

5-10-2021

Interview with Jo Pessin

Jo Pessin

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/auntiesewing_interviews

This Interview is brought to you for free and open access by the Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Auntie Sewing Squad Interviews by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

Interviewee: Jo Pessin

Interviewers: Jacob Goller and Kaye-Celine Celestino

Date: May 10, 2021

Location: Zoom

Collection: Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 322: Asian American Women's History, Spring 2021

Length: 36:26

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Jo Pessin is a Filipina American who was born in Seattle, Washington. The youngest of four, her father migrated to the United States after joining the Navy and shortly after, her family moved to Oxnard, California, where she spent most of her life. She currently serves as the LA chapter lead of For Goodness Cakes, a non-profit organization that bakes birthday cakes for underprivileged youth and young adults. After the COVID-19 pandemic began, Pessin contributed to the supply van to Navajo Nation and joined the Auntie Sewing Squad. Shortly after, Pessin received a cancer diagnosis and found support in her community of Aunties. Today, Pessin still continues to make masks and provides support for the Auntie Sewing Squad.

Thematic Outline: (0:00) Jo Pessin talks about where she grew up in Oxnard CA. (3:38) Pessin goes on to discuss how she was not taught Asian American history and culture during her childhood education and recalls how she introduced these important topics into her children's school. (6:10) Adding onto the subject of Asian American history, Pessin defines activism as having a voice and speaking out against the stereotype of not making waves. (9:00) When discussing the recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Pessin mentions how the lack of support for several affected communities inspired her to join the Auntie Sewing Squad. (10:19) Pessin regards the Auntie Sewing Squad as a second family and looks warmly on how they provided support to her. (17:45) Pessin also recalls how she had learned to sew from her mother. (20:33) Next, Pessin discusses the other kinds of support and services offered by the Auntie Sewing Squad. (23:13) For example, Pessin talks about how the Squad has helped combat recent hate crimes against Asian-Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. (26:29) When the question of mentors is brought up, Pessin acknowledges Kristina Wong as her inspiration. (28:23) Going back to the discussion of family, Pessin mentions that she inspired her family to act outside of traditional roles. (31:27) Pessin then concludes the interview by including information on how to support the Auntie Sewing Squad and why it's mission is important.

Transcript

Jacob Goller (G): 0:07

OK, this is the Auntie Sewing Squad Oral history interview being conducted for SBS 322: Asian American Women's History. We are here interviewing Jo Pessin with Jacob Goller, myself, and Kaye-Celine Celestino. How are you doing today, Jo?

Jo Pessin (P): 0:18

I'm great. How are you guys?

G: 0:26

Pretty good, finals coming up, though, so. Well, anxious right now, but we're glad to be doing this interview today.

P: 0:31

Good luck. I'm sure you've got it all prepared, right? You're all ready?

G: 0:41

Yep. Here's hoping. Got all my fingers crossed right now.

Kaye-Celine Celestino (C): 0:47

Yeah, doing pretty well too kind of stressed about finals as well. But we got this.

P: 0:55

Good. I'm sure you do.

G: 1:01

Oh, one more thing. Just for the bookkeeping, this interview is being conducted on Monday, May 10th, 2021. Time is currently 2:06 PM and this is being recorded over Zoom. All right. And being overseen by Dr. Chrissy Lau. So, Kaye, if you would like to get us started with the first question for the interview.

C: 1:33

All right. So, Jo, how would you describe your relationships growing up with family and close friends?

P: 1:42

Well, I was born in Seattle, Washington, but my dad came to the states through the Navy. And so we grew up down in Southern California, in Oxnard. It was a community filled with a lot of Filipinos and a big Hispanic community. We had a lot of friends and not so much family nearby. But we had good relationships. I was the youngest of four, so I was the baby. And there

was about an eight year difference between my oldest sister. So we weren't really close in age, but we were pretty close. Our family was close.

G: 2:43

Okay, so, for the next question, kind of talking about where you grew up, like how would you say your school experience was growing up? You said you had a tight community with your family and friends. Did that translate into your school life?

P: 2:56

Yes, I would say that because there was such a cultural similarity, I would say, and like in my high school and my middle school, we had a lot in common. So I think that the community was pretty close. And I had a lot of friends in high school.

G: 3:29

OK, and talking about school and mainly primary [and] secondary education, like elementary school, middle school, high school, were you, do you remember there being a focus on Asian American history and any of your coursework?

P: 3:48

No. No. I don't. And I really think that there should be. It's so important to learn about cultures in general. And that's why I actually brought it to my children's school. I know this is not about me personally, but because I didn't have that growing up in school, I brought it to my children's schools here in the valley. And we did a whole cultural committee. And we taught about the families. Families would come and speak to the kids about their cultures. We brought in food and dancing and in all aspects, and we even had like cultural sister schools around the world so that they could learn about cultures. So I wish I would have had that growing up.

G: 4:47

Yeah, I agree with that statement and it kind of in my schools like this course that we're enrolled in and currently right now, this was kind of the first time a lot of us had really learned about Asian American history in a classroom setting because we haven't really discussed it in our lower education. So I agree that it's important to discuss.

P: 5:11

Yeah, definitely. And, and there were things even when I was doing research for my kids, things that I didn't know because I was born here and my parents were trying to assimilate with American culture. And so I didn't learn Tagalog. I'm Filipino and I didn't learn Tagalog. I didn't, you know, have some of the traditions that I think my siblings had because they were born out of the United States. So I kind of had to even learn that for myself and try to bring it to my kids as well.

C: 5:53

That's really good to hear. And, you know, one of our essay prompts actually in our class was defining what Asian American women's activism is. We were just wondering, how would you describe it?

P: 6:10

So I have to say, growing up, I always felt that the culture that I grew up in was for the women to be meek, to be quiet, to not make waves, to just turn the other way and not be loud and not speak up, but just go with the flow. And I feel that in [the] Asian American community, especially for women, I think for me I would feel [activism is] like being able to have a voice. It means being able to say when something isn't OK and to get support with that. Yeah, definitely. And my mom had a mental illness growing up my whole life. And so, you know, saving face and being able to just talk about her situation wasn't something that happened. We always kept it quiet. And I wish that there was a place for that where we could be honest about it and we could not be so ashamed about it and be able to get help and feel comfortable in situations. And so I think that for activism, I think it's for everybody, for every different people, different cultures and different personalities. I just think that it's so important to have a voice and to be proud of who you are.

C: 7:56

We definitely agree with that.

G: 8:03

So to kind of follow up on that, you mentioned that at the start of the response, that the part of activism is to kind of push aside the stereotype of like being quiet, not making waves? So you...?

P: 8:18

Yes.

G: 8:20

OK.

P: 8:21

Definitely, definitely, yeah.

G: 8:31

Ok, so kind of talking about more recent events, the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically affected the lives, kind of everyday life as we know, it's like from our educational systems to the workplace. How would you feel that the US government at the time, how do you feel that they handled the pandemic as a whole?

P: 9:00

Well, there are so many communities that weren't supported and didn't have the right resources, whether it was masks or PPE or the food supplies, I mean, just so many different areas that didn't get that support, and so that's why I actually wanted to join the Auntie Sewing Squad, is because I felt like I couldn't just stand by and not do anything when I knew that there were so many communities that didn't even have simple masks to wear during COVID that they couldn't even protect themselves. It just broke my heart and more so made me angry. I know that, you know, this was a very new thing and a very unique situation where, you know, everybody was learning as we went. But I just felt like too many people died unnecessarily and didn't have the support that they needed.

C: 10:07

And then following up with that question, would you tell us your experience of joining the Auntie Sewing Squad?

P: 10:19

And so I joined the Auntie Sewing Squad and immediately it felt so comfortable and, really like the true meaning of what "Auntie" is like "Auntie" growing up. Like I said, I didn't have a lot of family growing up nearby and also socially because of my mom's situation. And so, I think this group kind of fulfilled that for me, it really, okay, I'm going to cry. I'm sorry.

C: 11:01

No worries.

P: 11:03

It really fulfilled that for me. And I was going through some personal health issues. And I got a cancer diagnosis just after I joined the group. And because of my mom's situation, I did not share my diagnosis with her, but I shared it in the Auntie Sewing Squad. And I felt like that filled that little gap for me. Looking and seeing the elders in the group, as well as my peers, and they were just so, so supportive. I remember during one of my first surgeries, I had mentioned to you, well, one of the Aunties reached out because I had posted about it. I needed some support and wanted some positive vibes. On the day I was getting my news and she immediately texted me: "What do you need? I could have 12 Aunties outside of your hospital window right out there cheering for you. What do you need?" And she was in Florida and I had never met her. I'd never talked to her. And yet that was the love and support that I was getting from the group. It was unbelievable. And it still is. And I can't wait to be able to try to meet some of these people in person because they're just angels. And I think that also they, we're very similar as far as the energy to help. It's like when I think about who would sew hours on end in their home, sheltered and choose to do that over anything else to be able to help other strangers in the world. It's like my people. And so I feel really fortunate and I'm so happy that Kristina created this group of beautiful Aunties and

Uncles who just have hearts of gold and their hearts are always wide open and they don't hesitate to just give what they have. And so I just feel really blessed to be part of it. And I know that you won't want to be making masks much longer, but I don't want it to end. So I hope that we maybe sew something else after this.

C: 14:00

Oh, that's very sweet. It actually made me tear up a little bit. So given, like, the experiences you had with this, with the Auntie Sewing Squad, what do they mean to you?

P: 14:15

What do the Aunties mean to me?

C: 14:16

Yes.

P: 14:20

They mean like real connection, you know, during a time when we were sheltered and isolated, you know, in our homes, fearful of COVID. They meant connection, they meant love. And, you know, a time when I felt helpless in the whole world, it's like they gave me purpose. They gave me purpose in the world at that moment. It was a way to stay in positive energy every day and to put that out into the universe. And that's what we need. I strongly believe in energy. I believe that we're all connected. No matter where we are. And that's the energy that the Aunties and Uncles transcended, whether it was just thinking about them, whether it was Facebook and connecting with them, whether it was getting a package in the mail or sending a package to them. It was energy that was passed back and forth throughout all the states. And I did, I like to make things with my hands. And so I made a lot of handmade clay bowls that were in the shape of a heart. And every time I made one, I was thinking about who is going to have it. And maybe they would hold something very dear to them in it. Maybe that they would see it throughout their day and maybe they would feel the love that I was sending to them because I really felt the love that they were sending to me.

G: 16:20

So would you say that the Auntie Sewing Squad is kind of, in a way, like a second family for you and all the other people that are a part of it?

P: 16:28

Absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, it became such a comfortable, comfortable part of my day. I think I was calling and typing Auntie and Uncle to everybody who I was writing to and they weren't even Aunties and Uncles.

G: 16:46

Kind of like second nature?

P: 16:48

Yes. It became second nature. And, and as I mentioned before, not having that, you know, true community. Early on, I did have friends and we called, you know, their parents, aunties and uncles, even though they weren't blood relatives. That's how I feel. Almost like I want to have now. But I can't have that with everybody. But I can have it here in this group, which is a wonderful thing.

G: 17:22

So one more quick question about your current involvement with the Auntie Sewing Squad. You said that you like to make things with your hands so did you have any prior experience like sewing or crafting before joining the Auntie Sewing Squad or did you kind of protect your craft while you were a part of it?

P: 17:45

My mom had always made things. She crocheted and she sewed so she taught me how to sew when I was really, really young. And then I was sewing in high school. And then I would use the sewing machine, you know, throughout my adult life, but not as regularly as I am now. And another story, one of the Aunties had shown that she was interested in vintage Singer machines, sewing machines. And once again, you know, everything seems to connect to me. I'm very, I feel a lot of things. And when I saw that machine, I thought of my mom's sewing machine and she had brought it from the Philippines. But at one point it wasn't working. And so my dad traded it in. And I know that she probably would have rather kept it. But he thought he was doing a good thing by giving her a brand new machine. And so I got a new vintage machine through one of the Aunties and I was sewing on it. And the second that I heard it, it really brought me back to as a child hearing my mom's sewing machine. So I have one that I got during COVID and I'm getting it cleaned up and I'm going to surprise my mom and show her the machine. And I know it's going to bring a smile to her face because it's going to remind her of the machine she had decades ago.

G: 19:27

I'm sure she'll love that.

P: 19:28

I'm excited. I think she's going to really like it.

G: 19:38

Okay. So you said that in the start, like the Auntie Sewing Squad kind of began and during when the whole shelter in place was going on last year. And a lot of people know that a big part of the Auntie Sewing Squad is that they make masks. What are some of the other activities that they do in the Auntie Sewing Squad?

P: 20:18

You mean, what did they make to give out? Or what are some of the activities that the Aunties do together?

G: 20:29

It can be either or.

P: 20:33

Well, I know that some of the Auntie's have sewn fleece hats and scarves. Some have made mittens for colder areas that needed protection. I think I saw some that were also making some PPE. And amongst the Aunties, there was a lot of Auntie Care, which I think I'd mention that everybody is so talented and crafty and they make different things and they share with each other. I know that they've offered different stress relief, like, you know, Zoom yoga and, you know, different things like that. And I know that L.A. has had, like, a meet up. I haven't been able to get to one because I've been super sheltered down but now that I'm vaccinated, I'm hoping to be able to do that. You know, and it's nice to be able to see everybody in person. So there's, like, a lot of support and a lot of creativity, and I think one of the wonderful things is that openness to share and to teach. If somebody sees something that they're doing and they say, "Oh, you know, is there a pattern for that?" And so the pattern gets posted and then other people can learn how to make it. That just happened to me recently when someone had posted fleece hats and I had been wanting to make fleece hats. And so I've been looking at the pattern and it looks really like a great one and really easy. And so I'm going to start doing that. So it's a very supportive environment and everybody loves to cheer everybody on when they post their masks or their items in the Facebook group.

G: 22:35

Yeah, that sounds nice, it sounds to me like that the whole idea behind the purpose of the Auntie Sewing Squad is support and energy, from what I gather.

P: 22:52

Yes. Yes. Absolutely.

C: 22:02

So another question for you is, how do you feel about the hate crimes towards Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic?

P: 23:13

Oh, that is just so...it angers me so much. It saddens me, it angers me. It's actually brought up some actual memories that I don't think I had ever spoken about. My dad passed away about four years, three and half years ago, and we were very close and I remembered a memory that I had of my dad being, like, harassed when he was running. He used to run and he was running and there were these teenage Caucasian boys who were taunting him. He was running and they ran bicycles and they were hitting his hat off his head and doing really awful things. And when that memory came back, when all of these hate crimes were happening, it just broke my heart because I wish that as that young girl, I would have had that loud voice to be able to say something and protect him. I know that he did not pursue any kind of, you know, I don't think that he reached out to try to find out who those people were or anything. He probably just came home and just said, oh, you know, just never mind, you know. Like don't even worry about it. And it just makes me so angry because I think about that and I think I mentioned that about being meek and not having a say. Sometimes I see where others fight back and I'm so happy. Some in the community are getting funds and raising money. I think there was something back east that I saw where she was raising money for Uber fees and trying to help elderly to be able to travel safely. And that makes me happy because people are getting involved and supporting each other. And I think the more that we are vocal about it and putting ourselves out there, and I made some anti-Asian hate crime masks, and I've been wearing that, and I think that every little bit helps. Even just talking about it and seeing the support from friends, I think it's all good.

G: 25:56

Absolutely. And going back to the topic of Asian American activism. Did you have any, like mentors or influencers of activism growing up or do you currently have any today?

P: 26:18

You know, I don't think I had any growing up. You mean in the Asian community?

G: 26:25

It can be.

P: 26:29

Well, right now, Kristina Wong is my idol. I am just in awe of everything that she does. And I love her humor. I love how she's making such a difference. And I'm so grateful that she's brought us all together. And it all started with, for me, it all started by making a donation to the Navajo Nations to support their communities. And then I found out about the masks. So I learned about the masks secondly, but it was through a post that Kristina was doing in bringing a van of supplies. And that's how I learned about the work that she does and I'm just so excited that I

know her, that I've worked with her, and hopefully one day I'll be able to meet her in person. But I know I will.

G: 27:26

Yes, Dr. Lau actually showed us a short video during one of our lectures recently on Kristina Wong and when I saw it, I'm like she should run for president someday, I think.

P: 27:38

Absolutely. And I think she holds a position in Koreatown, right? I think in the L.A. area. A political position. So she's on her way. Maybe one day.

G: 27:53

I may have to look that up. I'm not too sure off the top of my head. The thing is, like a 90 second video maybe.

P: 28:01

That's cool. That's great.

C: 28:10

And then growing up with your family, were there any traditional roles for women within your culture? And do you feel as if you followed those traditional roles?

P: 28:23

I think growing up, I remember my mom, when she could, you know, keep connections with family. It stopped at some point, she couldn't. But early, early on, I do remember that cooking was clearly a tradition and spending time with the family, so I think that I do those things. I have in my own family. Definitely with the social and, you know, keeping those connections with family that I can. Yeah, definitely.

G: 19:17

So a family connection is a big role. You would say?

P: 29:23

Yes. Yes. And I think family as in blood. But also I have a lot of family that are close friends that have supported me on my journey and my family that are like the Auntie Sewing Squad, like family, but not blood family. And blood relatives. And I think they are just as important and just as valuable as the blood relations.

G: 30:01

Okay and so to add on to that, would you, would you have considered your family to be on the more traditional side growing up or did they try to embrace modern values?

P: 30:19

I think that my family tried to stay traditional and I probably pushed those boundaries. I was the only child, as I said, that was born in the States. I was super active and out there and I did all the things that I was supposed to do. I, you know, did well in school and was involved in all of that. But I think of all of the kids, I was the one who probably pushed, you know, that line and made them bend a little bit. But my dad and mom were really supportive. So they kind of bended with me.

G: 31:10

OK. And one more question, going back to the Auntie Sewing Squad, is there any way to get involved with it, like either to sign up or support the Auntie Sewing Squad?

P: 31:27

As a newcomer, you mean? Like or is there something that I could sign up for anybody? I mean, I think that once we had gotten some publicity and we were in the *L.A. Times* and I think there are a lot of people who found the Facebook page that they could join. You can always make a donation for supplies and postage and to support the cause and everything that we're doing. So, yes, definitely support. Also, like, if there's organizations or communities that need help. I think that's also a way to support the group is to make us aware of the groups. I had just done my first ask for the group. I had never led one. And I ended up doing one for Valley Breast Care in Van Nuys, California, the day that I got the news that I was cancer free. I found an organization that my girlfriend worked at and they give the services and treatments for cancer to low income Hispanic communities. And a lot of the community that goes there has little to no insurance. And so I had put it out there to the group. Within an hour, I had pledges for seven hundred and fifty masks and I was able to deliver them recently. And all of the women and men that receive them were so grateful they wanted me to take pictures of them and show that the Aunties and the group, how much they love them and how grateful they were. And so I know that the Aunties were also very happy to see it, too, because they were able to see their masks on their faces protecting them. And so it was a really great experience for me too.

G: 33:37

That sounds amazing, yeah. That just sounds very amazing right there.

P: 33:46

Yeah, it was, it was a pretty powerful experience. I literally cried when I was there, when I visited because they invited me to see the tour of the facilities and meet the doctors and all the staff. And then I passed out masks in the chemo lounge to the women and men who were getting

their chemo treatment. And they put the masks right on and wanted their photo taken. And they said, "Please tell the Aunties how much we love them." And they were just in awe that there would be people like us who would make them and not charge any money for them and really help them. And they were so grateful. What they do is incredible to help that community, because personally, you know, I'm grateful for the treatment that I received. I'm fortunate that I have insurance and that I have the funds to be able to pay for my treatment. But these people don't have it. And so their mission in that office is to prevent death from, you know, breast cancer and to give treatment to people no matter what their means are. And I think that is a super beautiful thing. So together, the Auntie Sewing Squad and that group together for me, it just was like an incredible amount of love and compassion.

G: 35:20

OK, so that actually wraps up the questions that we had. I'm gonna end the recording soon. Jo, thank you very much for joining us today and sharing your story, you're amazing and I wish the rest of your Auntie Sewing Squad experiences go well.

P: 35:43

Thank you so much. Thank you so much for including me. I think what you're doing is really important and valuable, and I'm just so grateful to be part of it.

C: 35:55

Thank you so much, Jo. It was really really heartwarming for you to share your story with us.

P: 36:00

It was important to me, and I'm grateful that I was able to share with you.

G: 36:10

Okay, with that being said, I'm going to stop the recording and end the meeting. Thank you all for coming today.

P: 36:20

Thank you

C: 36:21

Thank you so much.

P: 36:22

Thank you.