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Interview with Kathie Adams

Kathie Adams

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Interviewee: Kathie Adams

Interviewers: Georgina Marin, Nayialena Avraam

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Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Kathie Adams currently lives in Los Angeles, California. Growing up she changed schools often because of her dad's profession, but was always the best math student. She formerly worked in an aerospace industry and currently works as a private practice psychotherapist. She has an undergraduate degree in psychology and engineering and graduate degrees in organizational management and psychology. During COVID-19, she joined the Auntie Sewing Squad and one hundred masks each week.

Thematic Summary of Interview: (00:00:57) Kathie Adams discusses her background, profession, and the mutual organizations she participated in leading up to her membership in the Auntie Sewing Squad. (00:05:01) Adams then explains how she participated in Auntie Care as a creator of soap and recipient of a pie. (00:09:43) She then explains how COVID-19 impacted her profession as a psychotherapist. (00:15:06) Adams discusses her activities during ASS retirement, particularly her participation in I Found a Quilted Heart. (00:25:54) She talks about her experiences in a male-dominated the aerospace industry and how the lack of female voices and representation affected her workplace. (00:30:00) Adams hopes that art like Kristina Wong's plays will be recorded because they remind us how bad things were and moreover, she shares about how she held therapy workshops for Aunties. (00:35:45) Adams ends by saying that being at service, helping others doesn't have to be big, it can be as small as buying some coffee; small acts of kindness matter.

Oral History Transcript

00:00:02

Nayialena Avraam (NA): My name is Nayialena.

Georgina Marin (GM): I am Georgina.

NA: And will be interviewing Miss Auntie Kathie Adams today regarding her involvement in the Auntie Sewing Squad and different questions around what the work of the Auntie Sewing Squad is and how this played out during the pandemic. So Georgina, if you'd like to start off with the first question.

GM: Our first question is, could you tell us a little bit about yourself and your background?

Kathy Adams (KA): Sure. So. I'm 68 years old. And I live in Southern California, live in Los Angeles, near downtown. And my father is retired military, so I've lived all over the world and until I moved in this house that I live in now, my house, I moved every year of my life. And now I've lived here for 33 years, so that's a very long time. I've gone to college way more than people typically go. So I have an undergraduate degree in psychology and engineering and graduate degrees in organizational management and psychology. I worked for a very long time in the aerospace industry. I retired, like 13 years ago, and now I work as a private practice psychotherapist. Is that enough?

NA: Yeah that's great. Our next question will be what motivated you to join the Auntie Sewing Squad and what was your role in the organization?

KA: So I am involved in several different kinds of alternative economy kinds of things and mutual aid organizations. I think that that's an important thing to be involved in and doing. I believe a lot in community. I know that for my mental health, I'm better if I'm helping others. It's just a good thing for me. I learned to sew when I was in sixth grade. My parents told me that if I made my own clothes, they would reimburse me for it. I had to keep the receipts and I had to wear whatever I made one time in public. So, as a kid, you can't make so much that you break the bank, so I learned to sew. And I've sewed since then. So for a very long time, I've sewed. Before I ever saw Kristina, I was making masks for my neighborhood, for my neighbors and my friends, and for a restaurant in my neighborhood that had become a food bank. And they were distributing the masks. So before I even saw Kristina, I'd probably made 500 masks in the first month with things that I had at my house. I used up fabric and I was using fabric ties, not elastic because there was no elastic available. And then I saw Kristina Wong speak on a thing on zoom for the Lucas Museum. And they were they had several different artists talking about what they were doing during the pandemic. And I really liked what she had to say, and I didn't notice at the time, but she lives like three miles from my house. So I joined the group on Facebook, and then, that was probably in April or May. Pretty early on. So and then I made, my commitment was I was going to make 100 masks a week, and so I did that for a year, a little over a year.

NA: How many hours did that take? A hundred masks a week?

KA: I have no idea.

NA: Ok

00:05:01

KA: I wasn't leaving my house at all. So I had lots of time. I had friends who were bringing food to my house groceries. But, the pandemic scared me and I stayed at home. So it was very isolating because it's me and my dog, so the aunties also created a community by their Facebook group, and people were rage sewing and complaining about politics and all kinds of stuff. So that was a nice outlet.

NA: Yeah

KA: But I also, like at some point, I don't remember when it transitioned, but it became so that I received pre-cut masks. So all I was doing was sewing and ironing, which made a big difference and made it so much easier to take care to do.

GM: How did Aunties support each other and keep each other motivated?

KA: Well, I don't know how much of this you've already heard, but so the Aunties had a care group. Auntie Care. And you could ask for things and or they just deliver things to you. So like last year at Thanksgiving, Auntie Gayle, who, she and her daughter were kind of in charge of the Auntie Care, and she contacted me and said, oh, you, you're going to be the recipient of a pie from this really good bakery in downtown L.A. And so I got this really, really tasty savory pie for Thanksgiving. It was really, it was lovely and it's like I made a lot of things for Auntie Care because I do a lot of craft things. So I made soap and I felted soap. And I made lots of jam and then Auntie Gayle would distribute it. And then last spring, I don't remember when the first one was, but then Gayle would host events in her backyard where people shared things that they've made or things that they wanted to share with other Aunties. And one of my neighbors really learned to make bread over the pandemic. And I told her I was going to go to this, and she made 12 loaves of bread to share with Aunties.

NA: Wow that's amazing.

GM: Yeah

KA: My neighbors were really supportive, like one of my neighbors wrote, just anonymous thank you notes. Just took a big stack of you know cards and just wrote notes to Aunties thanking them. So that was a nice thing to share, too.

NA: Yeah

KA: Yeah

NA: Would you described being in the Auntie Sewing Squad is an empowering experience? How did the overall experience feel?

KA: Yeah, it was very empowering because you felt like you were doing things for others who like a year ago couldn't access masks or PPE. Because we were donating masks to really marginalized communities and communities that were being ignored in really awful ways, so. Well, go ahead Georgina.

GM: What was your main takeaway from this experience?

KA: Well, that's a good question. Everyone can be of service. Everyone can help in some way, because that was true with the Aunties, not everyone sewed. There were people who were driving all over the city you know dropping things off or picking things up. And it was such a generous group, at one point, so do either of you sew?

NA: No

00:09:43

KA: Ok. So when you sew something and you have to turn it inside out, you need something to stick in the corners. And at one point, so this is a chopstick they are the perfect thing, and I had lost my one chopstick that I'd had for years. So in the sewing group in my Auntie Sewing Squad group on Facebook, the private group, I just said, oh, I lost my chopstick. I know it's in the house, unless my dog ate it, but I can't find it. I still haven't found it. But so I posted in the group that I'd lost it. And the next day there was a box on my front porch of a whole box of new chopsticks.

NA: Oh Wow.

KA: They were just such a great group. Yeah. So, people did all kinds of nice things and kind things for each other.

NA: That must have been really important, like in terms of mental health, as you mentioned earlier, going through a pandemic to have that support.

KA: Yeah.

NA: Our next question would be how has COVID-19 impacted your life?

KA: Well, I now work as a psychotherapist. And so I saw my clients online immediately when the lockdown occurred on March 12th, the next day, everybody went to online. I had been seeing people online before. So for me, that part was fine, but I also like right as that happened within about a week, I no longer took new clients. And I still haven't a year and a half later taken on any new clients because I knew what would happen is that people I had seen in the past called me up and wanted appointments. So I went from less than 20 clients a week to about 25 during the pandemic. And typically as a therapist, ethically, if somebody comes to see you who is experiencing the same kind of problems you are, for instance, you're going through a divorce, you probably shouldn't see clients who are going through a divorce. Just not a good thing. Well, with the pandemic, everyone who is coming to therapy, the pandemic was affecting their lives, but there were no therapists you could refer to who weren't also affected by the pandemic. So it was really hard. The strangest thing that happened is that for people who experience depression, not depression, but anxiety shows up a lot in their life, they did great. Because it was real. The pandemic was real, even though there were lots of unknowns. Everybody was experiencing that. And for folks where anxiety shows up a lot, they already have skills. They already know ways to calm their central nervous system down. So for me, it was the hard year of work. Because it's like lots of people were suffering. And no one close to me died. I'm a fairly privileged person. My family is fairly privileged, so they all kind of did ok. But now I have clients whose family members died and friends died, and that was really hard.

NA: Did you have any like was there anything that was an outlet for you? I'm sure was really overwhelming to experience this.

KA: Sewing.

NA: Sewing.

KA: Making masks, having that community. I also live in a really good neighborhood for where people are very supportive of each other. Like I'm in a book club with just women who live within two blocks of me. There's like 10 of us in this book club. And we were already scheduled to meet that Friday after the world kind of shut down. And so we met on Zoom and one of the things I said was I guess I'm going to learn to drink coffee without milk because that's what I drink, and the next day, one of the husbands brought me half and half.

NA: Aww

00:15:06

KA: So in my neighborhood, people were really supportive of each other. And checked with each other. Like if somebody was going to the grocery store, they check with others if they

needed anything. So lots of support in that community, lots of support in the Auntie community. Yeah.

GM: Other than mask-making, did you pick up any other hobbies during the lockdown?

KA: Well, let's see. I don't know if mask making as a hobby. I do lots of craft things, so I'm trying to think if I did anything new. I'm not sure I did anything new, but I have a very large vegetable garden, and so I probably did more gardening than I did before because I was home more. And so I had lots to share with neighbors from the garden. Let's see, I made a lot of jam, and I made a lot of soap. Yeah, did I do any other things? The one thing I gave up that I didn't do during the pandemic during the lockdown part of the pandemic is I couldn't read. I usually read like several novels a week. And I just couldn't concentrate enough. So I wasn't reading very much.

NA: Why do you think that is?

KA: What.

NA: Why do you think that is? Was it just being home all the time and it didn't motivate you to read?

KA: Yeah, it's like I couldn't concentrate enough. Like for me, reading a novel, you kind of fall into the story. And you're engaged, right? And I just couldn't sit long enough. I could sit long enough and sew, like I can sew for hours and hours and hours and hours. But that's just repetitive, and for me, it's really easy. Like, I have so much experience sewing, but reading was just really hard. It was hard to settle into it.

NA: When you're sewing, do you listen to anything like podcasts or music, or do you prefer silence?

KA: No, I listen to a lot of podcasts. One of my interns and her business partner do a therapy podcast called Very Bad Therapy. So if either of you have ever gone to a therapist, what they do is they interview people who had very good therapy experiences. I mean, for me, it's really sad that that has happened, but I like the Carry and Ben who do the podcast. So I listen to all of that and I listen to some other kind of religiously to some other podcasts. I would listen to books on tape or audio books, and that was good.

NA: OK. And are you a retired auntie? And if so, what have you been up to since retirement?

KA: Well, sort of. Everybody's a retired Auntie, because they're no longer doing organized mask pledges and deliveries. So what I've been doing, oh, I've been making, I'm looking to see if there's one by me and there's not, so there's a group called I Found a Quilted Heart. And they have a website, but you make like quilted little hearts out of fabric. So that's something I can do with the sewing machine. And that's a way that I can use up all of the bags of scraps from all the masks. And then so you make these little hearts and then you leave them places with a little tag on. And people can report that they found a quilted heart. And the stories are very sweet. So I make some of those. But instead of my distributing them, I've been giving them to friends to distribute. So that's kind of fun, too. So they get involved. And then the other thing there's an organization called the Social Justice Sewing Academy. They're on Facebook and Instagram, and they're based out of Oakland, and I volunteer with them. So it's younger people make like a quilt block or make a panel and do some kind of social justice related sewing. And then they ask for volunteers to embroider them or to embellish them. And I do some of that. So those are couple of things that I'm doing and my garden's really big. So today the only thing I have left to plant. Well, now it's artichoke plants to plant and I have garlic to plant, and probably today I'll get those done. So that's great. Yeah. How about you guys, what did you do? What have you been doing?

00:21:26

NA: I'm on a year abroad currently, so this is all new to me.

KA: Where were you during the lockdown during the year?

NA: I was at home in Cyprus, so it's a small island next to Greece. So I normally study in the UK, but I was back home during the pandemic and then I didn't want to go back and just finish my university degree without actually experiencing a university life. So that's why I chose to come on a 'study abroad' here.

KA: Okay.

NA: Yeah.

KA: But how about you Georgina?

GM: In this year of the pandemic, I haven't been up to much. I did try to start at least planting flowers and build my way up to like a garden. But after a while, you kind of forget that it's there and then they start dying. And then it's like when I'll try to save it. But it doesn't seem savable, I just let it die. But when you least expect it, it starts blooming again. So the plant that I started off died, and right now it's still blooming, which is kind of like how since I don't really

water it as often?

KA: Yeah. Yeah. My garden is all irrigated. It has water lines everywhere.

NA: That's convenient.

KA: And then the other thing I did this past summer when it seemed like, oh, it's all better is. A friend of mine's daughter had asked me to facilitate her wedding to be the whatever the person who's in charge of saying you're married. So I knew that it was going to be in Seattle. And she asked me for the year before in 2020, and then they postponed the wedding, so in January or February, she asked me again and the wedding was the end of July, and I knew that I wouldn't fly. That seemed too scary and I have a dog that, you know, needs to go with me. And so I bought a little van and converted it for camping and went away for two months. I was gone July and August, part of September.

NA: Oh, that sounds like an adventure.

KA: So that was a really good adventure, but I can tell how much the shutdown has affected me and I still worked. I mean, because I did all the electronics and the power and figured out all those things before I left. But I realized how much the shutdown of the pandemic. It affected me because I dehydrated just a whole bunch of food so I could make like soup or other things out on the road. And it didn't weigh very much, just in case we get shut down again and I didn't want to go in grocery stores. I only drove up to Seattle. It's not like I went across the United States or anything, so it was a nice trip and my dog really liked it. And the wedding was really lovely. So and then kind of right after the wedding, so the wedding was the end of July, and in August the Delta variant started. Yeah, but I was out camping, so I didn't care. I wasn't around other people. It's just me and my dog. So that was kind of nice.

00:25:21

NA: That must have been nice.

KA: Yeah, it was.

GM: This has not been the first and probably not the last time when governments rely on women to uphold social well-being in times of hardship. Do you agree with this statement and do you have any hopes or wishes relating to this in the future?

KA: I absolutely agree with the statement. I worked in a male dominated profession. There was a pretty senior manager in an aerospace company where I was often the only woman in the room

and 25 to 50 people were in the room. We live in a very patriarchal society. The is the career I'm in now is pretty women-centered. But we live in a world where women hold up more than half the sky and aren't valued for it. I mean, towards the end of my career, I would just text guys in the room that I knew well, that were my buddies and say, say this now I want to leave, because if I said it we wait for another two hours till one of the guys said it. That's the way our world is, and it hasn't changed very much. So. Yeah.

NA: How many years were you in this male-dominated field like involved in aerospace?

KA: 30, 25, 30.

NA: Ok.

KA: Long time, long enough time, too long. I retired the day I could retire. Well, not exactly. I stayed a couple of months extra because they paid me a lot of money to stay around. But then I left as soon as that was done.

NA: Did it feel intimidating at first?

KA: Not really. I really like theoretical math, which didn't serve me well as an engineer, but I was always really, really good at math. And, so like I had years of experience from middle school on of kind of not fitting in in those kind of ways. When I started middle school, junior high, I lived in Bolivia and then I lived in Panama, and then I lived in the states, and every year I moved someplace else and I was always the best math student in any school I went to. So I've always kind of not followed a girly path. I was good at it, so it it wasn't too intimidating. And I have a dad who worked as an engineer who always had me doing stuff that wasn't typically girly, like pulling a car engine or I built a house or things where I got to be successful at those things. So it made me I think it made me kind of strong.

NA: Amidst the pandemic and the tragedies of the pandemic, many have found that it was a time of meaningful reflection as well. Do you relate to this?

KA: Yeah. I do. I mean, I work as a psychotherapist. It's kind of about reflection. Yes, and with some of my colleagues, you know, we we did groups together and talked about things that were going on and what we wanted for the future, what we wanted to change, what we didn't want to change.

NA: Yeah.

00:30:04

KA: I watched a film this week. I'm right by USC, University of Southern California, where I live and USC does lots of community things, and one of them is there was a really good school of cinematic arts theaters movie. Lot of people go there because they want to make movies when they grow up. So they do movie screenings of films that, well most of them are in public theaters, but they aren't big names, movies, necessarily. And then during the pandemic, they did them all online, and now that USC is back in person, they do a lot of the screenings on campus. I don't go to the ones on campus. But they did one this week online called The First Wave, and it's a documentary that was made in New York during the beginning of the pandemic. And it was a good reminder of really how awful it was. And one of the scenes in the film is New York City with no people and no cars. And Los Angeles was pretty fabulous when there was no traffic. Like, I would go out and drive once a week to keep the car going and stuff. It was great to have no traffic. But then there was so many other things that were so awful.

NA: Yeah.

KA: So. Yeah, I think that the film is worth seeing the first wave it'll be on Hulu. It's in theaters now, but it will be on Hulu too. And then the play that Kristina is doing right now. The New York Theater Workshop did a online piece last April maybe I don't remember the exact date that was the draft. I don't know theater talk, but it eventually became what she's doing live in New York.

NA: Ok.

KA: Ok. And so in that play, in that performance piece, she does a whole piece around the... I haven't seen the play in New York, but in this thing I saw she did, it was in three three parts of it. One was the things that happened with the Aunties and how the Aunties came to be, and that whole no elastic, no all of that. And then another piece of it was what happened to her during that year. And the third piece was around politics and Trump and how awful that was. And when I saw it, one of the things I thought about was, I hope this is taped somewhere and I can watch it in a few years because this year has been so traumatic that people have forgotten, they've not remembered and for good reason, I mean, it's like your brain wants to shut that crap down. And so I'm glad that that I'd seen it and it made me really think about everyone has stories of what this past year of shut down and what that's been like for everyone. So I did a little group for some therapists I know and for some of the aunties around, what's been meaningful for you over the last year? What do you want to keep around? What what's your imagination about the year to come? And then I did another session that was just for the Aunties of the same thing. I think we're going to all forget how awful this time was in many ways. Even for those who've had

somebody died or somebody who's been really ill. My sister has been really ill. Not because she got COVID, but because she had a negative effect from the vaccine. And she's been quite ill. And she will still say she's really glad that she has the vaccine.

00:35:31

NA: Ok

KA: Even though she's been hospitalized four times. So –

NA: So sorry to hear that. Hope she gets well soon.

KA: Oh, I do, too. She will. She's already feeling better, so.

NA: OK.

KA: Thank you for saying that.

GM: Are there any closing remarks, key points you would like to leave our listeners with?

KA: Well, I mean. I would say be of service, not even just during a pandemic, but find a way to be of service. Find a way to help others and it doesn't have to be something big and dramatic, like making I forget the number of masks I made, but it was close to 6000.

NA: Wow.

KA: It's like you don't have to do anything that dramatic. Help a neighbor. If you're if you're in line, you know, getting coffee, buy coffee for the person behind you, do something kind for someone else. If you can afford it, I mean, don't do things that put you in a negative place. But if you can afford to buy somebody a cup of coffee or two, whatever it might be, it's like those things matter. Letting other people know that they're cherished and cared for, so make a big difference, and they help you.,

NA: That's so important, thank you so much for that.

KA: You're welcome.

NA: Thank you for meeting us.

KA: Oh, you're welcome. I do that. I get interviewed by people in graduate school for two or

who want to be therapists quite often. Because when you're in graduate school to be a therapist, that's almost always one of your assignments is to find a therapist to interview. So and you guys must be almost done with this semester or quarter.

NA: Yeah, almost almost.

KA: Will you go back to Cyprus for the holiday or yeah?

NA: Yeah, I'm hoping to go to London to see my grandparents first. Since they won't be able to come to Cyprus because they're like for safety reasons regarding the pandemic, they're scared to fly over. So I'm hoping to go visit them first.

KA: Oh, good, that's nice. You can visit them.

NA: Yeah.

KA: Georgina how about you?

GM: Well, most of my family lives lives around us, so there really isn't much. There's not much traveling involved. But since I do live with my grandma, we try to maintain some distance to protect her since she's the most vulnerable out of all of us.

KA: That's good. Yeah, I think I'll probably spend Thanksgiving on my own just because for those kind of reasons. Yeah. And also because someone told me this week that they had a false negative test, so they were really positive, and they flew and visited their family, visited their dad and the man's and uncles who are now positive and are quite ill. And so it's like, I don't think I need to go out in the world too much. I'm double vaxxed and I've had the booster shot and I'll go to a restaurant if it's outdoors. Since I'm in L.A., that's pretty much all year round. But I'm not going to like going into closed spaces. Yeah, it's kind of changed what how the world is.

00:40:02

NA: Definitely.

KA: Yeah. So, but enjoy your travels and enjoy being with your grandma and family.

NA: thank you

KA: Both of you. Enjoy your holidays

NA: Well, thank you so much for meeting with us.

KA: Oh, you're welcome. Bye bye.

NA: Bye, have a good day.

KA: Okay.