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Interview with Lisa Prostak

Lisa Prostak

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Interviewee: Lisa Prostack

Interviewers: Jessica Morales and Hana Moyle

Date: November 24, 2020

Location: Zoom

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

Length: 00:45:28

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Biography:

Lisa Prostack grew up in Medford, Massachusetts in an Italian family then later moved to Randolph, Massachusetts. She is very family-oriented and has three grown children. She works as a science teacher at a private elementary school with the hope to impact future generation's relationship with science. She usually knits but when the Covid-19 pandemic began she made masks for her family and friends, then wanted to donate to medical personnel which led her to join the Auntie Sewing Squad when she saw them on Facebook. With more time, she wants to become more involved in women's rights activism.

Thematic Summary:

Lisa Prostack discusses the Auntie Sewing Squad (0:00 - 6:11). She then delves into the current Covid-19 pandemic and what we can do moving forward (6:12 -13:06). She speaks about women's rights activism (13:07 -19:46). She then describes her community growing up and her current one (19:47 - 24:40). She describes her evolving relationship with politics (24:41- 31:55). She then states her opinions on the current political climate (31:56 - 43:47). Prostack makes an ending statement about what she hopes for the future (43:48 - 45:28).

Interview Transcript

H.M.: All right so. Hi, I'm Hana Moyle.

J.M.: Hi, I'm Jessica Morales.

L.P.: And I'm Lisa Prostack. Yes.

J.M.: Where are you right now?

L.P.: I'm at my home in Randolph, Massachusetts and I'm actually up in my bedroom because I have two daughters and two dogs who still live at home, and this is the quietest place. Where are you guys right now?

H.M.: Oh I'm at home. Just kind of locked myself away in my room. I have a dog and I have a cat in the other room.

J.M.: Same, I'm in my room. So, if you want we'll begin with the questions.

L.P.: Okay, that is fine. Tell me what you want to know.

J.M.: So, the first question is what motivated you to join the Auntie Sewing Squad?

L.P.: Um... yes. How to say this? I was very frustrated when everything shut down at the beginning of the pandemic in March, I think that was. And I just didn't know what to do. We were hearing all kinds of horrible stories coming out of New York City, where people were running out of masks and PPE and all that kind of safety equipment, and then I noticed that there was a whole bunch of directions popping up on where to get masks, how to make masks, and I went online and I found a couple of patterns and I started making them for my family and friends. And then one day it was on Facebook and I don't know how it popped up, but this group popped up and I took a look at it and I said wow, that's really great, because I was trying to make masks and, at that point, this was maybe through April and a little bit into May. And my own daughter had a bout with covid at the very beginning of early, early April. We were quarantined for late March through mid-april, end of April. We were quarantined for about 5 weeks until she got better, and she actually had a mild case, but it was still pretty bad until there really wasn't a whole lot I could do during that time. I was teaching, and we had gone remote because the governor had shut the schools down, so I was at home which was fortunate I could do this while I was quarantined. And then on Facebook, I saw this group and I said, well gee, that would be really great, because by that time, this was probably about the beginning of May, I'd made masks for about everyone that I knew, who wanted one, and the PPE would situation for the medical community was getting a little bit better and the hospitals in the area started to say oh no we have we have enough, and this group was a way that I could continue to help because there were a lot of people who needed masks who couldn't get any. At that point, I was seeing, you know, people were selling them for fifteen, twenty dollars a piece, which I thought was absolutely horrible, and I just wanted to make masks, and so I I joined the aunties [Auntie Sewing Squad] and I've been making... I don't... I'm very slow... I don't make a lot, but I do what I can and it's made me feel a lot better to know that I'm helping people who can't pay \$20 a mask. So that's how I found them. Somehow on Facebook connected me and I don't know how or why.

H.M.: Yeah, it's almost like fate.

L.P.: Yeah, it could have been, it could have been fate. So that's how I found the group and I've been sewing for them ever since.

H.M.: So, what kind of impacts do you see the Auntie Sewing Squad making?

L.P.: I think the squad has, I think they've saved a lot of lives. Because we do know that masks work. We've always known that. You know, if you, if it stops particulates and droplets from coming out, you know it's going to keep them from coming in. I don't know why it took CDC so long to tell us that but it's obvious. And so I really do think that they have saved a lot of lives, especially in marginalized groups around the country that this Administration or the outgoing Administration now just couldn't be bothered with and I thought that was just horrendous and we call it "rage sewing," because we shouldn't be doing this. Okay. We should have had a response

that helped everybody, and we didn't so... Argh. Okay. Enough of that.

J.M.: How have you been affected by the current pandemic, and what do you think the U.S. can do moving forward?

L.P.: Okay. Well, like everyone else my life has been severely curtailed. You know, we've had to go remote in teaching, especially last spring when nobody knew as much about the virus as we know now, so everything shut down and we couldn't go anywhere. We think my daughter contracted it when she went to the grocery store. There wasn't as much mask wearing at the time, so I think that might have had something to do with it, so we've had that, that bout. I quarantined at the other end of my house. The girls would not let me do anything or come near them for quite some time because, because I am over 60 and so I end up, I'm in a high-risk group. Plus I have a couple of underlying comorbidities, so I'm frightened. I don't like going out. Our school opened this fall for four days a week. I'm not happy about that, but we had, we are coming into a brand new school building, it's a small private school, everybody wears masks, we do all the social distancing, so it's probably a lot better than it could be if I were in a larger school and in an older building with less, with the ventilation not very good. So I'm still afraid. I don't go anywhere, haven't gone to the gym, will not go anywhere near a gym. So I have been getting a lot of exercise. Financially, I've been okay. My son is in California and he was out of work for months. My daughter, my older daughter, has actually finished a double master's program at Boston University last spring. She had to go remote but she did it. But she's unemployed except for a couple of little part time jobs. So I'm helping her out, I'm trying to help my son out, but you know you know guys they don't want to take any help especially from Mom. So he's out there and he's doing okay. My third daughter has been fortunate and she works at UMass Amherst, and they never, she's been able to keep her job and work remotely. So out of the five of us, only two of us are really working and were able to work through it. So we've been fortunate, a lot more fortunate than other people, and I'm blessed with that and I know it. [This is] one of the reasons I try to make as many masks as I can to help other people. What can the U.S. do? Oh gosh, where do I begin? The U.S. can coordinate. What they should have done is made sure that people didn't starve, as so many of us are doing now. \$1,200 didn't do a damn thing for a whole lot of people. The \$600 unemployment did help a lot of people. My son and my daughter were able to get that and that helped them greatly, and that should have been that should have continued. What the US needs to do is prop up, support the people. The regular working people. That's the only way we're going to get the economy going. Giving millions of dollars to corporations isn't going to help if there isn't anybody to buy what they're selling. So you do need to make sure that you're general populace can get the things they need to live and survive, and that is the underpinning of the economy. And I think that's what the present Administration and even the general Republican party, they love their supply-side economics, which never works, has never worked. Every time they've tried it, it's failed miserably, but they still do it. They're insane. So the only way the economy is going to survive is to do bottom up and not top down, so any measures that will be put in place to do that, I think should be done. We have to get people also wearing masks. We have to get people to have confidence in the vaccines that are coming. You know, you're not going to just get the shot and then you can throw your mask away and go about your business. This is, it's going to be a big job to educate people and to get them to comply with what needs to be done, and that's been sorely lacking, and part of it is, you know, the CDC says one thing and

then the President says the complete opposite. So you need a coherent consistent message from everyone, and I still think there's probably 30% of the people who just won't do anything because they'll have somebody out there tweeting not to do it, unfortunately. But I think that is what needs to be done. concentrate on the people first and the economy will follow.

H.M.: Okay, so to switch topics a little bit, you mentioned something about the Women's Liberation Movement in your bio,

L.P.: Yeah!

H.M.: So I was wondering how you've been involved in women's rights activism?

L.P.: Well I haven't quite been involved. I've, you know when I was very young I did some marches, I did the women's March a few years ago, but it's always been an interest of mine. I guess it's something that I feel strongly about, however over the years I really haven't done much with it. I spent many years raising a family and working, and I did not have a lot of extra time or energy for that. I'm hoping to get more into it as I get older, my children are older and I would have more time, and so that's what I'm thinking about, getting a bit more active in it. I have seen all kinds of horrible things happen to women in the workplace, and it's just terrible. It's just terrible. So, I think I'm going to try starting to get a bit more active as I have more time, as I get older.

J.M.: So continuing with the topic, what do you think are the biggest challenges currently that women have to face?

L.P.: Currently for what? I'm sorry.

J.M.: Oh, currently that women have to face? The biggest challenges.

L.P.: Oh, the challenges that women face? Probably the same... Did I hear you right? I wear hearing aids...so.

J.M.: I'll repeat the question. What do you think are the biggest challenges women currently have to face?

L.P.: Women, yes. It's still the whole family versus career. That is, that has been a challenge for 50 years as I could tell. There's a lot of sexism out there. There's not a lot of support for mothers in the workplace. We have very little in the way of child care, affordable child care, family leave, and we're the only industrial country, we're the only rich, wealthy country that doesn't mandate maternity leave, good maternity leave, paid maternity leave for everyone. And for some people it's just a horrendous situation. When I was, when my children were young, both my husband and I worked, and it was a necessity. And that's the thing. There's still this idea that, oh, woman just wants to have a career, you know, she shouldn't be that way. she should stay home with her kids. But if that's the case, but over the last 40 years wages have stagnated, and the only way that people can make ends meet is to have two incomes, and that's what I think there's not a real good

acknowledgement of, and women are still looked at as being irresponsible if they go to work. Several times over my career, my husband and I sat down and said, okay here are expenses and here are our take-home pay. If one of us doesn't work, can we make ends meet. And the answer was always no. Even if we took child care into account. If we weren't paying child care, everybody said, oh well you pay child care. If you don't have to pay child care then you can make ends meet. No. No, I was making enough money to do childcare and then some. So this pandemic is going to hit women really, really hard. It already has, and that's making me very very angry. And I'm sure that once this is over, everybody is going to kind of say, okay everything is back to normal, but it won't be for some of these women. They've had to give up their jobs in order to take care of the children, to take them through school in the Zoom meetings. It's really, really had a hard effect on them, and it's not going to go back to the way it was. A lot of the jobs that women did were the first ones to go in the pandemic and they may or may not come back. My guess is they probably won't. I think they're also getting, when they do work from home and the kids are at home, I think there's a lot more pressure on them to keep the children away because they are looked on as less serious if the kid runs in the room and says mommy, mommy can I have a glass of milk? If that was a man, they'd laugh and haha, you know, where's Mom. But the woman has to do it. Women still are responsible for the lion's share of the work and in the house and the child care. And that really is still the same. It's the same challenges as when I was young and was raising my children. I don't really see a whole lot of difference, and with the pandemic I see that it's getting worse. That's what I think.

H.M.: So I'd like to talk a bit about what it was like for you growing up, so what was your community like when you were younger?

L.P.: My community was white. I lived in a, kind of a medium sized city, it was Medford, Massachusetts, and there were, I think, about 65,000 people. It was a Red Line City. We had a black section, and the rest of the city was white. Very, very few Asians. The white folk were of mainly Italian and Irish descent, so it was almost very, very homogeneous. I pretty much did not speak to a black person until I got to high school. We had one high school, everybody went there, and so you've got people, kids, being segregated all their lives, and then at the age of 14, you throw them all in one building. And sometimes you get tensions that way, but more often than not. My family was very steeped in our Italian culture because my grandparents came from Italy, and it was fun. I really did enjoy the big family gatherings and the accents in my life, but that was, that was how I grew up. There was very little in the way of the outside world. I lived in my own little world, and that was kind of the way it was in the 60s until the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement came in. But then again, you only saw that on the news at 6. Other than that, no 24/7 news cycle, nothing like that, nothing from the outside world impinged upon your life. And it is that I find that was very, very different. So it was to me it was a happy community, but it was a very insular community and I think that was the way it was in a lot of places at that time.

J.M.: So, how do you compare it to your community now? So how's your community now?

L.P.: Well, I'm in a different community. I left Medford a couple of years after I got married and that was... So I moved here to Randolph where I live now in 1986 and over that... over this period of time the demographics in Randolph changed. I wouldn't say it was a white community

when we moved in, but over the years it has gotten more and more of a mix which I really love. We have, believe it or not, Randolph has the highest Haitian population of anywhere in Massachusetts. We also have a very large Vietnamese Community. I know a lot of my children's friends, their parents were actual boat people. Came here on boats. Very, very interesting stuff. So there's a real mix of people here now and I really prefer it to anything else. Medford, I really don't know how much it's changed. My parents lived there really until they died several years ago, but I would only come and visit a little bit, so I'm not quite sure how that changed. But I do know that we are a very integrated community here in Randolph.

H.M.: So... would you say your politics have changed since you've grown up?

L.P.: No...umm, I have always voted democratic and I'm not sure why umm I guess the democratic candidates always seemed to me to be more appealing umm I haven't been as involved in politics as I have been to the past 4 to 5 years and a lot of that was simply because the government just seemed to hum along you know it wasn't something that a whole lot of us seemed to pay a lot of attention to and we're probably paying the price for that now. I mean I really disliked Reagan, I thought that his policies were just horrible, I didn't particularly care for the first Bush and I hated the second one. And in fact that was right around the time that I started to pay a little more attention, started to pay more attention to Clinton and the whole Whitewater thing and the Kenith Star stuff, I just looked at it and scratched my head and thought 'What are they doing?' I never liked Reagan's trickle-down economics that never worked and I didn't like Bush's policies either. I didn't think he was a very honest man... the second one. But we always seemed to be doing better with Democrats than with republicans was kind of what I was thinking at the time. Like I said all during this time, well most of this time I was raising a family and so this was all kind of outside over there. Until one day somebody in the George W. Bush administration that's when I really started to uhh What can I say they started to pick on scientists who were trying to raise the alarm about the change and they fired somebody from NOAA for saying that climate change was something we had to pay attention to. This was what the earlier 2000's so this was 20 years ago. And they fired him and one of Bush's people I don't know who it was but he was asked about it and about climate change and science. And he chuckled and he said hahaha well we make our own science and as a scientist that freaked me out completely, I said you gotta be kidding me we make our own science. Science is science, facts are facts. What is he talking about? That's kind of when I started to pay attention to the nand that's part of the reason why I eventually decided to become a teacher because I did not want to. It seems to me that people who could say this about science had no idea what science was at work. And so I figured I probably need to start at the very beginning which is with... with children, so I decided that I would go back and do it. Be a science teacher. And I'm hoping that we're going to get something along game and will get better as as the years go by. I am speechless sometimes like I don't have the words for this happening this anti- science band. By people who should know better, these are educated people. And you know you have somebody like Ben Carson who has a MD in brain surgery saying he doesn't believe in evolution he doesn't agree with it it doesn't happen, how can you say that? A scientifically educated man, it boggles my mind it actually boggles my mind. So over the last 20 years I've been watching what's been happening more and more school boards around the country are starting to and or have been trying to get you to know, intelligent design taught in school along with evolution. Because of course it's only a theory.

And they've been 20 years ago they didn't succeed but they've been succeeding more and more and more and I find that frightening. I find it horribly frightening. And that I've been finding has come more from the republican party than the Democratic Party and I think maybe I always sent that and as my brain has always worked in a logical manner and a lot of things Republican said doesn't make any sense. So no, my politics has not changed. I have just gotten a little bit more aware of what people are saying and what people are doing are in the body politic out there. And trying to take action to to to help prevent it. And you know some days I feel really helpless and other days I do a flurry of letter writing. But you know I can only go so far as far as writing my representatives because who are my representatives? Ed Markey, Elizabeth Warren and Ayana Presley. Okay, so I'm preaching to the choir and I don't know who else to I know they're fighting for me and I know they're fighting for what I feel is right. I don't know what else to do.

J.M.: So sticking with politics, how do you feel about the current political climate?

L.P.: You haven't figured that out by what I've been saying so far?

J.M.: Can you expand on it?

L.P.: Hell yes. I can expand. I can talk forever on that. I am very happy with the results of the election. I know that there are a lot of younger people, one of my daughters included, saying that we shouldn't have a 78 -year-old white guy in there I said but we do, okay. And he knows what he's doing OK I don't think that and while I loved all of the candidates Neil during the primaries people at all which candidate do you want I said any of them really. Just not that idiot and his minions that's the thing it's not necessarily him I think half the time you were simply being used by Mitch McConnell and week we just have to figure out how to not let this happen again. And I have some ideas in that first of all is getting rid of the electoral college, not an easy process as it's in the constitution but I just don't think that it it goes along with the will of the people and it hasn't done with Jefferson wanted to do which was to prevent it from getting in and it put a demagogue . It put a demagogue into the presidency so it failed miserably. We need to get gerrymandering out as much as possible at much fairer both parties do it but after the 2010 senses and the Republicans just weaponized it. So we went we need to get that I'm kind of more fair I mean when you think about it both Trump and Biden won the electoral college by 306 votes but Trump lost the popular vote by 3 million and Biden won the popular vote by 6 million so when you look at that you say what's wrong with this picture this is this is something is going off the rails here. So I think we really need to take a look at that and. I am happy with...well I don't know a lot of the picks that Biden has done for his cabinets but I have heard that except for Janet Yellen night I know her but I have heard that they're all solid and experienced well respected people and I think that that's what we need and I think.

Biden was the right person for the job right now so I'm ... I'm hoping that he can put a lot of things right but there is just so much that has been destroyed over the last four years that I'm not sure how it's humanly possible. To ... to get to everything that is needed to be done in a timely manner because sometimes some of these things are just crying out for help and you know, our water and our air is going to start to get polluted again unless, you know, we put back some of the ... some of the regulations that the Trump administration rolled back . Other things, other things as well, it just ... there seems to be such a daunting task but Biden seems to be up for it.

He's rearing to go, and I was like 'Fine Go ahead do it please, please' so yeah I think think we have a long road ahead. I'm worried about the 2012 midterm ...uh... 2021 midterms because this country seems to love divided government for a check on the... which is fine as long as you have reasonable people, but we're becoming increasingly polarized, so that a check is really obstruction. We're going to be a check on the Democrats so we're going to obstruct everything they want to do ... or we're going to be a check on the Republicans, so we're gonna, you know, obstruct everything they do. That's gridlock. That's not a check. That's not cooperation, that's just gridlock. I'm really afraid that that's where we're heading, and that in 2021 we're going to end up with Republican majorities again and that's not gonna ... They won't work with anyone, OK if they're going to work with people but all they're doing is obstructing so ... I'm gonna try to keep my eye out on that and see what I can do to support candidates in other states. To support candidates in other states. For Congress a lot of our state logistics late legislature chairs went Republican I am and that's a function of this horrendous gerrymandering that is being done so there's ... there's just a lot of work to be done and sometimes I wonder if we can do it because of this polarization.

H.M.: So how would you say that the Trump administration politics has affected you?

L.P.: How have they affected me? They've made me pretty angry. But as far as you know did they affect me financially, no I didn't. I mean I didn't get a raise for that whole tax scam, I didn't see any difference in any of my taxes and in fact I have a feeling that this year they'll go up because they're scheduled to go out for the middle class. As far as immigration goes you know we have less this year we usually had a very robust an international student program it at my school and I don't think we had any new students from the usually in a we get students from Japan, Korea and China and we really we didn't get any of them this year when or last year. So I think it's really been. I think they're finding it harder to come here. And really the biggest one of his policies has been the pandemic I play I just you know I'm sitting in my house afraid to go out and my children either can't get a job or all of their end or they close down and we're unable to work and my son has a job the way you can't work from home so he had to sit in his house for three or four months and now cases are going up even in California where he lives so you know now he's at bigger at a bigger risk because he's he is going out and he's getting some jobs he's a freelancer in the film industry, he works behind the camera and so you know in May my daughter who spent all this money getting two masters degrees now his new job and she has student loans so. What are we gonna do with that, okay man. I just you know as far as the policies themselves affecting me you know other than the taxes I haven't really been affected by anything that he's done because the only real thing he's done is for big corporations s he hasn't done anything for the rest of us we're just hanging on in here and maybe I think some of his policies for the big corporations have allowed them to you know keep their thumb on on their workers and. You know why I know my kids friends to really they can't they can't survive on the money that they are they are paid they can't live on their own everybody's even been that one of my friends my daughters friends who whose family simply became homeless during the pandemic and they went to live with a friends a friend and they're all living on this friends couch so he's actually living here and in order to give his family more room and he's he's got a job and he's trying to help. You know I've just been seeing this and it's making me angry and it's making me want to do something but frustrated that at this point you know. What can I do other than

write letters, protest and make masks.

And I'm trying to do all that. I just don't know what else I can do. This feeling of helplessness which I've never felt before.

H.M.: So is there anything else you'd like to touch on?

L.P.: Umm... Yeah, I am hopeful that we can get ourselves back on track. It's going to take a lot of work. I don't think that electing Biden was the panacea for everything. I think we need to take a good hard look at ourselves and I think we have to work at it and I ... I have felt a change in the atmosphere. In the past things have happened and people have rallied together, and then things would go back to the way they were. But when George Floyd was killed in the outpouring that happened after that I felt it was different. I think things will change now on but they only change if we continue to push it and I think we have that will now at least a certain portion. I think enough of us have that will now and that it will happen with the right people leading us and I think we have the right people now we can continue to keep the right people in place. I think we're going to be OK.

H.M.: Thank you for joining us

L.P.: You're welcome

J.M.: Thank you.

H.M.: Have a nice day