dont know I'm not really into big... public demonstrations. I'm more like a letter writer so... I think to some degree my activism has been about like.. Occasionally writing a letter to the editor umm... One time I, I stood up at a... a town meeting, which is a sort of a new england government forum and I just had recently move to this town and there was a really conservative legislator who was trying to re-in-state the death penalty in Vermont. And so I stood up at town meeting and made a little speech and thought the death penalty was in immoral and you know was not consistent with a civilized country and .. the they voted and and my position won like 5 votes or 10 votes or something. Like so and then that night the *Boston Globe* called me and wanted to like interview me about it and I.. I you know I talked to them for 2 to 3 mins and then I was like, look, I am not an expert on the death penalty but you know I.. I have pretty much told you what I said at the meeting um.. I think the other thing that I have had a modest impact was um.. I worked at a church in my area. I have work at 3 different churches but the one I was at the longest, I was there for 24 years, during a lot of that time I did a job share with another pastor and so ....first of all I think I modeled umm a male-female equality and gave people a image of of a women leader and um.. That worked really well for people but secondly I ... was advocate for gay and lesbian inclusion in the church and over that period of time umm... The church never really officially adopted that and never talked about it but we acted our way into that inclusion um... and I think that ...I modeled that and and had an impact on that in our community.

So... Um... again my style is like ... quiet... you know I don't really think of myself as an activist but I have strong feelings about things that are on that agenda...

Paloma: That's super awesome! I love that you are including um... The LGBTQ+ plus in the church just cause I my family owns a church. So, it's always been close family and friends and uhh it's never been open for that...

Martha: Yeah. I am really passionate about that.

Paloma: Yeah.

Martha: And the domination I belong to the united church of christ was historically the first christain group that ordain gay people and has been a leader in that area.

Paloma: Yeah, that's super awesome.

Victoria: Super cool you are a part of that!

Martha: Mhm!

Paloma: So, for our next question, I'm sorry that they bounce around. We didn't really put them in order.

Martha: Oh that's alright.

Paloma: Keeps it interesting... Um... for this one it says do you think after this pandemic, hopefully there's an after, that you will continue to serve a role in an organization like the auntie sewing squad?

Martha: You know I never known anything like this organization it's such a kind of crazy and enduring mixture of like rage and kindness and like you know acting out and like and getting to work and helping people. So, I don't really know what would be equivalent to it um... You know I... I will always be active in sort of helping others through finding financially contributions and and and you know local work but this is the first time I have been involved that is something you know based on the west coast and made of a lot of people with really different lives than mine it's been fun but I can't quite image what would follow it.

Victoria: Yea it sounds like a hard thing to compared to or to be in alright and then... Um... Considering your current state of the world has your faith, your christain faith been tested in any way in the past year or in general?

Martha: Um... I think that you know the presidency of Trump has definitely been a challenge in my faith in a sense that ...again I can't fathom how christians can support him chirstians of any stripe can support him and I also ...when I was, after I, the last ministry job I had um... was a part time one in a small church and ... I ended up leaving that job around when Trump was elected. Around a year after he was elected part of it was I felt like I spent my whole career like articulating a vision for diversity as a blessing and community and you know an advocate welcome for everyone you know and the church is a place that could transform society for the better and you know kind of call people to act out there better selves and then like trump was elected I just felt this mixture of ... just kind of sadness and anger and it was sort of like .. I felt like I took it personally. I was like I have been doing this for 40 years and and you know the world is changed in this direction and I felt like I wanted to get up in the poll pit and just say "what the fuck?" you know but I was like well I can't say that! First of all you know it would shock people and it's not particularly helpful but you know I just felt like okay like I don't have anything left to offer and you know. I'm not really sure if it's not true but that's how I sort of felt um.. I have done a little bit of um.. Substituting, umm Substituting in churches in the last year and uh you know occasionally, I will lead a service somewhere but yea but the state of the world

definitely has challenges me in the sense that my vision of christainy doesn't seem to be ..having a lot of traction right now although I see alot of hope from pressive christains and other people and people other faiths that are working together and I think that possibility is very encouraging especially you know with this admiration people motivated to work in that way yea... (phone rings)

Martha: I am just going to take this and hang up.

Victoria: No you're okay.

Martha: Okay go ahead.

Paloma: Um.. So you mentioned you loved you imagining people wearing the masks you made for the auntie sewing squad. What other organization have you worked with before or you have already stated it, masks or sewing or even before this pandemic?

(Phone rings)

Martha: Oh... sorry.

Paloma: No you're okay you can take it if you need too.

Martha: Okay I don't know where my husband is... (takes phone call)

Martha: I'm back.

Victoria: Okay thank you did you want us to repeat that question?

Martha: Oh yea no you don't have to... I did make some masks for the local schools and um sort of handed them out randomly to some people. Before, I got involved with the aunties and them, uhh a few since then I also work um about once a month. My church has a food delivery of a large amount of food and then there is a group of us pack about 250 grocery with um staples so um I do that once a month um...

**20:10**

Martha: I am also involved in mentoring ministry candidates and kind of guiding them through the process of ordination. Um I've done a lot of working with youth in my career although not recently and I really love doing that and also in my work I used to visit nursing homes. So I have done a lot of things through my job and those are the main things I've done other than that.

Victoria: Thank you, and um kind of going off the Auntie Sewing Squad as well, in order to join the Auntie Sewing Squad do you have to have specific qualifications in order to become an official Auntie. So any sewing background or anything like that?

Martha: Um I don't think so because there are some Aunties who are learning to sew and they have some subgroups of like kids and teenagers that they kind of are teaching them how to do it and they are doing it. And when I first started um I had to like look up a pattern online. I make quilts so I have basic sewing skills but I had never made masks before. And then I, over the, what is it, 9 months of the pandemic I have been gradually refining my masks and making them better. Um and I still, like a lot of the Aunties make them adjustable with little beads and I haven't really graduated to that yet, but I'm thinking about it. I find each time I have a pattern I get like really stuck on it and I'm not, I don't really want to try a new pattern and sometimes if I am forced to try a new pattern I'm like oh this is great I'm going to use this one now you know so (all laugh)... And I don't know if in my preliminary I think I told you how I got involved in this in the first place, do you want me to do you want to hear that?

Victoria: Yeah that would be great. Because I know it was pretty brief on the um the filling out of stuff...

Martha: Yeah... Well as I said my son lives in Joshua Tree and he has a friend who lives in Los Angeles and is um a involved in a kind of activist dance company and uh so I was friends with her on Facebook and she apparently is friends with christina wong who is the like the main person who started the Aunties. So I saw that Laura, my son's friend was involved in this organization and I like messaged her and said like tell me more, you know, is this something I could do too? And so the first batch I sent just to Laura and then I, you know, figured out how to really be integrated into the organization after that.

Paloma: Awesome! And it sounds fun (laughs) good experiences.

Martha: It's very inspiring... Yeah and it's interesting to me too because there is a really high percentage of Asian American women in the group and that's a population of people that I don't really have any opportunity to interact with where I live so that's kind of cool for me.

Paloma: Yeah... Let me see... So our next question is what are your views on women's contribution to society, do you think women, including trans women, have fulfilled their duties to be looked at as equals to men in the workplaces, government, etc.

Martha: Um I think it's work in progress. Um growing up in the 70's and I attended a women's college that was really heavy on feminism and like you're going to be the leaders of the world and you can do it all. And so that kind of like that was my adolescence and young adulthood that point of view, and when I became a minister there weren't that many female ministers so that was another thing that, you know, we were like breaking in to. But I also feel like there's just a lot of progress still to be made. I feel like when Amy Coney Barrett was being vetted for the Supreme Court, I had these really complicated feelings about her. Like on the one hand she's a religious woman who is really committed to her family, and I can relate to that. But then I thought the Republicans are like pretending that she's their role model for women's equality but actually, you know, she, there, it's a false front. And like she's actually an advocate for keeping women down and she, you know, she has all these children but who's taking care of them, like not her, you know, she's got this hidden help that we don't see and um... So I feel like it's still really complicated and, you know, obviously women have borne the brunt of the pandemic in

terms of like trying to work and homeschool their kids and somehow do all those things or have to quit their jobs because their kids are home. So I think the pandemic in some ways has exposed lingering inequalities and oh the other thing about Amy Coney Barrett is, you know, our child care system in this country is terrible and, you know, it's really hard for women to have families with the way it is... You know to put her up as this symbol of progress when the people that represent don't care about women (all laugh) you know I was just like this is wrong you know so... I feel like in my own life I have experienced a lot of opportunity and affirmation starting with my father who always thought I could do anything and my husband but I also have experienced a kind of like a kind of swing towards more traditional roles because my husband was a doctor and he always made uhh like 8 or 10 times more money as I did so it just it and he worked like 60 hours a week so it just made sense for me to work part time and him to work full time and that worked really well for us but it kind of reinforced sort of traditional roles in ways that I didn't expect when i was just starting out like I expected more of like a 50-50 thing where we'd each work three quarter time and share all the childcare and you know I had that kind of idealistic idea and I wasn't married very long before I realised that that wasn't going to be how it worked out 'cause my husband was not interested in doing anything less than full on work. And he was an obgyn so he was delivering babies in the middle of the night and then like working a 12 hour day the next day and stuff like that... so... I don't know if I answered the question or if I veered off.

**29:01**

Victoria: No no you're good. That's insane how much he's been working, my gosh.

Martha: Yeah we're both we're both retired now so it's a whole different rhythm.

Victoria: Yeah so it's slowed down a bit.

Martha: Yeah.

Victoria: That's Good. Um I guess kinda what, well it's funny that your husband was an OBGYN 'cause this question kind of goes off of that, is what do you think the United States can change about laws based on women's reproductive systems. In some states women are not able to make decisions about their own body and how does that make you feel?

Martha: Well my husband was an abortion provider and that um was mostly okay but occasionally we were sort of targeted and shamed or they tried to shame us for that. In my early days in ministry some of the other clergy in town were like "she can't really be a good christian because her husband provides abortions." So it was at times a little bit uncomfortably personal. But um, I think that Roe vs. Wade needs to be protected um and I I think that, you know, the strategy is unfortunately is to go state by state and repeal the laws that have restricted abortions in many places, um again its kind of strange that on the one hand our society has moved towards greater access and equality for women, and then on the other hand we have gone backwards in this respect and ah its just we live in such strange times.

Paloma: Yeah it's...



Martha: I think some of what we're seeing...

Paloma: (Laughs)...

Martha: Go ahead.

Paloma: No I was just saying it's super crazy.

Martha: I think some of what we are seeing or I guess I hope that is that the pendulum swings back and forth and like overall it's swinging towards more freedom and equality but like in the short term it is it in some ways it's going backwards.

Paloma: Right. Hopefully with our new Vice President um somethings get back on track, since our last president I felt kind of put things a little more backwards um...

Martha: Yeah, She's awesome (all laugh).

Paloma: Yeah it's super sad how some states are not even offered or offer women birth control or sometimes just basic condoms because its some type of um I guess sin so to say even though ya know, it's a preventative of having an abortion maybe or for certain situations, you know, I feel like it is um it can be very important for some people ah for some women...

Martha: Yeah and you know it's really basic health care.

Paloma: Mhmm and then trying to demolish Planned Parenthood makes it worse because then it um...

Victoria: Exactly.

Paloma: There's a lot of families that actually use it not just obviously for abortions because it's just more than that.

Victoria: Yeah like people can get free birth control there other types of health care. My mom actually worked at Planned Parenthood and she would say that there was always people outside with signs, maybe not like a whole bunch of people but she's like it's crazy because people just don't know what goes on here they just think of the big "Oh they're giving people abortions," but yeah...

Martha: Yeah lots of other things, yeah, pap smears...

Victoria: Yeah.

Martha: Birth control and yeah...

Victoria: Mhmm health care (all laugh).

Paloma: So this is our last and final question um, if you feel uncomfortable, ah, answering this, that's totally fine, um it is, do you consider yourself a feminist?

Martha: Why would that make people uncomfortable (all laugh)?

Paloma: Just cause some people, I don't know, I've noticed when like um 'cause there's always those some people that are very feminist and it's like, you know, sometimes people feel like they have to watch every word they say or like certain things, you know, because there are just those people that are very passionate about it, um...

Victoria: Yeah the "Man-haters." (All Laugh)

Paloma: Yeah.

Martha: The say it again. What was that Victoria?

Victoria: The "Man-haters." (All Laugh)

Martha: Oh yeah, no I, you know I grew up in a time when feminist wasn't a loaded word, I mean it was more of like a "of course I'm a feminist." So, you know, that's sort of like where I come from and you know for me what that means is women have all of the same abilities that men have, maybe are expressed in different ways and deserve [Little bit of a cutout on internet service here] every opportunity that men have. And am more aware of even now than I was when I was in my childbearing time is that that equality really requires support for having babies and raising children because if if the support isn't there then it's really hard to realize the equality. And, you know, so that that's something that I see with my daughters in law and you know both my sons and their wives have what I would consider more egalitarian division of labor and and you know relationship than Bill and I have had you know my husband is really a great person to do like his share of the work but you know we've developed habits of certain chores that I do and certain chores he do and many of them are like gender normal if, you know, based on old times. Although he does all of the cleaning, I'm I am great at cooking but I hate cleaning, so (all laugh). He washes the kitchen floor and stuff like that, yeah.

Victoria: Well thank you so so much for your time today and it was really great getting to talk to you and um... oh I was gonna say something... Oh! About the Auntie Sewing Squad, um my grandma is a very active sewer like she makes quilts and she's part of like ah a group on Facebook that does stuff like that. I was just wondering if there is someone I could hook her up with to join the Auntie Sewing Squad, if you knew of anyone?

Martha: Well, my friend that I got in through is named Laura Karlin but I think you can also just go onto the Auntie Sewing Squad, and I don't think there is an S on Auntie, I always wanna put an S on it, and then um I think there's a way to join and you know like say I want to be part of this and then you get access to a Facebook group and on the facebook group there's all these subheadings where you can like look at patterns or get advice from other Aunties but also they have ways of like sending you fabric... Where does your Grandmother live?

Victoria: Um we live in San Diego.

Martha: Yeah, there there's definitely Aunties there.

Victoria: Yeah I mean I figured (all laugh).

Martha: Yeah, so, um like they share some of them share supplies but also um the way the group is set up they have very specific um asks that are moderated by some of the leaders. So, like right now they are doing and ask that involves 2,500 masks to be sent to the Navajo Nation and um so if you're sewing what you do is you respond to that and you say like you know, I have 50 adult masks and 25 kids masks or whatever and then they send you an address and you send the masks to the place and then you let the person who's moderating that ask know that you've sent them so they keep track and and, so that's basically how it works.

Victoria: Thank you I'll definitely get her hooked up there. Because she loves sewing and that's what she does in her pass time so I will definitely get her involved.

Martha: [Frozen for a bit due to internet connection] It's probably worth saying but all last spring and summer whenever I felt either bored or anxious I would just sew and you know put on um music or listen to NPR and so it really helped me to get through it both because it gave me something creative to do and I also felt like I was helping people 'cause otherwise I was like you know what can I do, I live in this place that's so remote and we don't even really have COVID here, although we do now, but like just in the last month. So all spring and summer we would have like the whole state of Vermont might have like 5 cases in a day...

Victoria: Yeah.

Martha: It was just like we were, people really isolated effectively and it kept us safe for a long time but um that's not really the case right now, so it was really helpful to me to have a project that I felt like I could do that helped other people.

Victoria: Yeah, that's, I think it's really great, thank you.

Martha: Yeah, well thanks for um starting your day so early with me and ah is this project due before Thanksgiving?

Victoria: Um... I think the rough draft, yes... but the final draft will be due after that and we can share with you so that way you can see what we've created.

Martha: Yeah, great, well I hope that things go well for both of you are you commuters or do you live on campus?

Victoria: Um, I live back home in San Diego right now just 'cause everything's online, but when we were on campus, Paloma and I actually lived together last year.

Martha: Oh nice, great.

Paloma: And I am currently living on campus yeah...

Martha: Okay.

Paloma: So it's a pretty interesting experience (all laugh).

Martha: Yeah, I feel bad for all the students right now having such an abnormal scenario but I guess everyone's doing their best.

Paloma: Yeah, we are really trying out here (all laugh).

Martha: Well good luck with your project, and it's been interesting to be a part of it.

Victoria: Yeah.

Martha: I'm sure I'm going to be the only Vermonter in your class (all laugh).

Victoria: Yeah, I think you are actually.

Paloma: We appreciate you so much for answering our questions and um sharing your beliefs, we really appreciate it.

Martha: Thank you! Thanks.

Victoria: Have a great rest of your day.

Martha: Good luck to you and okay.

Victoria: Bye.

Paloma: Bye.

Martha: Bye.