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Interview with Lisa Kawamura

Lisa Kawamura

Interviewee: Lisa Kawamura

Interviewer: Nancy Cornejo

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SBS 112: Women and Social Change, From 1890s to the Present Day

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Lisa Kawamura grew up in San Gabriel, CA and received her bachelors and masters at San Francisco State University. She is a faculty in the Communications Department at California State University, San Luis Obispo. She is an activist who has served as a union representative and is a member of Tsuru for Solidarity.

Thematic Summary: 00:00:00 - 00:07:00 Kawamura opens with a reflection on growing up in conservative background in San Gabriel and experiencing a political shift when attending San Francisco State University. 00:07:00 - 00:14:00 She discusses the difficult transition to online teaching during COVID-19, both as a professor teaching college and as a parent of a nine-year old attending the third grade online. 00:14:00-00:19:00 Kawamura connects how a background in debate prepared her to be a good union organizer. 00:19:00 - 00:27:00 She shares that two uncles passed away from COVID-19. 00:27:00 - 00:31:00 Kawamura reflects on what the Auntie Sewing Squad has meant to her. 00:31:00 - 00:37:00 She remembers how her grandmother taught her to sew. 00:37:00 - 00:42:00 Kawamura considers herself an activist and has been a part of Tsuru for Solidarity. 00:42:00 - 00:46:00 She closes her interview with her opinions on what next steps can be taken to address the pandemic.

Transcript

NC: My name is Nancy Cornejo. I will be interviewing Lisa Kawamura on November 25th, 2020 at 10:10 a.m. The interview will be done online through zoom. Let's start with the questions, um my first question I was going to ask: Could you tell us a little bit more about yourself, a little bit more about your history, like where you're from?

00:00:18

LK: Sure. Take these off and I'll have to read anything. I was born and raised in Los Angeles, California, and a small suburb of L.A. called San Gabriel, and I lived there for the first 18 years of my life in a fairly conservative community. And, you know, as in the early 70s and 80s, was really one of the only Asian families in the neighborhood. Japanese families in the neighborhood. And I remember growing up there not really feeling super different as an Asian American. But then, you know, realizing there are some differences, like we ate rice every day and everybody else eat bread or potatoes and things like that. But, you know, it wasn't super diverse where I grew up. And we spent a lot of times I know like a lot of Asians and a Latinx folks, their friends are like their cousins. Right. And so that's how we grew up together, is that most of our friends are our cousins. And so that's really where a lot of our Japanese cultural stuff sort of came in was doing big family gatherings at holidays and birthdays and things like that. And then when I was 18, I went away to college, to San Francisco State and oh my God, that was like total culture shock. And everything about being in San Francisco or at San Francisco State was totally different than what I had known. I didn't really realize or didn't understand what it meant to be conservative or liberal. I just knew I was ...I knew that I was a Republican, even though I didn't even know what that meant. And then I go to San Francisco State and everything is, is completely opposite of what I knew. Very liberal, very uninhibited people talking about things in classrooms that I had never even thought about before. Like I remember the first week of classes, one of my teachers saying, well, the first abortion I had...and I was shocked...I was like, oh, my God. OK. And. It actually was a really good change for me, but it was really, really hard because I wasn't ready for it. No one had prepared me for that. I didn't really know what to expect. I applied to San Francisco State at the very last minute and got in. I think I applied a month before I left for college and and went there. And it was. I didn't know what to expect. I didn't have time to to worry about it. And so I think it was a really hard transitions for me. And I remember coming back at winter break and saying, I'm not going back. And my mentor in high school said, hey, I know you and I know that you haven't really given it a chance. You're gone and debate trips because I was a speech and debate kid every weekend. You haven't really acclimated. You haven't really given it a chance. And I really listen to what he said because, you know, I really trusted him a lot and went back and really tried to give it a chance. And I really started to enjoy it, although I think I was still really too young to really appreciate everything San Francisco State could have given me, because now I'm. If I went there today, I think I'd fit in a whole lot better than I did then because I didn't really understand what was going on around me. I didn't really understand the history of San Francisco State. I didn't really understand what it meant to, to not

be conservative. I don't even know that I knew what it meant to be conservative. And I think those are things that I really grew into because of the exposures I had at San Francisco State and I spent 16 no 10 years there, 10 years there getting my undergraduate and master's degree in communication or speech and communication studies is what they called it, doing much of what you're doing? Except I would take these oral histories and turn them into performances. And that's that's what I've been studying since then. So when this offer came across, you know, our plate in the Auntie Sewing Squad, I thought, wow, you know, instead of being a researcher, maybe I can be a participant this time, can be really, really cool. And so after that, I got a job I had a job offer because of my experience with speech and debate coaching. There was a job available, coaching policy debate, et cetera, at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. And so basically I went from graduate school to the job I have now twenty three years later. And here I am in a very conservative area in probably one of the whitest, least diverse in terms of student population and the faculty and staff of any CSU, if not in California. And and what it's like to be a person of color here, doing the kinds of things that I do. I think it's it's been a very interesting turnaround. So I don't know if that really answers your question or if you needed a little bit more if you had more follow up.

00:05:54
NC: Yeah that answers it. So you kind of go through it a bit, but just for the sake of the questions prior to the pandemic what had you been doing for a living?

00:06:01
LK: So, like I said, I am sorry, let me turn this off. I've been teaching in Communication Studies department at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo for 23 years. I teach mostly performance classes. So a lot of public speaking, some argumentation and debate, not so much anymore since I'm not coaching debate anymore. Every once in a while, I'll teach an oral history or not oral history. It's performance of literature class in which I do teach oral history and ethnography and I also every once in a while, we'll pick up a class. I try to do at least once a year at the community college here at Cuesta community college, because I really like working with that student population. It's very different. Very different than what I work with everyday. So the student population there makes it really worth it for me to just have something a little bit different and to teach what I teach to a different group of people. But I'm very fortunate. I have not had any lapse in work because of the pandemic.

00:07:13
NC: So. So for question three. What was a typical day like you, a day like for you before the pandemic and how different is it now?

00:07:25

LK: For me in the pan before the pandemic, it was pretty routine. I teach from 7:00 in the morning until 1:00 in the afternoon and I'm usually on campus until about 5:00. I spent a lot of time in my office after I finished teaching and having office hours or going to meetings. And, you know, I have one son. He's now nine. He just turned nine, he had a Covid birthday. So we didn't really have a very big birthday. It was just us and a couple of family members. But, you know, he goes he goes to he's in the third grade, so he goes to public school. And then he would stay for the after school program. So allow both me and my partner to work a full day and pick him up, come home, have dinner, get ready for bed and start the whole routine over. So it it was pretty like pretty much like clockwork. We would just, you know, get up, do our school thing, partner. We go to work and take our son to school. And then, you know, I do the pickup and then dinner and all that other kind of stuff. And since the pandemic, because it happened really quickly at well, at both Cal Poly and my son's school that transition to going to online schooling happened really quickly. I mean, literally days apart, you were getting oh, you might want to think about online final exams. Oh, we really encourage you to have final exams. And the next day it was like we really don't want to anybody on campus anymore. And, you know, my son came home on a Friday day and we got an email that weekend saying we are not coming back to school. And so it was a really, really quick transition for us to go to this online method of school and work. And my partner continued to work in the office for another couple of weeks. But then since my partner works for Caltrans, another state entity, they also shut down and have not really gone back to full on office work. So all of a sudden, the three of us were home. You know, all trying to do our own thing and figure out how this is all going to get done. Lucky for me, it was at the end of a quarter and that gave me a little bit of time to make that transition to spring quarter. It was just, you know, we had spring break, which isn't very long for us. It's only four days because grades are due on Tuesday and then we go back on Monday. But to really figure out what was going on and we were really fortunate. I am a union activist also I am the lecture rep here at Cal Poly and the co co-chair of the APIDA is Asian Pacific Islander Desi American Caucus in the Union. And, you know, we were very lucky that the chancellor's office offered us I think it was two hundred and fifty six hours worth of Covid leave. And so that was enough for me to take off spring quarter one one class. So I teach each at seven a.m. and or two classes. I was able to take off two classes, so I taught my classroom seven to nine on Tuesdays and Thursdays. And then, you know, I was able to be with my son from two until five. His schooling hours were really two until our nine until three. But then, you know, it was such a hard transition. We were really working on his homework until like five or six every night. So it was almost more work, I think, than what we had been doing, even though it felt like we had more hours there. And so I was really lucky to receive that covertly from the CSU and the chancellor's office who put that aside realizing that, you know, many of us had school aged children or were old enough and that high risk category or was the third one was if you had to take care of somebody else who, you know, was Covid sick, but it was enough for me to be able to take off those two classes in that spring or last spring. And then this past fall, I was I took part of the federal leave that was given to or made available to us and was able to get two classes off and so taught from

seven to nine Monday, Wednesday and Tuesday, Thursday taught my two classes and was able to work with my son from 9:00 until three, five, six, whatever it happened to be. But it's been a real change and it was a really hard transition for us to to start doing this online schooling, because now on top of being a college professor, I was also having to do all of my regular committee work, you know, like I'm the the vice chair of the PTA and Faculty and Staff Association at Cal Poly. In addition to doing that for the union statewide, you know, serving on the board of trustees for the union and being a lecturer and all these other things that I'm involved in. But also having to be a third grade teacher and being more of a stay at home mom, even though I had seemed like three extra jobs to do once the pandemic started. And so it's been really hectic. The first I'd say three or four weeks were really hard. But we've kind of gotten into a rhythm. My son has gotten a little bit more used to the what it means to be online and how to go about that daily routine and I'm really grateful for the way that his school transitions in the sense that, you know, first I thought, God, what a waste they're going to take the first two or three weeks and just not really do anything that just to get used to step up where it's not really going to count. And I'm really glad that they did that because it was it was a hard transition, a lot harder than I thought it would be. And so it gave him the requisite amount of time to be able to get used to when we're going to meet being on that schedule, what he had to do before each meet. And, you know, and I was I thought, oh, well, I can do my work while he's doing his work. And I realized, no, in order to be effective, I can't grade while he's into lecture or, you know, getting his many lessons or trying to help him. It's just way too hard. So I'm really grateful for the time off that we've had paid time off that we've had. I'm really nervous about going back to this next quarter, the next two quarters of this year, because we don't have that. And I'm going to have to be working more and I'm not sure how that's going to turn out. So we'll see. So.

00:14:14
NC: How did you get started as a union worker, union organizer? What was your journey like for that?

LK: It's really kind of interesting because it was right after I had quit coaching debates and I had missed a lot. Like I'd been doing speech and debates since I was in high school. And every week, again, every other weekend I was at a debate tournament. And, you know, that was really the center of my life. Even once I, you know, my partner and I got together and we were having now I just I guess my son came after I quit. But, you know, even after having our ceremony in and starting to live a life together, I was still going away on these debate tournaments every week or every other week or we're working on debate stuff every week and, you know, twice a week, really late into the evenings. And at first I thought, oh, my gosh, what's going to happen when I am done coaching? And I thought, I'm going to have a heart attack because I'm not going to know what to do with all this time. But it was the right time. So that transition went really well. It was easy. It was smooth. I missed some of the people like my co-coaches. I really miss them a lot. The students that I work with, I really miss them a lot. But I didn't miss a lot about the

activity because it had changed so much that I was glad to be away from it. And some of the people in the activity, you kind of find out who your real friends are even after, you know, 20 plus years of doing that with the same group of people. I really found out who my real friends were within that community. And I'm still keep in touch with maybe 10 and 12 of them. But of the amount of people that I've been exposed to, it's that's just a drop in the bucket. And so it's a little bit stressing about man, what am I going to do and, you know, kind of felt really aloof with all this time that was left over. And someone on our campus was leaving one of the spots, so I know it was pretty what they called them, the affirmative action representative on a union board. And we talked to a couple of people and they said, I think Lisa would be really great for this being one of the few people of color on my campus. And so I was invited to be part of the executive board for Cal Poly's California Faculty Association. And I did that for I think it was a year maybe maybe it was only six months, but then got elected as the lecturer rep because I wasn't as satisfied being the affirmative action person. I felt a little bit. I felt a little bit excluded. I might be this might be a little bit too controversial to talk about, but as an Asian person, because most of the voices on that council are not Asian. And I really felt that there were other priorities. And so I decided to run for a spot as the chair or co-chair of the at that time, the API caucus. And I got that. So my union, we're really focused on being a lecturer rep and the Asian Pacific Islander Caucus leader. And I've really enjoyed doing that. And it took really all those skills that I had learned to debate and coaching and administrating a debate program and things like that really transferred well into the union. I mean, we are advocating for people's rights. We are advocating for our contracts. We're advocating for a more equitable working situation. And so I thought, wow, I don't know that I could have found a better way to integrate the two interests of my life from one stage to the other. And it was really a welcome switch. And so now I've been working with the union. I think. I think it was 2014 or 15 that I really started to get involved with our union and from the ground running, I have been very lucky that many of the people in our union, throughout the state have been very supportive of me and allowed me to get involved at some of the higher levels pretty quickly. You know, and in a lot of groups, you have to sort of pay your dues and wait a really long time until until you're elected to some of the leadership positions. And that didn't really happen for me. So I was I was very glad to have some of that responsibility fairly quickly and get into working with some really important goals in the unions.

00:19:01
NC: So. For you personally, how has the pandemic affected you?

00:19:09
LK: I've had two uncles die of COVID-19. And that was really what prompted me to start an Auntie Sewing Squad. I remember getting a call a couple years ago from my mom saying that her brother was being put on hospice. He had been sick for a while. He had what we thought was Alzheimer's. But I think it ended up being Parkinson's or something like that. And he was living in a convalescent retirement home where he and his wife had moved there when he was still

pretty well, and so they were in a retirement living community. And then they moved or he moved to assisted care. And she still lives in that retirement community. And when we got the call that he was on hospice, I was really worried because, you know, hospice is not a good thing. I mean, usually hospice means you have a few more weeks to live and then you're gonna be gone. So my mom and my uncle and my aunt made a trip to go out to get from California to Colorado, which is where they were. And I visited him. And when I saw him, I was shocked. I was like, oh, my God, he's going to live for at least another 10 years. He's so strong. And I guess apparently some of the definitions of Hoppes Hospice have been changed. So hospice just means that you're not going to get any any any better from really where you are. So they didn't expect him to recover from his disease. He was still going to be independent care, but he was pretty strong. He was eating well. He was not mobile. He had to be in a wheelchair and have help moving around. But he had he could talk a little bit. But I think you would forget about what it was he wanted to say. So he would sort of mumble at the end. And it was kind of hard to have a conversation with him. But with you know, I've dealt with a lot of people like that with memory issues and not Parkinson's, but Alzheimer's. And, you know, you just sort of have a conversation with them, even though they're not able to participate as much. And so I felt really good when we left. There are a few years ago feeling like, oh, he may not get any better from where he is, but he's doing OK, right. My grandmother lived in a similar state for 10 years in a convalescent home. So I thought, oh, Uncle Tom's going to be great. And then last year, people started to get sick. And this Kofod 19 came into our world and people started getting sick. And we were worried about people in convalescent homes, places where there were high concentrated groups of people that were living together. And, you know, we were watching some of those news reports until we got a call. And it was really late because I understand my cousins didn't really want to worry the rest of the family. But my uncle had his facility actually had been locked down for a really long time. They were one of the first facilities to be on lockdown. And we heard that my aunt was not able to go visit him anymore because they were trying to keep everyone isolated. And so even though she was in the same general facility, since she lived in a different section, they weren't living together in the assisted facility. She was not allowed to see him at all. And that went on for a couple of months. And then we found out that she had contracted COVID-19. And within maybe four or five days, he passed away from COVID. And so it was clear to me that someone who was working there since he had no visitors had brought the virus into his facility. Perhaps at that time we didn't really know how it was transmitted as easily as it is. I'm not sure what those precautions what precautions were taken in his section or what kind of testing was happening with the workers or whatever. But I know no one was able to see him except for people who work there. And I am not saying that the facility was negligent because I do think that they tried their best. But at the beginning, there wasn't a whole lot of information flowing when he passed away it was really hard on our family because it was it was our connection. You know, it's just like anything else bad that happens. Like you don't really think about it that much until it happens to you. Right. Cancer is bad. Until you get breast cancer or your father dies of lung cancer or your mother dies of pancreatic cancer or something like that.

Right. It becomes more real to you. And that's what happened to us. And I think this was back in March of 2000 that my uncle passed away. And I had seen that some of my union colleagues, one from Sacramento State Hellen Lee and one from San Francisco State Vallerie Soe had been sewing masks for this Auntie Sewing Squad. I didn't really know what it was, but they're like, hey, you know, come rage sew with us and make masks for people who need them. And I thought, wow, what a great idea. But I really want to send them all over. I mean, there are people in my community who need them and my family members who need them. So I'm just going to. So not a great Soest. My grandmother taught me how to sew forty five years ago. But ever. I don't know anything that is curved. It has to be straight. And that's it. I can do anything other than straight lines. And so I looked on the Internet for a pattern that was just going to be rectangle and not take a whole lot of work or talent to do. And I found a pleated mask and I started making those for family and friends because, you know, my uncle died and I wanted, you know, at that time we weren't able to get PPE. We were able to get masks. We weren't able to get gloves. We weren't able to get alcohol to make hand sanitizers, much less hand sanitizers or disinfectant wipes. And so I thought, well, this is something that I can do for people that I know or people that need it. And so I started making masks. And once I sort of fulfilled most of my family and friends, I started making masks for anti sewing squad because it seemed like a really small thing that I could do to have a little bit of control where what was going on in my life. And it was hard because there wasn't a lot of time, but it seemed like a lot of people needed masks because kids have one mask. You have to have at least one mask per day. Or if you're out, you know, and you come home, you should change your mask, which you think a lot of people don't want to either spend the money to get masks or they don't want to waste masks. But really, you're just spreading more disease. Right. So, you know, I was making my family, you know, seven or eight different masks because, you know, you need at least that many unless everybody's washing everyday, which I don't think that they are. But there was a lot of panic for me. About, you know, having a little one at home, an eight year old at the time. And how do we keep him safe? You know, he's our only kid. And I know every child is precious. That's not what I'm saying. But when you only have one, it's kind of like you have to be I mean, you you are a little bit more watchful about what happens and and you know, his safety and what's going on with him, and so I was really nervous. We really, I left the house more than anybody else, which probably isn't the best thing because I'm diabetic. I do have other health concerns that make me higher risk than most people. But my partner was working all day. My my son is young and I didn't want him out contracting this virus. So I did most of the grocery shopping and whatever it also was that we needed. In addition to being a third grade teacher and a stay at home parent and teaching college and all these other kinds of things. And I would stay up late to make these masks because I really felt like it was a need that needed to be filled. So.

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NC: So. How has your journey as a part of the Auntie Sewing Squad been like?

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LK: It's been really great to meet other women, other men, other Asians, and, you know, that's not just Asian women. As it started. But to meet other people who are like minded in the importance of wearing protective gear. People who are making time in their lives to do things for others, which, you know, even as a debate coach, I think that was really one of my primary goals to teach my students was not about how to be a great debater, but how to advocate for others where others cannot. How can you help this world with your advocacy skills? And it's kind of the same thing with the anti sowing squad is that we're all there to make the world a better place and getting rid a lot of the negative energy that you heard from the White House or extreme groups who were saying that COVID 19 is a myth. Well, tell that to my family, who's lost two people to COVID, you know. Tell that to any family who has sat next to somebody who's on a ventilator because of this disease so much somebody to anybody, you know, who has lost a family member or who's who's even had to go through surviving this disease. You know, it it it it's really infuriating and offensive to have someone say, oh, it's not a big deal. And to come to a space where you don't hear that from people that we know, it's a big deal. We know that every small. Work helps. Right. I think my first pledge was ten masks. And I felt like, man, people are pledging 50, 60, 100. And I'm only doing 10. And I felt like that just wasn't enough. But nobody said anything. And even though my very limited sewing skills, I was afraid to try a new pattern like everyone was doing the Uncle Van masks. And I was like, yeah, I don't think I can do that. I think that's outside of my comfort zone. And, you know, I think it was Kristina Wong that said, we don't care. Well, there's a mask for everybody. If you make a mask, we'll find someone who wants it. And, you know, my 10 little masks turned into, you know, 20 masks turn into 30 masks that turned into 50 masks. I don't think I pledged over 50 because I know I can't get on in time. But, you know, it's been rewarding to know that whatever it is, even if it was one or two, it would be welcomed. And that I'm working with a bunch of people whom I've never met before. But I know feel very similarly to me and that it's a safe place to come and just congregate with others that are very much like me. And so I've really loved that journey. And I just I look at my colleagues at other you know, Hellen and Valerie and I. How do you sew so much? There's no way I could sew that much. And I think that that's been a real inspiration to me. People that I know that are doing the same job that I'm doing, you know, raising kids are doing other things. Also dealing with their own health problems and and seeing them do this work is really just an inspiration for me to keep going.

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NC: So. I know you had talked a little bit about how you learned to sew the...can you explain a little bit more. Did you kind of, when you learned to sew were you active throughout the years, sewing or...?

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LK: I learned a lot of stuff from my grandmother. She was very, very like if I had given a word to the number one homemaker, it would be my grandmother. No offense to my mom, but my grandmother was so talented in many ways. I mean, she was a great cook. She was a great baker. She was a great crafter and a craft. She did Japanese embroidery, which she taught me how to do. Well, she taught me how to do everything. But Japanese embroidery called Bunka Shishu. We used to take classes when I was young. She taught me how to knit and crochet. So she didn't really do needlepoint. We did the Japanese needlepoint. And I remember she used to make clothes for me. And, you know, as a kind of ungrateful teenager, I didn't like them even though they were awesome. And I wish I would have spent more time with her doing some of that stuff. Like it was really kind of interesting, because when my grandmother was dying, I told you she was in a convalescent home for a really long time. And when she was finally starting to make that transition to go into the next world, you know, we were there every day. My aunt would come out on the weekends and we would just sit there around her bed myself, my sister, my mother, my mom's sister, my auntie. And we would sit around her bed. And so she really couldn't communicate. I mean, she's really out of it. I tried to grade papers, but you can't grade papers when somebody is dying in front of you. You just can't focus enough. So we would all bring knitting or crocheting because each of us did something different. And we would all sit around her round her bed just knitting and crocheting. I remember one time she was lucid and she woke up. She opened her eyes and she looked at all four of us. She got this really big grin on her face. And it was as if she said to us, look, I did that. You're doing that because of me. And that's how I kind of think about a lot of the things that she taught me was, you know, when I was growing up, my best friend was my was my grandma. I really liked being with my grandma because she let me do stuff. My mom always is like, you're going to make too much of a mess. You're going to make a mistake. My grandma is like, whatever. And, you know, she would just let me help all the time. She would let me do things that my mom wouldn't let me do. She taught me things that my mom didn't know or, you know, didn't have time to teach me. And so sewing was one of those things that was a little bit harder because you needed a sewing machine. I mean, she did teach me how to hand sew, but there's only so much you can do with that and it's really hard for small fingers to really push a needle through thread. I mean, through materials sometimes, especially if it's doubled up or whatever. So I didn't get as many sewing lessons as I would have liked. And also going through that stage where she was making me clothes and I didn't really appreciate them, it was like that was sort of an expression of something that I didn't like. So I wasn't really into it as much. But I did. She did teach me a lot of the basics. I learned how to cut out patterns. Well, I don't know that I know how to use them now, but, you know, I learned how to deal and also that kind of stuff. And I remember in seventh grade, we I'm old enough that they still offered a home economics. And so I took a home economics class in the seventh grade. And again, we learned to sew with a sewing machine. That's really all my, you know, experiences. And then when I moved to San Luis Obispo, I couldn't afford new furniture. So I bought a lot of old furniture. I had a lot of old furniture from being a college student. So I started to recover my couches because I'm like, oh, I won't be too bad. They're, rectangle, you

know, cushions. So I'll just, you know, it's just rectangles. It's straight, really. Naturally, those can't. Okay. Because you came out okay. It was just straight rectangle sewing. Then I got overambitious. Then I tried to recover a chair. And that did not go up at all. One of them is still like partially covered in my living room with a slip cover over it.And you can't see the wrist. But, you know, every so often I pull out some sort of sewing projects that I wanted to do. And, of course, it was always something simple because I realized that I could not do anything other than straight lines. And, you know, a friend and I started when I was just had a kid or no. I guess it was because she had a kid. We started making, you know, what they call hooter hiders where your nursing blankets that, you know, have a tie in the back and then it's just a blanket that covers you while you're nursing your baby. And we thought, oh, we could do this. And I'm like, Laurren, I cannot sew anything that is not a rectangle And she was not that experienced either. But there were just rectangles and that we just had some other rectangles for the ties in the back. So it was pretty, pretty simple. But that's really all my sewing experience. I have not made any clothing. I have not made anything other than stuff that really needs to be straight to. My son probably has made more things than I have them because he actually learned how so in preschool, they had a sewing machine there and you know, he's really great at threading machine. And so in his little projects. But, you know, they look like little kid things, but he's way more adventurous than I am.

00:37:25
NC: With the pandemic being currently used as a political topic, do you consider the work that you do as a form of activism, as a kind of response to...?

00:37:37
LK: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. You know, one of the other things that I've been doing, I mean, probably being a union activist gives you a clue that I am an activist, not just for the union, but if you see the cranes behind me those were some of the cranes that we folded for a group called Tsuru for Solidarity. And there are a group of Japanese Americans started this group to protest and support the illegal detention of families at the border and the illegal separation of families at the border. And, you know, part of that is because of our incarceration during World War Two and that many people didn't stand up for us when it happened. And Japanese Americans were some of the first people to protest these separations and detentions at the border. And that that movement has really grown a lot to other groups. And, you know, there are people who are in the Auntie Sewing Squad who also are in Tsuru for Solidarity. And I think when you're an activist, it it tends to bleed over into other areas. Like what other ways? What other of my identities are really, you know, can I explore using this this idea of social justice and working for more equity in the world? Or not even equity, but, you know, basic human rights for people. And so, you know, making these masks for folks I often have for as outspoken as I am, I'm still a little shy about walking around with a handful of masks in my pocket and saying, like, here's a mask. Why don't you wear it, you know, or telling people how to wear their masks

correctly. You know, those people who wear their masks under their nose or whatnot. And because I have a personal attachment to COVID, you know, with family members dying and, you know, my work with Auntie Sewing Squad, you know, those things are really important in it. And it is a political statement, but it's also something about our physical safety. Right. I've done what I can to keep my family at home and not take them out and not take them into exposed areas. But there's part of me and how violent some people have been that I've been a little bit more hesitant to say something to people about their behavior, because I don't want someone to shoot me. Because if they shoot me, then who's gonna go do the shopping for my family? Right. I'm kidding. But you know what I mean. I think that there's a sense of violence that comes with this from folks on the other side. You know, I teach communication. And one of the things that we don't teach in schools is how to communicate about diverse opinions. How to communicate? Hard topics, right? You're always told don't talk about politics and don't talk about religion. Why is that? Why can't we teach people how to talk respectfully? About these topics. You know, why do we have to worry about getting shot? And so what it is, what I do. Yeah. It is activism. It is, you know, a political statement. It is social justice. I just haven't figured out how to do that without getting myself killed or putting myself in danger. You know, a friend of mine, very good friend of mine. Lisa Boyer asked me to make 20 masks and she paid me for them, I'm like, no, you don't have to pay me for that. But she goes out and she hands them out to people and says, hey, wear a mask. You know, she's a lot braver than I. And that sounds like I'll make all the masks you want, but I don't know that I'm ready to force people to wear them. You know, I, I advocate on my own social media page, you know, on my Facebook page, wear a mask or if it's car seat safety, I do that there, too. I don't go around telling my friends, like, well, you know, your kid's really unsafe until four. You should keep them rear facing until at least age four because people are going to make their own decisions. And, you know, it's not. It's not my kid or whatever. Not that I don't care about them. But, you know, every parent has to make their own decisions. Every person has to make their own decisions. And I know that from the person that I used to be, I used to be one of those people who would run their mouth often. I don't really think about my own safety or or whatnot. And I would say exactly what I thought. And I still say exactly what I think. But I'm a little bit. I hold back a little bit more, even though my friends and family would say that that's not true. Until I can figure out a more productive way for someone to hear it. But I do think that this is, you know, working in terms of social justice and, you know, basic human safety, physical safety.

00:42:31
NC: And in your opinion, what do you think the government can be doing better in response to the pandemic and the public needs?

00:42:45
LK: I think the first thing is, and it wasn't something the government did, but that this country elected a different leader. I think that was the first step, because when you have somebody in the

president of the United States seat who thinks that it is just a hoax or that wearing masks is weak or that taking precautions to save lives is weak. I don't think that that's helpful. I think that it's been hard for the Biden campaign or the Biden, you know, Biden's administration to get started as quickly as they could because of Trump's non refusal to transfer power easily and peacefully. But I do appreciate that this has been said as a priority for the Biden Harris administration. I think that will do a lot, it may, it may be difficult because we've had already so long of someone saying that it's not true and people who want to believe that believe it. And so they may be unwilling to take the necessary health precautions that need to happen before we can. You know, stop transmission and stop people from dying from this. In general, I would hope that people would do the right thing. But it's really clear to me that people lack the critical thinking to know what the right thing is. And so in some cases, I do think it's necessary to have these mandates, but there needs to be some follow through, like what's going to happen if I don't? Because clearly, the fact that your family and friends can die is not enough of a consequence for some people. You know, I wish I hope I can find the strength to say to people, put your mask on. Right. Wear a mask. In a way that people can hear it. But I do think that there needs to be stricter. And I'm not a huge, like, huge government, you know, control kind of person. But because we have so many people who are uneducated and lack critical thinking skills and lack or think that there is a belief in science that science is not true. But there needs to be some other figure of authority that's going to come in and make people do the right thing.

00:45:21
NC: Is there anything we can talk about that you would like to add on or say something about?

00:45:29
LK: Well. I don't think so. I'm really proud of you all for doing this project. You know, from what I've read of the history of the Auntie Sewing Squad, it started as a very small group of people. And now it's grown to thousands of members. And we've made I don't know, hundreds of thousands of masks and help people all across this nation. And it's great to see it being recognized and documented somewhere. So I really want to thank you for your work. And I hope that you come out with something that you're proud of. And if you ever want to make a performance out of it, I know Kristina Wong is a performance artist. Well, more than me. But, you know, let's talk about that. And we can, you know, put together a performance of a two, if that's something that you are interested in.