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## Interview with Ashley Terada

Ashley Terada

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**Interviewee:** Ashley Terada

**Interviewers:** Aurora Arredondo, Sophie Spencer

**Date:** December 9th, 2021

**Location:** Zoom

**Collection:** Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 114: Women and Social Change, From 1890s to the Present, Fall 2021

**Length:** 00:27:22

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

**Bio:** Born and raised in San Diego, Ashley Terada is an activist and member of the Auntie Sewing Squad. Growing up in a family that encouraged activism, her family felt it was important that she uses her right to speak out against injustices. Terada developed her love for sewing from a young age since her dad's mother was a professional seamstress. Her sewing skills and involvement in activism carried on into her role in the Auntie Sewing Squad, where she moved supplies, sewed masks, and led a coat drive.

**Thematic Outline:** (00:00:00) Ashley Terada starts off by explaining that she was not new to activism by the time she joined the Auntie Sewing Squad. She shares how her mom's family history of service in the military and navy, as well as her dad's family who were unjustly incarcerated during WWII, led to her involvement in activism before joining the Auntie Sewing Squad. (00:06:59) Terada then discusses her family's history of sewing and how her family members encouraged her creativity. (00:12:09) Terada next tells stories from the San Diego contingent of the Auntie Sewing Squad, such as having a luau in a parking lot and the coat drive for the Lakota nation. (00:17:22) Terada shares that the the Auntie Sewing Squad and the Pandemic taught her the importance of mutual aid. (00:23:13) She finishes by giving advice on how to get involved in activism and be apart of something even if you may think you do not have the right skillset.

## Oral History Transcript

00:00:03

**Sophie Spencer (SS):** Our names are Sophie Spencer and Aurora Arredondo. It is November 29th, 2021, and we are conducting an interview with Ashley Terada over Zoom. So I'd first like to start off by asking a little bit about your background, like where is your family from and where did you grow up?

00:00:16

**Ashley Terada (AT):** So I grew up in San Diego, and my mom is, well, she was born in Minnesota. Her parents are Swedish and Irish, but she's spent most of her childhood in San Diego, but was in Japan for a while because she's a Navy brat. And so, yeah, my grandpa was in the Navy and then my dad was also from San Diego. But he is or he was. He's since passed and he's Japanese and he was born and raised in San Diego. His mom was from Hawaii and his dad was born and raised in Colorado, but they were both Japanese American. They met after World War II at some point and had lots of kids and settled in San Diego.

00:01:35

**Aurora Arredondo (AA):** Our next question is, in what ways has COVID 19 affected your life? What were your initial thoughts at the start of the pandemic?

00:01:39

**AT:** So, I was living by myself at the start of the pandemic, and I am an extreme extrovert, so I love being around people. I loved going to work and being in the office. I loved being with my friends. I loved visiting my family. So, when all of a sudden it was like "Hey, for the next two weeks, you can't do any of that." And then that two weeks became two months and so on and so forth. It was really, really hard at the start of the pandemic. I think, really, the Bay Area was the first area on the West Coast, or in California, to go on like a full lockdown. So I was checking in on my friends and family in the Bay Area to see how they were doing. I was in L.A., which went on lockdown pretty quickly after that and then my family in San Diego went on lockdown after that. And so it was just really surreal to see all of that happening and to live alone and be someone who really thrives on being around others and like that community to just all of a sudden be by myself in my house with my dog. It was really hard. Yeah.

00:03:01

**SS:** Yeah, I can agree that COVID was definitely a big shock for everyone. I want to ask you, how did you find out about the Auntie Sewing Squad and what prompted you to join the organization?

00:03:17

**AT:** So I just know a lot of Asian Americans in Los Angeles. We are not that big of a community, but we all know someone who knows someone else. And one of my good friends had posted that he knew someone who was sewing masks for people and was like, “Does anyone know how to sew? Do you want to join her?” And I said, “Yeah,” so I sent her a message, Kristina, and she's like, “Great, I just started this Facebook group here.” So I was one of the first Aunties to join the group, and I sewed my first 30 masks over the course of like two days just trying to figure out the pattern. Yeah, I joined because I needed something to do. I wanted to do something that was going to help other people. And so when the call came, I answered it and was sewing it within the first couple days of lockdown.

00:04:17

**SS:** Well that's so interesting, that's really crazy that you're one of the first to join. I applaud you for that.

00:04:27

**AA:** Were you always involved in activism or was this something new for you when joining the Auntie Sewing Squad?

00:04:34

**AT:** I'm not really new to activism. I grew up really, like quote unquote doing the right thing. Pushing against the wrong thing has been something that was part of my upbringing. A lot of people here, I said my mom was a Navy brat, a lot of people hear the navy or like anything, military and they're like, “Oh, must have been so strict”. And my grandpa, the one who was in the Navy, was like the total opposite of that. The first time I told him I was going to a protest I was like, I don't know, 12 or 13, he was like, “That's great, you should speak up when you think things are wrong and you should do something when you believe that someone else is being hurt.” And I was like, well it was an anti-war protest and he was like, “Good. I fought for your rights to be able to speak up when something's wrong.” So that was really ingrained in me on my mom's side. And then on my dad's side, my grandmother and her mom and all of her brothers and sisters, she was 1 of 10 kids, they were all imprisoned during World War II, they're Japanese, American and Hawaiian. But they were imprisoned during World War II for being Japanese American and basically no other reason. And the country thought they were enemies of the state, and that was true of the entire Japanese American population in the US. And so on that side of the family, we have always been in activist circles and speaking out when we see things that are wrong, like the Japanese American community has come together for reparations for Black Americans because Japanese Americans got reparations after World War II. We have come together a lot after 9/11 against racial profiling because we were racially profiled, and Japanese

Americans just tend to be involved in a lot of activist spaces. And so I was raised in those spaces and part of our Buddhist faith is about making sure that we are making the world a better place and we are on a path to enlightenment. And part of that is supporting others and supporting our communities. So I've always, always, always been involved in activist spaces.

00:06:59

**SS:** That's really interesting. I would like to ask, what were your adolescent years like and did they have an impact on your role as an activist? I know, that's kind of adding to what you just said, but...

00:07:09

**AT:** I would say so. I think as an adolescent, I feel really blessed to have a family that I have, and just have always been encouraged to tap into creativity, tap into what I think the world should look like and work toward that. I have a very liberal mom, a really liberal dad, liberal grandparents, even those who are in the military. And I think one of the things that I was always told as a kid, especially as an adolescent, is that I wasn't praised for being smart. I think I am smart, but I wasn't praised for that. I was not praised for talents. I was praised for doing what's right and standing up alongside others. And I think that kind of praise from a young age and into my adolescence really shaped the person I wanted to be. Because when you get some sort of reinforcement, you either act in accordance with that or you push against it. So, I don't think I realized that I was much older, but it's something that I've appreciated from my family.

00:08:29

**AA:** So you mentioned you helped with making the masks. So would you mind telling us more about your background in sewing, how did you learn to sew and how has that influenced your life?

00:08:41

**AT:** Yeah. So I learned to sew when I was really young. I think my grandmother on my dad's side was a professional seamstress. And she was a costume designer. She sewed pageant dresses for San Diego's fairs, which is kind of like one of the big pageants in San Diego. She designed costumes for like Circus Circus, the hotel chain in Vegas and Reno. She designed their performer costumes. They used to have actual performances, and she designed, actually, let me see if I can pull it up and share the link with you. She worked on these pretty iconic flight attendant uniforms back in the day. So, sewing is, I think, part of my DNA, and my mom sews as well. So not the same side of the family, the other side of the family. I have always appreciated fiber art, so my mom is a quilter. My grandmother, her mom, is a knitter, like lots of clothing making. So I started hand sewing at a really young age and then have always been into crafts and art. And I think I sold my first purse when I was 11 on a machine and just learned to sew from there before

the pandemic started. I was sewing my own clothes and sewing bags for people. And then I haven't made any of those things, I don't think, since the pandemic I've only made masks and, yeah, I just think it was like such a great creative outlet to be able to work in fiber arts and crochet and knit, and it was something that wasn't, I don't know, some people like look at sewing or knitting or crocheting or embroidery as silly or for old people, and that was never something that was the case. My mom was in her 20s when she had me and I remember this young lady sewing all the time and like making really cool stuff, and it was just always so fun to know I can see something and I can make my version of it and I can wear it, or I can have it in my house. I think the first thing I really made for myself was pillowcases because I didn't like the pillowcase I had. And so my mom let me pick the fabric and then I got to sew it myself. And then I was like, oh my gosh, this is so powerful. I can make the world I want to live in by sewing. So that's where my love of sewing came from initially.

00:11:46

**SS:** It's really, it's amazing to hear you talk about this. It seems like you're almost made to be a part of the Auntie Sewing Squad.

00:11:50

**AA:** Yeah, you're very passionate about it too.

00:11:55

**SS:** I'm looking at this picture right here. These are literally amazing. I love this era of fashion. It's one of my favorites.

00:12:02

**AT:** Yes. The designer was Pucci, they are Pucci design, but my grandmother sewed many of them.

00:12:09

**SS:** That's crazy. Obviously, the pandemic has affected, like joining the Auntie Sewing Squad because you can't have face to face contact. Obviously, there's a six feet apart rule. But I wanted to ask how the Auntie Sewing Squad has impacted you, but also, even with COVID restrictions did you feel a sense of community or were you able to have a sense of community with the woman you worked alongside?

00:12:34

**AT:** Absolutely. Early, early, early on when people were like, "don't touch me, don't look at me. Like, where's your mask?" I was going to, so I lived in L.A., I still kinda live in L.A. still, so I was going to Kristina's house, she's the founder, to pick up elastic and fabric because no one

could buy any, like we couldn't buy anything. There's nowhere to go. Places were sold out of elastic and fabric because people are making masks. And so we had this incredible network of people who are like, "Oh, I have this connection, I have fabric, I have this connection. I have elastic" and like bringing it all together and being able to get it. And then I was going a lot between San Diego and Los Angeles because I gave up being by myself and was like, I'm just gonna stay with my mom, ride this out, at least I'll have someone to talk to. And so, I was like shuttling supplies between L.A. and San Diego and dropping them off at people's front porches. So, I know where all these people live and I had only met them through Facebook at the time. It's such a trusting community. At one point, we, the San Diego Aunties, all decided to get together and have a luau in the parking lot of our favorite place to meet up to trade materials, which was the library parking lot near the IKEA. And so we had initially used that because it's a very central location in San Diego to trade fabric or trade elastic. And one day we all met there. There was a huge group of us. We all brought our favorite foods and gifts for each other and shared them, and we had like a socially distanced luau and just got to hang out together. This is like before vaccines, before anything. And so we were all in our little lawn chairs, very far apart, you know, sanitizing our hands. We took a distanced picture. It was just so special. And knowing that if I needed something, I could call upon an Auntie and she probably or he, we also have Uncles too, they might have something for me that I needed, or I would be able to supply them with something they needed when there was a call for masks. That was another really special thing someone would say like, "I need 500 masks for this organization." And then Aunties would be like, "I can sew 10" and someone would be like "I have 250". And it was just really amazing to be able to see this small contribution that I can make right this second is going to have a really big impact for this group. One of my mentors, he is a registered member of the Lakota Oglala Nation and he said, "We don't have masks, we don't have coats." And so that's when we started a coat drive for the Lakota nation and we've gotten them like tons of coats, tons of masks. And so we've gone from being a mask-making group to being a group that's able to support indigenous communities a lot, like a lot of indigenous communities, a lot of communities of color, farmworkers, etc., like the people who live on the fringes of society and often get forgotten about. When we're talking about a global pandemic, we're talking about like numbers of infection rates going down, that's not necessarily true in all communities. And so, just being able to support the communities that I'm close to or support communities that are similar to those that I'm close to has been really rewarding. Oh, and back to the question of doing it alongside this group of men, women, nonbinary individuals, it has been incredibly rewarding and I would be remiss if I didn't mention that it was primarily women of color to start and within that primarily Asian and Asian American women were the ones who really were the first quote unquote first responders within the Auntie Sewing Squad.

00:17:04

**SS:** That is really interesting here, I'm actually from San Diego, so I am kind of familiar with the areas you're talking about, but I wish I would have known about the organization. I feel...

00:17:13

**AT:** Mission Valley, IKEA, that's where we would meet up all the time.

00:17:17

**SS:** That is so cool. Here I'll let Aurora ask her next question.

00:17:22

**AA:** Since your retirement from the Auntie Sewing Squad, has your role in the group carried on into your life now. And are there any projects you are currently working on?

00:17:47

**AT:** So, I'm still a member of the group, some people still sew masks for Asks, we call them Asks. So if someone makes an Ask, there will be people who will sew, we don't track in the same way that we used to and like, keep track of all of the Asks and whatnot. But it's just really fun to still be a part of the group, to still share our laughs. There's the Christmas card exchange coming up, for example, and this is just a group of people who answered a call to action and said yes. So I will always stay in touch with people who do that. Those are the people who you want on your side. And I don't know if you've all thought about, what would I do in an apocalypse? Like these are the people who are going to keep us warm and they're going to keep us sheltered, and I'm really proud to be among their ranks. Currently, I'm not working on any sewing projects at the moment. I have said yes to sewing some Christmas masks for friends and family that I will send out, but I'm working full time and I'm a student, also, getting my MBA, so that's my project right now. No artistic endeavors at the moment.

00:19:01

**SS:** Yeah, well, obviously we wish you guys didn't have to step up to the plate and start making masks because that's kind of the whole point of the Auntie Sewing Squad, like out of frustration because people should have handled that, like our country should've handled things differently. But it's really cool that you got to meet, I mean, not that you're lucky to have experienced the pandemic, but you were able to meet people out of that experience in Auntie Sewing Squad. I want to ask overall, how has the pandemic or what has the pandemic and involvement in the Auntie Sewing Squad taught you? What lessons have you learned or just really anything?

00:19:38

**AT:** I think the importance of mutual aid was really highlighted for me during this time and the idea that other people aren't going to keep us safe, we keep us safe. So sewing and putting the



intention of protection, and that sounds really silly to some people, I'm sure, but I don't need those people's opinions, like really putting that intention into every mask was so important. And just the idea that if you see a need, figure it out, it's possible. The fact that government agencies were trying to get masks from this ragtag group of people who started a Facebook group, I'm not even on Facebook. It's a miracle I found the Auntie Sewing Squad. I'm barely on Facebook. But the fact that government organizations were asking us for things blew my mind. And it makes me think of a quote from Marian Wright Edelman. I might misquote it, but I think it's pretty emblazoned in my mind. "A lot of people are waiting for the next Martin Luther King or Mahatma Gandhi, but they are gone. We are it. It is up to us. It's up to you." And it just makes me think about, if there's a need, I can't wait around for someone to do something about it. And if someone is like, "Hey, I want to do this thing, who's with me?" And I have the energy and the ability, and it's something that I also want, it would be silly not to do it, so that's really what being a part of the Auntie Sewing Squad taught me. And I wish we didn't have to live through the pandemic, but at the same time, I do feel really honored and blessed to be able to say that I've taken this lesson about mutual aid and care for my own community from this group of individuals who were like minded, who is incredible. And the fact that like you hear Auntie Sewing Squad, you probably know that we've made masks, but that's not all the group has done. Like we have Aunties who coordinate gifts for people, the Care Auntie, Auntie Gayle. We have the Aunties who keep track of all the masks that we're making and get in touch with organizations to make sure that their values align with ours and that we are sewing in the biggest areas of need, those super Aunties who really took care of that for us. And so just being able to find people and their talents, and if you don't fit in, exactly say like, "Hey, I can't sew. I don't have a sewing machine, but this is what I am, I'm great at being organized. How can I help? I am great at asking people for money. How can I help?" Those people who weren't sewing were instrumental in making sure that the group continued to run. So, that's the biggest thing that I learned from this experience, is stepping up when the call is made and figuring out where you fit in.

00:23:01

**SS:** That is really amazing, that people that you just met at the start of the pandemic, you're able to get such support from and become close to, I really, that's amazing to hear.

00:23:13

**AA:** Do you have any words of advice for us adolescents who want to be part of something like the Auntie Sewing Squad? What are small steps you can take towards becoming an activist?

00:23:25

**AT:** I think first, by looking into local mutual aid efforts, wherever you are geographically located, and if that doesn't feel possible or if that feels like too much, I would say looking into

mutual aid hashtags on TikTok or on Instagram or on Twitter, whatever. But finding those mutual aid groups really lets you channel your frustration into something more positive. The Auntie Sewing Squad started out as like 20 people who were like, yeah I guess I can sew. And it has blossomed to like thousands of people who are like I can sew this, I can do this. And it's like, you don't know where it's going to lead you, but take the step, say yes and try it out because your gifts and support doesn't always have to be monetary. That's something that I was like, well, when I get older and have a ton of money, then maybe I can donate to causes and it's like, no, right now I can sew and give something to someone who needs something. And I think Kristina, the founder of the Auntie Sewing Squad, did something really incredible and I think one of her gifts is rallying people together and getting people excited about something. So if you are someone who is excited about something and or like super frustrated about something and excited to solve it. Like, how do you get your friends and your community together? How do you get people to join? If that's your strength. So, it's really understanding your gifts and what you bring to the table, like community organizing is activism and community organizing is bringing people together to be a stronger group and to stand up for injustice or fix a problem because I think I said it before, we keep us safe, we are who help us. We cannot wait around for someone else to solve a problem for us when we have seen governments and agencies and nonprofits fail over and over and over again.

00:25:41

**SS:** Thank you. I feel like I've been almost scared to become a part of something because I don't know how to join that. But hearing you say that makes me want to like, find something to be a part of and get involved. Especially as an introvert, I can definitely try to branch out a little bit and try to be around new groups of people. Thank you.

00:26:03

**AA:** Thank you.

00:26:04

**AT:** And finding the right group because Auntie Sewing Squad, a lot of introverts and they got to sit in their homes and sew and send the masks off and still be part of something really big and doing it in their own way. So I think there isn't one right way to be an activist. I think that's something that people should really take to heart too is you can be an activist in your own way.

00:26:28

**AA:** Yeah, it's very inspiring because I'm an introvert, too, and I have never been a part of any activism. I've done community service, but I haven't been a part of something that big and it is scary, but it seems like you're very happy to be in that group and they seem very supportive.

00:26:49

**AT:** Yeah. Yeah. Totally.

00:26:52

**SS:** That's all the questions we have for you, but I just want to thank you. I feel like I've learned so much just from this short interview about the Auntie Sewing Squad, they really seem like an amazing group and I hope to be a part of something like that. But I want to thank you for your time and thank you for interviewing with us today. And thank you for letting us get to know you better.

00:27:15

**AT:** Thank you both so much. Best of luck with the rest of your semester, Sophie be Aurora. It's great to talk to you.

00:27:21

**SS:** Thank you.