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Interview with Arianne Riley

Arianne Riley

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Interviewee: Arianne Riley

Interviewers: Valerie Crane, Mathew Trejo

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Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Arianne Riley, an African American activist, became a member of the Auntie Sewing Squad eight months into the pandemic. To help supply facemasks to disenfranchised communities, Riley, alongside many other Aunties, helped sew and donate masks across the U.S. She has been a part of many organizations prior to joining the Auntie Sewing Squad. She attended UC Davis and has continued to make PPE after the Auntie Sewing Squad's retirement.

Summary: (00:00:00) Arianne Riley defines activism and how she became an activist.

(00:04:43) Riley discusses her experiences in three organizations prior to joining the Auntie Sewing Squad, including the Black Student Union, the Education Opportunity Program, and the African Black Coalition Conference. (00:09:52) Riley discusses what set the Auntie Sewing Squad apart from other online mask-making groups: their approach to labor and Auntie care.

(14:40) She describes a few challenges she experienced in the Squad, including being one of the few Black people in the sewing squad and her own personal productivity in making masks.

(00:20:13) Riley gives suggestions on how people can serve their communities. (00:26:52). Riley discusses how COVID-19 has made her pay closer attention to her body, health, and family.

Oral History Transcript

0:00

Valerie Crane (VC): Okay, so I have begun recording. So we're going to start off this little interview. My name is Valerie Crane and accompanying with me is Matthew Trejo, and today we are doing one of our Auntie Sewing Squad oral histories with Arianne Riley. And we have a few questions set up for you today, so let's get started. So our first question that we have for you today is how did you learn about the Auntie Sewing Squad?

0:35

Arianne Riley (AR): Yeah, so I learned about the Auntie Sewing Squad from someone who is in the group and who is also in higher education. So we both met via a video, a Zoom video because she was hosting a workshop on how to make cloth masks. So I figured "Ok, sure." So she posted it on her Facebook group like I said that we're both in, and that was kind of how that happened. She told me about the group and I said "All right, let me go ahead and see what this is about." And that was that.

1:14

VC: Oh, ok. I unmuted myself. Ok, so for our next question: what does activism mean to you? And how has the Auntie Sewing Squad allowed you to serve the community?

1:26

AR: Yeah, good question. So activism to me, or at least in how I live that out is finding ways to support communities that are typically underserved, usually unintentionally or intentionally underserved and finding ways to essentially improve their quality of life and not feel as though we are less than. Or feel as though we are not a priority I guess I should say. And the way that the Auntie Sewing Squad allowed me to do that was that the masks that we made, a lot of them were going to groups of people who were either lower on the list or who would be receiving PPE, or maybe who weren't even on the list to receive PPE. And it was because of the group that, in addition to doing masks donations for them, I also did my own little local mask donations here and there. So it helps both with my own production, so I was able to streamline my production line to get more done, but it allowed me to help people not just in my community, but people across the United States, which was pretty awesome.

3:02

VC: And bleeding on into like your activism and your experience, what was your first experience in activism? And do you consider yourself to be an activist?

3:13

AR: Well, my first experience— oh my gosh, I would say my first conscious maybe decision to get into activism was when I was in college. I was in the Black Student Union (BSU). I went to UC Davis for my undergrad and I joined BSU, I mean I technically joined my freshman year, but I was part of the executive board starting my sophomore year. So that was when a lot of my activism really became more conscious, I guess, and more intentional rather than like a one off like here and there, random thing. Do I consider myself to be an activist? Yes, I would consider myself to be an activist. I don't think an activist looks or behaves in one way all the time. I think that our activism can shift depending on our own abilities and where we live and what we can do to contribute. Because it's not just like a monolith. We can do so many different things, so I appreciate it that I was able to, at least in the way I thought I could support. I ended up helping support activism on campus not just through BSU, but other organizations with like I said I thought what was what I could do and so, yeah, that was that.

4:43

VC: A question that I have that's not on our list is you mentioned other organizations that you were a part of could you talk briefly— or like not briefly, but could you talk about that and what your experience was with those experiences?

4:59

AR: Sure, the organizations when I was in college or after college?

5:04

VC: Let's start off with during college.

5:08

AR: Ok, so like I mentioned, I was in BSU. As a student, I also worked as a peer advising counselor for EOP, Education Opportunity Program. And through BSU I also ended up working a lot with the African Black Coalition Conference, ABC for short. I mean, there is the Congress in the Coalition itself. They do other things throughout the year, not just the big conference that people look forward to. So those are the three groups that I rotated my time through while I was in school. After I graduated, I did do some volunteer work here and there for ABC. Not as much, though, because I wasn't an enrolled student anymore. I wasn't a student. And I also, at the time I did not have the time to volunteer is like an alumni to really invest a whole lot. So that's kind of what, at least during my time while I was a student. And then afterwards, what I did was just kind of like random things here and there. And in terms of the organizations I worked with, at least for the masks donations, there was an excel sheet that was spread through social media that had locations and people could request where they want masks to go and what specifications those needed to be. So that wasn't really as organized per se. Like there wasn't like a like a actual

organization that housed that, but that did at least allow me to donate, for example, like senior centers and whatnot. And I also reached out to some folks who worked at community based health centers to donate masks for PPE as well.

6:55

VC: I don't know if you could see my reactions.

6:57

AR: Yes. Yes, I saw all the head nods and the smiling. Yes.

7:02

VC: Okay, thank you. For our next question: After retirement of the Auntie Sewing Squad, how have you continued your activism? Or and if not how do you plan on continuing your activism?

7:18

AR: Oh, you also made me remember there was one more organization, though I didn't work with them as much because it was towards when COVID lockdown happened. But in the Bay Area, there is an organization called Social Justice Sewing Academy and what they do is they teach, usually younger children between like the K through 12 ages, how to sew and make quilts and whatnot. And so if they ask the community to do is to embroider the quilt blocks that they make. So the quilt block you know if you think like a nice like 12 by 12 inch square. The kids glue whatever they want on it. And then we embroider it, so it stays. So that was also something that I did. I got a chance to do at least once before lockdown happened. And of course, because lockdown, they didn't have in-person sessions for the kiddos. So my goal is definitely still continue doing that, however that ends up evolving in the future. As for other things, I am debating on getting a little bit more into textiles. So I mentioned sewing. Clearly I sew, so I'm also going to try and find more organizations that do focus on textiles and social justice just like this organization does to see if there are ways that I can continue volunteering or supporting. I'm not sure what that's going to look like just yet, because for a lot of those things you do have to be in person. And you don't have to, but it's so much easier. So we'll see how that goes. That's my goal, though.

8:54

VC: Ok. Moving on to our next question. Before, I think we kind of mentioned this, but can we just like briefly like recap. Before becoming involved with the Auntie Sewing Squad, were you involved in any other organizations? But we kind of like talked about that.

9:11

AR: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I can repeat it if you want it to be more succinct. So in college, it was Black Student Union. It was educational opportunity program, and it was African Black Coalition. After college, random one-offs with the African Black Coalition. And then it became Social Justice Sewing Academy. And then it became Auntie Sewing Squad.

9:39

VC: So right now, your last activism was like the Auntie Sewing Squad.

9:45

AR: MmHm.

9:45

VC: The next question that we have is how has being a part of the Auntie Sewing Squad changed your life?

9:52

AR: So it definitely, it took stress away. And I say that because I was originally part of a Facebook group, I think it was like A Million Facemasks or something like that. And there were two things that caused me to leave this group. The first was because there always seemed to be a sense of urgency. Now, granted, in the beginning, yes, masks were definitely important and it was urgent. But the urgency was almost like you have to keep sewing until you like die or something. You have to. I remember there was one lady who would always post like “Do we still need masks? Do we still need masks? Do we still need masks?” I just remember that feeling overwhelming. And then the other, when I knew I was like “no, I got to go” was when someone had posted, it was an African American woman who posted if people had recommendations for fabrics to buy that had depictions of Black people in it. And this lady put a picture in. And it was a picture of silhouettes like shadows. And I was like “that's not what she meant by Black people. She meant African American people. Not literally like cutouts of people that are shaded black” and I was like “yeah, it's time for me to go.” And so I was like [sound of a car speeding by]. And so this group was a lot smaller because the other group is just humongous. Like there are thousands of people in it, this group was much smaller, a lot more intimate. So that helps with not feeling as overwhelmed and there is intentions behind what we did, and we had our care services as well, so we could request for care. So if someone was feeling overwhelmed, they could receive, for example, they could receive a care package, or maybe they could do something else that they just could not sew. They were like “I'm done sewing. I'll help in some other way.” So that sense of community was so, so, so helpful, especially as we got deeper into the pandemic and lockdown. And it seemed like the news was also just depressing every other week. So it was nice to experience that sense of community in a virtual space, given that we sometimes couldn't

actually meet up in person. And that was the best that we could do. And it was nice to know that these people, based on our own interactions online, that I knew I could trust these people and that they can trust me too. So that was nice. That was really nice.

12:26

VC: In your answer, I noticed you talk a lot about community and intentions. What does community mean to you and how do we positively apply intentions to the community, in your opinion?

12:43

AR: Yeah, yeah. So to me, I think what I would have said maybe a few years ago would be you know community is just whoever you know you want it to be, I guess. But I think that just like how people can choose their family, you can also choose who's in your community. You don't have to just accept the people willy-nilly. And so to have a community that is not only built on intentions, but that is intentional about what they do. In my mind, in my own personal thoughts, I think that that is really powerful because it helps have a strong front so that when you're moving towards your goals, everyone's on the same page. Just like how they talk about with relationships and whatnot: you have to have good communication whatnot. It's the same thing for a community or group of people who are doing, whether it's social justice work or even if it's like a book club, you have to be on the same page. And if not, then it'll crumble. And that's not what you want to happen. So for me, I, again I see community as a way for like minded people to come together, and they can either make something happen if that's the goal, if it's supposed to be "we are here to accomplish something and that's it." Or if it's just to in general, just be there to support each other. Whether it's through the highs of highs and the lows of lows. To be there to provide support.

14:17

VC: Ok. Ok, so in your previous answers you've mentioned some challenges that you faced within certain organizations that caused you to move to different types of communities that you felt more like in tune with. Our question is what was one of your biggest challenges within the Auntie Sewing Squad?

14:40

AR: Of course. So this one is actually very easy and one of the biggest challenges was that the Auntie Sewing Squad demographic wise— and I think in maybe no I didn't come in the beginning, I came like eight months later, so I don't know exactly where demographically things were in the beginning - but it was originally designed for the API [Asian Pacific Islander] community and there was a stronger push especially with the hate crimes that were happening to support those groups as well both in terms of sometimes with masks donations, sometimes those

other donations. And so I knew going into the space that I might be one of the few African Americans, which was fine. I knew that going in, but I did not use that, I would say as a, I didn't take it as a hindrance. I took it as "I'm just here to do support and help as needed." And in terms of other difficulties that I may have faced, there's always the internal comparison, you know like "I only did like 10" or like "I only did 15" and someone's like "I can do 500!" But that's more internally that has nothing to do with the group because I think regardless of the sewing group, you're going to have the people who just are all stars and can sew all day, every day and then the people who can't and that's ok.

16:15

VC: Thank you for that honest answer. So my next question I have for you is: is there anything that you would do differently during your time in this sewing squad?

16:26

AR: That is a good question. I mean, of course, it would have been nice to maybe make more masks. I wish I would have joined sooner, I wish I would have found out about them sooner. Because I think that would have probably helped with me not getting as burned out. I don't know exactly when I got burned out on making masks, but there was definitely a point where I realized "this takes me a lot longer than I remember it did." And it was just harder to get through. So I definitely did peter out towards the end. Honestly it did get closer to retirement, and I tried not to feel as bad if I could only send a batch of like 15 or 20 at a time. I mean, I think I would have, if possible, I would have probably joined sooner so that I wouldn't have burned out as quickly. And I think I would have been a little bit more interactive, and I think I was very hesitant at the beginning to say, oh yeah, let me see if I can meet up with people and talk with people. I think I was like, ok, now I'm just going to, I'm going to be here. I'll send my masks, you know, I'm not trying to, you know, step over toes or whatever again because I knew I'm one of the few so I was like I just wanted to send my masks and be on, ok, you know? But they were just so welcoming and that I was like, wow, maybe I should have reached out maybe a little bit sooner rather than, just trying to stay where I'm at. So that's definitely I would say I also regret that I have.

17:51

VC: Ok. Ok. Our next question would be what are some of your greatest or favorite takeaways during your time as an auntie?

17:57

AR: So my favorite or greatest takeaways. I would say my greatest takeaway is that people, no matter what we do in our job or what we're studying or whatever we have the capacity to really change lives and that we don't have to wait until it's perfect to get it done. And from what I remember with the origin story for how we even got to this place in the first place with the

Auntie Sewing Squad, it really just started as “yeah, let's let's do this, let's just make some and send it out.” So I think that it's a really good example of what can happen when people get together and when they make things happen and that does require figuring things out along the way. I don't think that in the beginning, Kristina could have imagined that oh my gosh, we need to have a Google doc that tracks where everyone is so we have these hubs and so that we know where people are and we're going to have fundraisers to raise money for like Navajo Nation and whatnot. I don't think that that would have been in the original business plan on day one. So I think that it's a really good example. It doesn't have to be perfect. It doesn't even have to be perfect in the beginning; it just has to be something. And as long as you're not trying to intentionally harm people, it's not like we were saying, I don't want to say don't wear masks, our masks are better than N95 or something that you can really make a difference in people in people's lives and the lives around you.

19:53

VC: OK, so a question that I also have it is. What is a piece or pieces of advice you have to people who want to be activists and want to help communities and serve but don't know how.

20:13

AR: Ooh, good question. And I say this is a good question because my activism compared maybe to other people is very, very mild. Like Taco Bell mild seasoning. I know you're laughing, it's fine, but that's really how mild it is. You don't have to be the person whose like either out at a rally or you don't have to be the person who takes on all these different things. I would say start by thinking about one. What needs do you see in either the physical community around you? The digital community that you're a part of? And once you figure out what those needs are, what can you do to contribute? So for example, if where you live you realize “Hey, there's a lot of potholes, why are there so many potholes that never get fixed?” Your first step would be maybe to look into your city council, go to one of their meetings. Usually they're open to the public. And if no one has say a question or anything like that that needs to be stated, they usually have a section for open comments. Maybe that's the place to go to make an open comment and say, “Hey, why isn't that happening?” That is a really great first step. Another good first step is if you are, maybe if you want to be more hands on is to look up organizations that do what you want to do. So if for whatever reason in your soul, you just feel “I just have to help people who are housing insecure.” I mean, you may want to figure out why do you want to do that so bad and to make sure you don't want to do that just so you can take a picture or something, say, look at me being a good person, but you might want to reach out to organizations that already do that work and ask them if they need volunteers. Those are really good, easy peasy first steps. But what you don't want to do is you don't want to just do something and then just assume that someone should be grateful for it. You always want to ask, like you don't want to, I guess a somewhat good example this would be, for example, donating like off season clothes to like a shelter or

something like that. If they don't need it, they're not going to use it and it's ok to donate money. I know a lot of people don't like that because it seems like you didn't like you didn't do anything. There's no like, what's the best way to say, you're not like in the trenches with people, you are not getting dirty. But a lot of people, they know what to do with money when they get it, so they they can take their money and buy what they need. And organizations, especially those who are nonprofits, for example, they might get tax breaks anyways, so they can probably buy in bulk more per dollar than you can as an individual. And you just got to kind of trust that they're going to spend the money probably better than you think you can for them. Yeah, those will be my my examples is to find out what's going on first, what issues are facing your physical or digital or whatever community and then do a little research to figure out where can I go to either find help or offer help and think about what help you can reasonably offer. So don't volunteer to take people to appointments like seniors if you don't have a car, because how are you going to do that?

23:45

VC: In your answer, thank you for answering, but in your answer, you've discussed helpful tips as well as tips that we should avoid in our activism. Are there any tips that you would like to share that embed in our everyday lives?

24:07

AR: Oh, yeah. Hmm. And for your everyday life there are really, really small things like. For example, if you're trying to be a little bit more focused on the environment. Even though I'm not at least for environmentalism, I'm not a super big fan of it being it's all an individual because it's really not. And if you really want to, take shorter showers and maybe use less hot water, you don't have the water running while you're washing dishes or something or while you're washing your hands or brushing your teeth. Other things could be, for example, making different food choices or meal choices if you have the ability to do so. Things that maybe aren't individual that might involve working with other people could be if you are one of the lucky ones to have a union, maybe contact your union, see if you can get involved with the union. Another thing that might be more of like an everyday type thing now would be maybe checking in with your neighbors. I know that I can be a bit anti-social. I am not going to lie. I will not sometimes initiate like talking to my neighbors and talk to your neighbors, whether it's literally in a cubicle or next door or something. But talk to your neighbors and see how they're doing. See if they need help with something or if they notice something again within your physical or digital community that needs to be fixed. And if you see something, say something. Of course, if you notice that someone maybe says something or does something that you think is inappropriate, maybe consider talking to that person about it. It doesn't have to be chastising, but it could say, "Hey, I noticed that you said, or you did blah blah blah. I just had some questions about that." Or, "hey, can you explain why you said that or why you did that?" Especially if you are in that group. So

if, for example, you are, say, identify as male, you know someone who also identifies as male does something that you know is inappropriate that is totally within your bounds to go in and talk with them because you both share a dominant identity. And unfortunately for some people, they will not listen unless someone from the dominant identity talks to them about it. And so that's how you got to play the game, too. Then that's how you got to play the game. So, you know they're not going to listen to you for whatever reason, find someone who you know, they will listen to you and go talk to that person to.

26:52

VC: Thank you for the helpful advice. We're going to take like a little 90 degree pivot away from the questions that we're asking, but the next question I do have for you is how has COVID-19 affected your life?

AR: So I am actually going to go back to masks, but this is going to be a hopefully a short story. So a friend of mine who does identify as Asian, we were talking about face masks and you know why they're important. This was back in like, oh, that's like, well before now, well before, right on the cusp of lockdown, before it was like just make anything out of face masks, even socks and bandanas and stuff. And it was recommended. And my friend, she said that you know, it's really good, you should wear a face mask blah blah blah. And I said, I'm not wearing a face mask until I am told you have to wear a face mask by the government. And she was a bit upset about that, and I digitally because she doesn't live near me, I sat her down and said, "Girl, I am Black. I am not going to wear something that covers my face, and I'm not going to tell my family to wear something that covers their face until I know for sure I will not be harassed for it." And she took that very well. So, yeah, I would say that was definitely one of the first times where I was like, yeah, we'll see how this goes. Besides that, it definitely has caused obviously a lot more stress, a lot more anxiety. I don't think that I could have anticipated how much it was going to impact me, and I think that it forced me to realize that I need to pay more attention to my body and to how I'm doing emotionally and physically, because I realize that I was displaying, I guess, symptoms of being really stressed. And I did not know that. Or symptoms of anxiety and I didn't know. So it was good, I guess, for me to then realize, oh, I guess I really need to pay attention. And it also forced me to be more mindful of my time, more mindful of where I go and what I do. Not so much that I'm not being antisocial, but to really think do I really need to go to the store right now? Do I really need to go do this? Do I really need to walk around the mall just so I can get exercise and pretend like I'm not going to buy something? So it forced me to also be more intentional about what I do. And it also made me realize that I can't be as reactive because I think in the beginning I was also being reactive. And that also caused more stress and anxiety, and I realized, no, it's ok to slow down. I know that it seems like because of the news and how people are dying, which they are, it's like, no, you can't do this. So now you should sort of do this and that it's ok to just pause, take in what you're getting, and then take a breath and then do

something else. You don't have to just go out immediately to a store to buy fabric because, by the way, I don't know if either of you sew, but in the middle of a pandemic, if you went to Joanne's, there was no fabric, which was scary. There was nothing. Now that could have also been because people wanted to do stuff at home, but there was nothing. So it was interesting. And also being at home, so I do live at home with my parents was also interesting being locked down. I won't give a rating on that. But it happened. That's life. And it also did bring me a little bit closer with family too. My sister came home from college because you can't be in dorms. And her and I got to bond a lot more, so that was really nice. So there are some little little sprinkles of nice things here and there, but definitely still working on the stress and anxiety, though still working on that piece. And I will probably still work on that well after the pandemic too.

31:15

VC: Well, I can't think of any more questions, but Mathew, do you have any questions you would like to ask our Auntie?

31:22

Mathew Trejo (MT): You really got into it. No, I can't think of anything else. Nothing that comes to mind right now. But you guys really got into it and it was really interesting to listen to you and I definitely appreciate you guys sharing.

31:50

AR: Of course.

MT: Yeah.

VC: Well, of course. If this is all we have left, I'm going to go ahead and pause our video.