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## Interview with Sylvia Kwon

Sylvia Kwon

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## **Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Project**

**Interviewee:** Sylvia Kwon

**Interviewers:** Adrian Arredondo Gomez and Melissa Horta Gutierrez

**Date:** November 21, 2020

**Location:** Zoom Video Call

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

**Length:** 19:00

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

### **Bio**

Sylvia Kwon has been living in California for 20 years but she grew up in the Midwest. Her parents are first generation Korean immigrants. She started sewing for her son's ballet studio and ever since then found interest in sewing, she's very creative and learned how to sew on her own and started with very little basic things. Sylvia Kwon is very centered around her community; she not only helped sew costumes for her son's ballet studio but has also sent around face masks that she's made. She's made over 1000 face masks as well as sewn a quilt for a school fundraiser.

### **Summary**

In this first section she starts off by explaining how she started sewing when her son started ballet classes eight years ago (01:43). Kwon discusses how she became involved in sewing to help other communities who were in need and how she was able to get a hold of materials (05:55). Both her sons and husband helped Kwon with shipping out masks and they all contribute to help her get small things done such as cutting elastic and taking them to get shipped out (08:07). Next she discusses the differences between large Auntie hubs in cities as opposed to her own location, Davis, removed from hubs (09:04). Kwon considers the aunties in the auntie sewing squad like family in a way and they have groups on social media where they all try to connect (11:02). The last part of our interview just wrapped up basic information about the interviewers (16:04-19:00).

### **Written Transcript**

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Okay and we'll send you the consent form, Okay?

**Sylvia Kwon:** Okay.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Okay, I'm pretty sure it's recording now.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Okay, So um it's... Today is November 20th. Right?

**Sylvia Kwon:** 21st.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah, 21st.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** And it's currently 12:38PM and we're just doing. **\*Screen froze\***

**Sylvia Kwon:** Oh, she froze.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah **\*Pause\*** I don't know if she knows, she froze.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah, she might not know.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah, uh so it's 12:39PM right now and we're going to conduct an interview; And we're going to talk about you and your involvement with the Auntie Sewing Squad.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Uhm, **\*MH rejoins\*** Hi.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** And she came back.

**Sylvia Kwon:** **\*Chuckles\*** Yeah, Hi Melissa.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Is it working again?

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah, now we can hear you.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Okay, did it keep recording?

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yes, it's still recording, you just cut out.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Okay did you um, do you want to start asking her your questions or do you want me to go first?

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Um, I can start.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Okay, go ahead.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** So, my first question to you is, do you know why you started sewing?

**Sylvia Kwon:** For the Auntie sewing Squad or in general sewing?

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** In general.

**Sylvia Kwon:** In general, I started sewing because my son does ballet. He's been doing ballet for about 8 years now. He started when he was about 4 and so they always needed people to sew the costumes; and uh I sewed by hand. But they also needed people to use the sewing machine, so I thought "oh okay I'll try it, I'm pretty crafty, I like to knit." So I got a really cheap sewing machine and sewed some costumes, sewed some curtains, you know just really small stuff.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah, so you start sewing later in your life, you started young then correct?

**Sylvia Kwon:** No no, yeah I started as an adult, yeah.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Hmm, interesting.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Oh okay, did you start, did you start sewing before, so you started sewing before joining the auntie sewing squad?

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah but just really small stuff, a lot of the aunties learned from their mom's or took home economic courses. I didn't learn from my mom or my grandma or from any school.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** So, like following up with that, another question I would have is, how did you start learning? Did you look up video or did you already have an idea?

**Sylvia Kwon:** To teach myself?

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah.

**Sylvia Kwon:** To nit, Yeah I taught myself how to knit when I was in grad school. So I thought it can't be that much harder to teach myself and I just watched youtube videos. And got myself how to sew.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah youtube is pretty useful to learn things you don't know.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** I use it a lot too.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** You said it was easy for you to learn or was it a little challenging at first?

**Sylvia Kwon:** I mean it was challenging at first, but I like to learn new things and I kind of looked at it as a fun challenge. So, I didn't stress about it too much because I knew that eventually I would get it because there's millions and millions of people who could sew; so at some point I'll figure it out. **\*Chuckles\***

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** **\*Chuckles\*** Did you contribute? **\*Cuts out\***

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** I think she cut out again.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Okay.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** \*Reconnects\* Can you hear me, I'm sorry

**Sylvia Kwon:** That's okay. I didn't get the last question.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Did you make any face masks or anything right now because of the pandemic and stuff.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Oh yeah, I think I'm close to a thousand masks.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** A thousand Woah!

**Sylvia Kwon:** \*Chuckles\* Well I joined the Auntie Sewing Squad at the end of March, so I been doing it for a long time. I made them for my friends, my family, I have a lot of older neighbors. So I did kind of start off in my own small circle, but then a friend of mine who was already part of the auntie sewing squad signed me up and so I just thought this is awesome. I'll try helping out in the pledges, so I started sewing for the pledges.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** And It was free to sign up for the sewing squad or did you have to pay a fee or something?

**Sylvia Kwon:** Nope, they just, it's facebook group and my friend I think she just signed me up \*Chuckles\* and I started getting information and other stuff.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** And You didn't mind joining or anything?

**Sylvia Kwon:** No, no I thought it was interesting, I was sewing for a food bank and a homeless shelter in Davis. But I like the idea being able to sew masks for other communities in need across the country.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** And when you sew for these communities, do you do it freely correct?

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah, it's all my free time but initially I started with buying my own, actually not even the fabric. I had a neighbor who gave me a lot of fabric and she knew I was sewing for the auntie sewing squad; and she was happy to give me a lot of her, she was a part of a quilt group at her church. A lot of the people who were a part of the quilt group stopped making quilts, they would make quilts for the kids at the hospitals. So then all of them started making masks, but they still had all this fabric from previous projects. So they gave me those fabric and used different things for elastic; and then the auntie sewing squad also would send you fabric for elastic for the pledges and sewing for pledges.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** That's good, you didn't have to really waste money. Go ahead.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Do you have any family members who also know how to sew or who are involved with them.

**Sylvia Kwon:** No I don't, I know a lot of people who have been sewing with their mom's or their grandmother's. I have my kids help me so that's been my family kind of, my kids been involved; they're 12 uhh he just turned 13, I always forget **\*Chuckles\***. 13 and 15, so my 13 year old helps me sew and cut elastic and my 15 year old will help out as well. My husband helps out because he's the one who takes all the masks and delivers it to the post office and mails them.  
**\*Chuckles\*** It's a family project.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah and do you ever meet up with the auntie sewing squad and do group sews?

**Sylvia Kwon:** We haven't done group sews but we have did a group hike in the bay area.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Oh.

**Sylvia Kwon:** And that was really nice.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** So it was something unrelated to sewing, you guys just wanted to hang out and get to know each other.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah, exactly.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** That's interesting and nice, did you guys get to bond and everything.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Uhm, and I knew it was my friend who joined me in the beginning, so I known her for a while but then I got to meet new aunties and people I never met before.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Oh okay.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** And are they all around the same area as you too?

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah, I'm in Davis so I'm a little bit further. A lot of them are in San Francisco and Pacifica so they're a little further out. I know that the bay area aunties are really tight and they hang out a lot, same with the Los Angeles aunties, they have regular swap meets. I'm kind of on my own out here, there's not a lot of aunties near by.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** But at least there's some and your friend.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Mhm

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yea

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Is there like any events that you have liked contributed in with your sewing or anything other than umm right now with the pandemic?

**Sylvia Kwon:** No most of my sewing has been for the umm pandemic but uh the dance studio where my son performs there doing the nutcracker um you know every Christmas they do the nutcracker but it's going to be there videotaping while in the studio so everybody isn't in at the same time and they're gonna edit it so I offered to make costumes again so i'm just waiting to hear back.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Mmm wait so they're still going to do the nutcracker this year even during the pandemic, oh that's nice.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yea but they won't have it you know, usually everyone performs on one big stage but they're gonna just video record pieces of it with less than 5 kids or kids who have been you know tested (chuckles) have already been there own plots together.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah. well that's good that they keep the tradition going even in these conditions. Regarding the Auntie Sewing Squad, would you consider them a second family to you?

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah in a way, I mean I have not, gosh I have only I think, I can't remember how many we have now at this point it's a lot. Maybe 800 people are involved, or at least have signed up on the facebook group and I have only met 5 in person. But they're people who post everyday and we encourage each other, one auntie in New Jersey I think organized a fund for like a secret santa. So I was able to get an Auntie in Florida and send her, it's just small gifts you can send to them and I received a gift from an auntie in LA. But I feel like it, yeah it has become a really important community for me during the pandemic.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yea it sounds really important you guys are having secret santas from like across the states and everything.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yea hahaha

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** That's really interesting.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yea you know some people, one Auntie in Washington state um was impacted by the wildfires and so you know we were able to all check on her and ask her how she's doing and sent her gifts, another Auntie uh in Nevada I think was having surgery so people were checking up on her (laughs) on Facebook and sending her things so it goes beyond yea just sewing masks we like to provide social support for each other.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yea you guys are basically are a second family then.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yea

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** You got anymore questions Melissa?

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Umm... do you know do you know Mrs Lau or how did you go like as far as um as like putting yourself out so that she can umm so that she could get more aunties?

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yea she put a post out saying that she wanted to have to see if there were any aunties that wanted who were interested in volunteering and I had already participated in another interview umm oral history with Grace's students at San Francisco State so this is the second interview that I've done for umm college for one of the professors who are part of the Aunte Sewing Squad.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** And was that also this semester or was it a different semester?

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Oh Okay.

**Sylvia Kwon:** That was fall semester.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** That's good.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Oh okay.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah, so I think another auntie who's also a professor somewhere in LA has also put a post up, asking for volunteers from aunties for her students' interviews. So, it's nice that we're getting tap to do that work, I mean I'm more than happy to help out.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Are you gonna join that one too?

**Sylvia Kwon:** So that one is an interesting one that one is asking to get connected with people and different folks who have actually received the masks not the aunties who've sewn the masks.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Mmm

**Sylvia Kwon:** So I think that'll be kind of another different kind of perspective.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yea

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Mhmm

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yea cause we dont really hear back after we sew the masks and send them off you know some organizations will send thank you cards but most of the time I don't you know. I just kind of know that the aunties who are the administrators make sure that the organizations we send our masks to like make sure that they're reputable that people will actually get the masks that people aren't gonna you know, turn around and sell them on a black market or something it's all above board and legitimate umm but yea sometimes you just wonder cause I remember I made a certain type of mask and I don't think I wasn't sure if it was you know fit people's faces because I don't know who these people are I just have to go on what they tell us is being needed



but you know I'd be interested to hear how the people who received them have been able to use them or if they've been helpful or useful.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah, well I'm pretty sure they all been helpful and useful because you know it's really important right now that people wear masks.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Do you have any other questions Adrian?

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Um no like we kind of answered them already.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Yeah, um do you have anything for us auntie?

**Sylvia Kwon:** So where are you Melissa, are you in Hollister or somewhere else?

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** I'm also in Hollister but I was working so coming out here was like ahh so I had to rush out.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Oh yeah.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Yeah.

**Sylvia Kwon:** I'm going to guess you work at starbucks \*Chuckles\*.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Yeah \*Chuckles\* I still have my apron on and everything.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Are you taking a break? Are you taking a break and will be going back soon?

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** No actually I'm off already, that's why I was like I won't even go home I'll just stay out here and finish it.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Okay.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Yeah, um is it okay if we send you our consent form for the recording after our video.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Sure, Yeah uhm.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Okay then you can just send it back to us as soon as you sign it.

**Sylvia Kwon:** And will you be transcribing the interview and then writing a paper?

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Um, she hasn't really said.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** I think it's actually.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah, I'm pretty sure we just supposed to do the recording.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** I think I think, go ahead.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** You go.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Yeah, no I wasn't sure either, I think it's just the recording and then we'll have to do an assignment afterwards that has to do with the interview.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Okay.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Uhm.

**Sylvia Kwon:** And what's your major, are you also a?

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Mine's actually biology \*Chuckles\*.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Oh wow okay, are you a sophomore as well?

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Yeah I'm a sophomore.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Okay, well that's great that you guys got to pick this class.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Yeah, it was nice she gave us a lot of options on who to choose and we actually came across yours and we signed up for it and so we ended up together.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Oh okay, \*Chuckles\* well thanks for picking me.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** No thank you, thank you for giving us the chance to talk to you. It was super hard to schedule with you.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Yeah, Yeah.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Yeah because you know we all basically work.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** But thank you, yeah.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Well have a good rest of your Saturday.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** You too.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** You too and thank you so much, we'll send you the.

**Sylvia Kwon:** The consent for uhm.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** And we'll send you the consent form, okay?

**Sylvia Kwon:** Okay yeah, sounds good.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** And have a wonderful thanksgiving guys.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Thank you.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Oh yeah you too, I always forget **\*Chuckles\***.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Thank you.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** I know I forgot it was around the corner.

**Sylvia Kwon:** Bye, have a good day.

**Adrian Arredondo Gomez:** Bye, you too.

**Melissa Horta Gutierrez:** Bye!