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## Interview with Lisa Hennig

Lisa Hennig

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**Interviewee:** Lisa Hennig

**Interviewers:** Tylia Brewster, Sarah Shaw

**Date:** December 1, 2021

**Location:** Zoom

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

**Length:** 00:31:27

**Overseen:** Dr. Chrissy Lau

**Bio:** Lisa Hennig was born and raised into a middle class white family in Washington state and from a young age she was taught to be inclusive of other ethnic groups and learn about many different cultures. She married, had children, and worked in a law office advocating for rights for individuals with disabilities. She made masks and donated to her local community center before she joined the Auntie Sewing Squad in January of 2021. Since joining, she has made 1,500+ masks and sent them to communities all over the United States with little access to masks.

**Thematic Outline:** (00:00:00) Hennig recalls how her parents instilled in her a vocabulary around civil rights and the importance of embracing many different communities in Washington. (00:06:45) Hennig then discusses how she developed an interest in sewing and how she joined the Auntie Sewing Squad. (00:12:24) She next discusses what life was like before COVID and the biggest challenge she faced during the pandemic: isolation. (00:21:07) Hennig lists women who have had a great impact on her life, including her grandmother and her stories of living through the 1918 pandemic, anti-Vietnam war activists, and disability justice activists. (00:25:50) Lastly, Hennig reflects on how the Trump presidency has impacted her social relationships, her children's social awareness, and participating in protests such as March for Our Lives.

## Oral History Transcript

00:00

**Tylia Brewster (TB):** OK. Hi, my name is Tylia Brewster. And I'm with Sarah.

**Sarah Shaw (SS):** Hi, my name is Sarah. Ok, and so the first question that we wanted to get just kind of get to know you more so where and when were you born, and just a little bit about about like your childhood growing up and kind of a little bit about your background.

**Lisa Hennig (LH):** Sure, sure. I was born in 1957, which seems like so long ago. I was born and raised in Seattle, basically just outside the city limits. My family, I think, has been in Washington state for about five generations prior to me. Both my grandparents grew up in Yakama - my mom's parents, I don't know my bio dad's family. I don't think you can say blue collar, because I don't think blue collar was even a thing then. They were just laborers and such. My dad was a truck driver. My mom was a stay at home mom. She also had significant mental health issues throughout my life, which really kind of impacted my my childhood in a lot of ways that I didn't understand until I was an adult. And even now, I think I learned a lot more about it. And yet she was very, very instrumental in talking to me about civil rights and social justice. The woman never left her house right, but she watched tv all the time. I knew who Cesar Chavez was when I was nine years old. My mom was a huge supporter of civil rights in every aspect. And my grandparents, it's kind of weird, my grandparents were Baptist missionaries and went to the Philippines. My grandma graduated from high school, but my grandfather did not. Again, my dad was a truck driver, so we were kind of working class, but kind of middle class like our neighborhood was basically, again, blue collar workers, some office workers. We had a couple across the street that were teachers and they were kind of elevated in everybody's eyes because they were educated. So I was the first person in my family to go to college and actually the first person to ever graduate from college, and I was 39 when I finally finished my degree. So what else could I tell you? It was a pretty typical white child in the 70s upbringing. You did the summer camp, not over overnights, but like day camp, you know, and we had so much more freedom than the kids have now. Even though it was a big deal to get the car to go somewhere. But my friends and I used to truck all over town and our parents didn't really question it. I mean, I think of some of the stuff we could have gotten into that we didn't because we were just naturally good. But we're just we're so innocent, but we could roam all over the place. I would never let my kids do what I did or my grandkids. No way. It was just a different kind of time. But I was always kind of like the black sheep of my family. I didn't like the things that they like. I really, really didn't care about holidays and I still don't. I was always interested in other cultures, and my parents kind of instilled that in us like they took us to community celebrations, like Seattle has a lot of Asian Americans, we would go to Bon Odori, which is a big Japanese festival. We went to pow wows with my parents really felt it was important that we understand that everybody belongs here and that that's what makes this country great, so I'm really appreciative of that considering where I lived, I mean, we literally had a handful of nonwhite students in our high school, and a handful. It was a very, very white neighborhood and yet I think it was pretty open minded for its time. Looking back, I think of some of the things I see happening now or things that people I know think are ok and that would never have flown in my my childhood, in my community. I'm really appreciative of that. Another thing I think that was instrumental is that I grew up three blocks from an institution for the developmentally disabled.

So I grew up in an era when people were put in a facility because they had down syndrome. I mean, from birth, give your baby away because it's not going to be what you think it should be? That kind of impacted me. And one of my first jobs was as a college students work study was at that facility working in the recreation department, and that was at a time they were moving people into the community, into group homes. And I went on to have a career as a case manager and then work in a law office for 20 years, advocating for the rights of individuals with disabilities, civil rights, the ADA that passed in 1990. And yet it's still an issue. Why does somebody have to fight to get accessibility to their workplace or their school or whatever? So I think that some of those things came from my childhood kind of helped develop who I am today. And then I went on married, not one, but two Arabs in succession. And so my kids grew up with bicultural experience. They don't identify as Caucasian. They have Arabic names. I lived in the Middle East for a short while in the late 80s, and that certainly, it gives you a different perspective, kind of how other people view the US and Americans. I lived among so many Muslims and Arabs in a very long time, spent like 15 years, really kind of learned to view things from an outsider's perspective, and I think that really kind of helped me view things in a more global way, but also kind of like why are we this way? And maybe as Americans we're not as great as we think we are? Maybe our society is a little more flawed that we want to acknowledge? Anyway that that's kind of where I come from.

06:45

**TB:** That's very interesting. Ok, so our next question is, did you have any previous sewing experience? Was there a specific person in your life that inspired you to start sewing from your childhood or throughout your life?

**LH:** In eighth grade, they made us take home ec. And I was a 4.0 student. And yet I got a D on my little dress that we had to make an eighth grade sewing because I really had difficulty, maybe because I'm left handed and I always had difficulty like following directions when the teacher would stand up in the front of the class, go do this and do that. And It was crap. And I hated it. And I felt so awkward and uncomfortable because I couldn't rely on a book and write a good paper. So I kind of shied away from sewing for a long time. And then I always enjoyed arts and crafts, and I used to, this is going to date me again, in the 70s, we were really into macramé and weaving, and I did a lot of that. And then as an adult, I did a lot of needlework, embroidery and stuff, and then I taught myself how to sew. I mean, I was like, whatever. I had my grandma's sewing machine - great grandmothers - and started sewing and made a lot of stuff for myself and my kids. Nothing fancy, pretty basic. But those dresses that were popular at Target last year that everyone's making fun of like the prairie dress, it was like a big thing online, I can make those, in the 70s. I made those. And then in the 90s, I ended up going through a horrific divorce and ended up with a single parent of four kids, so I didn't really have time to sew, and I put a sewing machine away. And then when I pulled it out to start sewing masks, I found that my youngest daughter had pretty much thrashed it in high school and she got good use out of it was like a piece of shit. Pardon my French. And I had to buy a sewing machine for COVID. And then I went on and burned the heck out of that, and I used it so intensely that I end up buying a second one just for the mask making because it was this pretty cheap. So I wouldn't say anybody in particular influenced me. I've always been kind of what they call auto didactic where you kind of

like to learn on your own, and just kind of try stuff. And I always kind of just do my thing, in a weird way, I guess, not by the the traditional methods. Did I answer that thoroughly?

09:26

**SS:** Okay, so the next question. Yes. Yes, very good. Thank you.

**LH:** I feel like I'm job interview.

**SS:** For the third question of, oh, we're just wanting to know what made you want to join the Auntie Sewing Squad? Oh, I know you kind of talked about. Yeah.

**LH:** So, you know what? Initially, when COVID hit, I'd been laid off. Actually, I took a voluntary layoff from my job thinking I was saving somebody else's job, but that didn't happen. So I been laid off and I was like, oh shit, what are we going to do? It was my husband who is who is 74 now and my 30ish year old daughter had moved back in because of the pandemic and we're like, remember when the surgeon general's on the news with bandanas? OK, so take a bandana and some rubber bands and I'm like, ok. So we tried that and it didn't work. What the heck are we going to do? This is way back when things were starting. We're getting kind of kind of freaked out. So I was like, ok, I'm just going to try something. And my friend said, here, try this pattern that we found on another Facebook group. And then I started making masks and people said, can you make me some? And I started making them, and I'm like, well, now I'm not working and I'm kind of bored, and I need something to keep me busy and keep my mind off of this. And I always liked sewing once I figured out how to do it. So I just started taking masks to things like the county up here would have what they call essential hub drives, like trying to collect food and toiletries and toilet paper and masks were a hot ticket item. So I would just to crank out like 80 to 100 and then just drop them off. So I was kind of like, ok, people need these, people who because, they'd be like, well, get your kid masks for school. And I'm thinking, oh, oh, sure, right? Because I remember what it was like being a single parent with four kids and no money. And if somebody told me I had to furnish masks for my kids, I'd be like, are you kidding me? So I thought, I'm just going to keep making these, and I just kept giving them out. And then, it was starting to be winter, so they weren't having those hub drives. And it was, I guess, it was January of 2021, I found the Aunties on Facebook and and joined up, and then I think I made another 1500 for them after the 1000 I'd made before. And I was just so grateful to find a group doing what I'd been doing on my own, to just kind of have a connection and be like, ok, I'm not out of my mind. There are other people doing this and they have a way to to get these out to people who really need them. Because you know what? I contacted one of the homeless shelters here, one of the big ones, and they wanted, well, we would only like that they would be this particular model and I'm like, you've got to be kidding me, because if you're on the street and you're houseless and it's cold, do you really care if it's a particular model? So I was like, ok. And then when I found the Aunties, I was like, Great, this works.

12:24

**TB:** So you kind of answered our next question. It had to do with how the Auntie Sewing Squad helped support you during this time of the pandemic and how you helped support fellow Aunties during this difficult time. So you kind of answer that one. So I'm just going to move to the next

one. So before you join the Auntie Sewing Squad, what did your hobbies include? Like, what did a day in your life look like?

**LH:** Ok, I worked full time and the last few years, my husband, I would take road trips because we have a little 1970s British two seater convertible. So we would take trips with other people to events in California and Canada and that kind of stuff. And then with COVID that came to a screeching halt. I'm really into photography, but with COVID, I mean, my dog and cat would see me come in with the camera and be like, get away lady. And so it was really kind of like, well, now what are you going to do? So that really kind of helped have to give me something to do. My other hobbies kind of shut down, the gym closed. Couldn't see anybody, you know how that is. I baked a fair amount, cooked a fair amount. And now that the masks have kind of winded down, I took up knitting, taught myself how to knit. So I made three hats that I gave in a clothing drive and made two sweaters for my dog. And now I'm starting on a lovely sweater for me that probably nobody will ever see because I think it's going to be a little a little wonky because it's the trial run. But I plan to keep up with that, and I wish I'd found it sooner because you can do it anywhere, you know what I mean, any time? So that's kind of cool. And back to the question about the Aunties. There's the dog. The Aunties were helpful in just that emotional connection and contact like the ones who live in California, they have these things where they drop off stuff to each other. And I was up here, so I didn't have that, but they did send me some stuff, but also just the whole Facebook connection, to get on there and find that somebody was doing the same stuff, keeping each other going, that really helped.

14:56

**SS:** I'm sorry, I was cutting in and out. What question are we on right now? Just so I know.

**TB:** We're on question six right now.

**SS:** Oh, ok.

**LH:** We could've totally messed with you.

**SS:** Ok, so question six is, was COVID 19 the first pandemic that you've experienced or lived through?

**LH:** Yeah, how old do you think I am? No I'm just kidding. Yeah, it was, but you know what? My grandmother lived through the 1918 flu epidemic and she used to tell me stories when I was a little kid about how she was six or seven years old and first they sent her to stay with her grandma and her aunts because they were afraid that the kids would get it. But then everybody got sick, and here she was, six years old, taking care of people, trying to feed people and that kind of stuff. I mean, I never forgot those stories that she would tell because they had such an impact on her. It was so hard to imagine. I mean it's still kind of inconceivable to me. So let's hope this is our last one.

**TB:** Hopefully. Ok, so the next question is what was the biggest challenge you faced during this pandemic?

**LH:** I think for me, it is weird because, it's kind of like two opposites can be true at the same time. Like, you're really isolated socially and yet there is something very what's the word I'm looking for. It kind of forced you to confront being alone and the solitude, and it's different. I'm not in my twenties. I'm not your age and being like, I'm supposed to be, meeting people and going out and doing the thing and living. I've done all that and there are times my husband, I've been like, you know what? Thank god we're old because we did all that. But I feel like that was the hardest thing was just that isolation. I mean, I have four kids. And for Thanksgiving, two of them came for dinner. Two of them didn't because one of them went to her ex's family to see her son and the other one and her partner are still really, really kind of a bad space emotionally, but also they have physically, they have underlying conditions. And my daughter is the principal of an alternative high school, and she had been exposed to COVID. And like the one time she went anywhere socially, she gets exposed to COVID. So she was kind of isolating for seven days to make sure she didn't have it. So she didn't come. And I'm like, I've hardly ever see my kids. We do the patio thing, the garage thing, whatever. So that's been hard, I think that's the hardest part is not seeing them, and yet, you know what? We can pick up the phone, we can do the zoom. And we haven't really suffered the way a lot of people have in terms of job loss or even isolation. Because again, you know what, you just do the best you can do. You just have to roll with it and it is what it is, but I don't know. I think the hardest thing has been the isolation, and yet again, it's had some positives.

**SS:** Yes, I completely agree with that. I think that isolation was definitely the hardest part, and especially for being in college and famous for it was definitely, really hard to yeah, that had that social interaction. So I think across the board, all the people that I talked to throughout the pandemic, that definitely the social isolation, the beginning and kind of the unknown are probably the hardest part of the whole thing. And now that we know what we need to do, we need to wear a mask to socially distance. It's a little bit better because things are opening up. And but I do agree with you that that was probably I think I can definitely relate to that, but that was a super hard thing for me to go through in life for my family.

**LH:** Yeah. Because like my daughter, that's the principle, she's got a big FOMO while she's got to be doing stuff all the time. She's one to play hoops. Yeah. Just being at home is hard for her.

**SS:** Yes, I think. I think it's hard for everyone. Moving on to the next question, I think honestly, I think you answered it before when you're talking about the math, but I just want to kind of reiterate it on. The question was were you selling masks for people within your community or did you ship masks out to other places? And I know you briefly, you talked about how you gave some of the homeless shelters. You're giving some of the people in your community. Were there any other times where there was a large shipment that you shipped out to people in need and can you can kind of expand on that and kind of tell us who and where?

**LH:** That was the great thing about the Aunties, because initially I did it for friends and family and then the community and the community drives. But when I found the Aunties, they pretty much exclusively went other places. And the cool thing was because of the setup they had, I would get reimbursed for shipping and they got to know me at the post office. They went to

Texas, all over California, I sent some to somebody in Georgia, I think. I made a spreadsheet so I could keep track of the numbers where they went, the reimbursement, that kind of stuff. But even if I hadn't gotten reimbursed, I wouldn't have cared. It was nice because you could just kind of pay it forward and keep going. That was the really awesome thing of the Aunties, is that they just sent them where they were needed and they had vetted the organizations that they were sent to typically. So, they don't want to send them somewhere like, oh yeah, send us 50 masks, and then you could find out, well, they could get them...but these were pretty much to organizations supporting people who did not have access and really needed them.

21:07

**TB:** That's really cool that you guys were able to send them out to different places.

**LH:** It was amazing. It was pretty, pretty amazing.

**TB:** Ok, so the next question is, did you have any inspiration when it came to women's history? If so, who was it and why did that person inspire you?

**SS:** I'm going to say before you answer this question, the reason why I put this question in is because since our class is women's history and kind of like going through the decades of women's history, I thought it'd be good to kind of see your perspective on it because I know there's lots...

**LH:** Absolutely. Ok, so I would say even though she wasn't famous, my grandma was a huge inspiration to me again because what she told me about the pandemic, what she told me about her life in general. Growing up her dad was a logger, but he was also a gambler, and they would move from camp to camp. And just one time he gambled away the silverware. So my great grandmother divorced him in probably 1931, who did that right? And she ran a cafe in a small town in Washington called Centralia. And I always think about that like, wow, that seems not like something did that women did a lot back then. First, off to have the guts to divorce the no good dog, right? And be a single parent and a business woman, and then my grandmother telling me what she did and then also just the things they went through in World War II you'd hear about. But definitely, and I think also just having a lot of women mentors as a kid because my mom was not extremely functional in a lot of ways. So I was an avid reader of biographies, and yet I can't pull up the names of very many individuals just off the top of my head. I will tell you that one of the women who is always influenced me was the singer Joan Baez, because she was so vocal and so adamant in her beliefs about civil rights and human rights and social justice, and her work reflected that as she did things that were unpopular. I believe she went to North Vietnam during the Vietnamese war. She protested against the war. To this day, she's still kind of a beacon for those kinds of things. Anybody who is involved in those kinds of things and some of them weren't American women, they were more involved globally. And just kind of following those things, people who stood up for the rights of people regardless of gender, identity, etc. And I think also, individual names again, but I got to say, you know what the WNBA those, women to me have just been so inspiring. Cynthia Cooper, I mean, people back in the day because that's who my daughter looked up to. And that was so empowering for her, and I took joy in that. And just the fact that, you have to follow your beliefs and make the world a better place. And I hope



that I can do that for somebody, make sure that they understand you have to you have to stand up for what's right. And a lot of people that I would look up to were very active in the disability movement, so you probably never heard of them, but just their collective work that has made a lot of what we take for granted now. You have to and you have to just keep working on that because we know what will happen if we don't, it will erode. Well, it is eroding. So anyway, I'm going to get all political now. I'll stop.

25:50

**SS:** And so one of our last questions is I know you spoke in the beginning about how your family, when you were growing up, was very like you lived in a predominately white area, but your family and your parents were very kind of inclusive and they gave you so many experiences to think about different cultures and things like that. And so the last question was just how did your family and friends feel about your involvement in setting up for injustices happening in society? Because I think in the past year, besides the pandemic, there's been a lot of things in the news and things that have been happening with social justice and a lot of different groups have been impacted and so how does your family and friends feel about you kind of having involvement, having a voice in that and then just, I don't know, it's just such a loaded question, so I'm excited to hear what you have to say about that. Yes.

**LH:** I will say that first off, since November 2016, my friendships have changed somewhat. I got to text the morning after the election and I've been a friend of mine, said, thank said the people have spoken and I texted her back, I sure as hell hope you're wrong and that friendship kind of ended. You know what, I am so proud of my kids in terms of their commitment to social justice. I mean, I get on their Instagram feed and like I didn't know anything about that. I mean, they educate me. They are in the moment they know what's happening and what's important on so many fronts. Anything you could think of, they already know about it, and they're already getting the message out there and making sure that other people are aware and that they're taking a stand. So I feel that I kind of did my job well and I got to stay on top of it to be up there with them in terms of current events, like what I didn't hear about that. So I think they're probably pretty proud of me. I think my son, he doesn't seem as much, even though he's very aware and very active, I think he's like, oh, isn't that cute, she's making those little masks for people. But again, I'm out in the community more than they are even now, they're still kind of like, oh, COVID. But on so many different fronts, those kids are super aware, super committed and super involved. My husband, when I met my husband, we've been together 17 years. When I met my husband, he was a republican, which not a bad thing. But he has said things lately that I am just like, all right, yeah, you get it. And so I know that our family has kind of pulled him into being even more aware of injustice and how to fix that. And I know he is good with the checkbook. Send them some money, they need help and that's important. Again, like I said, I've lost some friends, but most of the people that I choose to associate with have similar beliefs, and it's okay if you have different beliefs, but not not when it gets to limiting somebody's freedoms or rights or not thinking that you know what I'm saying, I don't have to go there. Just how can people think some of the things they think, how can they? I think one of the last active marches I went to is with my one of my daughters was March for Our Lives after the Stoneman Douglas High School shootings. Yet we have so much work to do in this country. It's heartbreaking. And again, if people aren't ok with me and my opinions, that's fine. That's fine. But whatever you can do to

kind of gently educate people or even get them to question, well, why do you think that? Well, really, where does that come from? Mean we all have that. Well, I mean, there are certain things that I can't believe I thought that or where's that coming from? Anyway, there I go, preaching again.

30:47

**SS:** No, I thank you for your answer on that, because it's good to know that you know your family and your friends, you have a very solid background and a lot of people that you're friends with that involve yourself with kind of have are happy that you're standing up and you're involved with that. So it's crazy to say, but I think we went through all of our questions. And so I just wanted to say thank you so much for being with us tonight. And I'm sorry for the technical issues again, but I thank you so much for being with us and kind of sharing your story so we can get to know you a little bit better. But I don't think I have anything else. Do you have anything else?

**TB:** I don't but everything you said was very informative, and it was really nice to hear your stories.

**LH:** Well, thank you. It was a pleasure to share them because sometimes you kind of live in your head and it helps to verbalize what you think and kind of reaffirm it and maybe just communicate with other people. So thank you so much. Sarah, I need to know what position you play.