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Interview with Maria Elena Rodriguez

Maria Elena Rodriguez

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Auntie Maria Elena Rodriguez Interview Transcription

Interviewee: Maria Elena Rodriguez

Interviewer(s): Kaylee McCargar and Kenna Skye Bokhari

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Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Born in San Francisco, California, Maria Elena Rodriguez is a Latin Mexican Filipino television writer. Exposed to sewing at a young age by her grandmother, Rodriguez was able to use this skill during the AIDS pandemic where she participated in sewing sections of the AIDS quilt. Her skill for sewing eventually helped her again later during the Coronavirus pandemic where she became a member of the Auntie Sewing Squad and sewed masks for underprivileged communities.

Summary:

(00:03:40) Maria Elena Rodriguez describes her childhood growing up in a big middle-working class immigrant family and learning basic sewing skills from her grandmother. (00:15:41) Rodriguez then goes into detail about how she got involved in sewing the AIDS quilt in the 80s while she was living in San Francisco with neighbors who were gay and who died of AIDS. (00:21:53) She explains how she came across a Facebook post that was offering people free fabric and talking about joining the Auntie Sewing Squad and she just started making many masks with a Costco sewing machine she bought and had to figure out how to use. (00:30:18) When asked about frustrations with politics and government during her volunteerism with ASS, Rodriguez expressed frustration with the government and politicians lack of involvement with the supply of PPE and safety during the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. (00:46:10) Rodriguez ends the interview by reflecting on favorite memories from ASS, explaining that everyone comes together in a time of crisis to help one another, and leaves us with parting words of inspiration to never accept that something is the way that it is and that it cannot change.

00:00:00

KM: All right, so we can start.

MER: In fact, if you didn't have a copy, I was going to put a copy of the book that Kristina Wong and some of the aunties published, have you seen it?

KM: She's talked about it. Yeah.

MER: Yeah, hang on a second, I'll just run and get it because it's by my bed.

KSB: OK.

MER: So, yes, I feel like our group has branched out into merchandise and everything. So this is in fact the book that's available on Amazon and might be really helpful to your study too, because it goes into all of the questions of solidarity and sort of on the ground organization that people think is so much trouble, but turns out with the right group of people is natural. Because our natural personality tendencies that so many of us seem to have had that just needed to be tapped at the right moment.

KSB: OK. So I'm going to start now. Okay, so. Hi, my name is Kenna Skye Bokhari and my partner for this interview is Kaylee McCargar. Today on Zoom we are interviewing Maria Elena Rodriguez, who is an Auntie Sewing Squad member. The day is November 29th, 2021, and the time is 2:05pm. The goal of this interview is to record the experience of the Auntie Sewing Squad members during the pandemic, while also covering a little bit about their life and activism. As the interviewers, Kaylee and I would like to remind you of your rights to confidentiality. You may request to stop the recording at any time. You are not obligated to answer certain subjects. If you wish, you may exclude certain parts of this interview from being published. However, this interview will not have a lawyer and client privilege. This means that the content within this interview can be viewed by anyone once released and can be used against you. OK, now that we have that covered, thank you so much for being here and welcome to the interview. How are you today?

MER: OK. I will also say that yes, we are all OK, we're still alive, we're still here. And that hasn't changed. So I am happy to help you with whatever research you're doing, whether it's a paper or this is going to be an oral transcribed archive that you want for the future because the important thing is that people know that this isn't such an unusual notion to occur in America. And the truth is, most history is written by men about men. And we got to fix that, this is a good step. This is a good first step.

KSB: OK, thank you so much. And now I will let Kaylee start the interview.

KM: So our first question we have for you is to tell us a little bit about your family background and how did you grow up?

00:03:40

MER: I am from a big Latin Mexican Filipino family in San Francisco, and I would say that we are working-middle class and our parents took jobs like nurses, accountants, computer data

programmers, shipping clerks, UPS drivers. That was my family, good, solid, American working class and their hopes for us for the second generation was to go to college and major in something useful like engineering or law or teaching and all that. And some of us did, and some of us did not. I personally got a degree in comparative literature at Berkeley, which is like being an English major in foreign languages. My sister got a theater degree. But we have many MBAs and engineers and computer science and tech majors in our family, as well as bio sciences and now more biotech combination of tech and science and all that. No doctors, no lawyers, but still solidly in the middle class. And we also have a good sort of working-class continuation of people who didn't necessarily go on to college but got union jobs like driving for UPS, state government, local government and all that. That is a very sort of American immigrant experience.

KSB: That's so interesting

MER: But the thought is, if you had the privilege of getting into college, you were supposed to use that to have some sort of higher middle class money making career and college has kind of changed in that it's no longer about going to be an educated person who is already part of the middle class, and it's like no step above. You got to be a step above what your parents achieved.

KM: Thank you.

MER: Of course, I'm a TV writer, so I totally jump back. There was no way to really study for that back then, but it is a writing and communication career and before that I was an animation producer. Again, something you couldn't really study for back then. But having majored in communication and just being a very curious, adaptable person in my making little short animated films because I like telling stories because I read books in several languages, gave me some useful base to say, OK, cartoons, I want to tell stories in cartoons. Cool. I'm not that great of an artist drawing, but I can organize teams of people to do the drawing and everything, and we can meet the deadline. And in fact, my very first job in animation on television was The Simpsons in the early years.

KM: Oh, wow.

MER: And there was no preparation. There was no school that could train you to be an animation producer back then. If you went to Cal Arts, you could learn to draw or you drew very well, so you got into Cal Arts and you could draw cartoons, but you couldn't necessarily tell a concise story, and you didn't know how to organize the work with so many, 200 people involved, to get one half hour episode on the air on TV at the right time. So all those other skills that are anything other than drawing are what I learned or I had. And those did not necessarily come

from going to college, because at college, what do we do? We write term papers. You can't write a term paper and say that's.

KSB: Well. OK. Should we pause the recording?

KM: Hi, sorry, I think we lost you for a second.

0:09:10

MER: I think my computer or some computer crashed, but we'll just keep going. That's a new one. But anyway, yeah, I have no qualifications in sewing, either, that was never part of my college education or anything, and in fact, I had not sewn anything since the AIDS quilt in the mid-1980s. And the sewing machine that I have now that I participated in the Auntie Sewing circle I had bought at Costco, but I couldn't figure out how to thread. So the good thing I will say is that for all the education and upbringing I have, the greatest tool has been its either perseverance or curiosity to sit there for hours and hours and figure out how to keep threading this machine because the instructions weren't right. And I went through every tutorial on YouTube. Eventually it worked. And the greatest thing is that because we have this community on Facebook, people would post their questions: anyone have the sewing machine, is anyone having the same problem? And you could connect by dm to someone having the same thing. And it wasn't embarrassing. It wasn't anything that was competitive. It's just like, am I the only idiot here who can't thread my machine? Please somebody help me. And again, because of the pandemic, we couldn't necessarily rush over and go to people's houses to help. So I think if there's one skill that probably women have more than men is that we're not embarrassed to say we don't get it or (say) we need help, can somebody help? I think some guys are getting better at that, but most men don't feel comfortable saying, I don't get it. They're just like, oh, this is not for me or it's sewing, I'll give it to my wife or girlfriend to do. But they don't want to be challenged by something mechanical.

KSB: Yes. Do you mind telling us a little bit about how you first got into sewing and maybe what it was like growing up in San Francisco during the AIDS pandemic?

MER: Well, my grandmother had an old Singer sewing machine. This is my Filipino grandmother and she was always either sewing our clothes or making curtains or doing something with it, and she could actually watch television and sew at the same time. So that sort of multi-tasking work ethic came up. So my sister had a natural talent for it. My sister, who became a theater major, was always designing costumes and sets and all that was very good at it. I was not. I could sew pot holders, straight seams, but clothing, no, I could never sew anything you'd want to wear. And I just kind of decided, okay, my sister got the sewing gene and I'll do this. So my grandmother used to give me piles of material to rip the seams so that she could sew them again and either make clothes smaller or larger, she could add panels to close so that they

would last longer or patches so that she would give me that easy stuff to do. And from time to time, she also did what is called piecework. There were all these sewing factories in Chinatown at the time, and they would hand out piecework to freelancers, depending on whether it was straight seams or cuffs. You get 10 cents or 25 cents or a dollar, depending on the difficulty. And they would just give bales and bales of this pre-cut material to sewers to take home, and you would bring them back and they would count and they would approve whether you'd done it right or not. And they'd add up on an abacus, what money they owed you, and they'd pay you in cash. And sometimes my grandmother did that work and she would take me or my sister with her and then we'd carry her bags and all that. And she'd go deposit her money at the bank and give us each a couple of dollars to go spend on candy and toys and little Trotsky's in Chinatown. So that that was something that happened. Definitely not your generation, but two or three generations before that's how a lot of immigrants made money or made extra money doing piecework at home. Because all the big sewing factories had gone overseas anyway, so they kept a certain amount here in the US and definitely in New York, I talked to people in my generation and Kristina Wong, in fact, her family ran a sewing factory in Chinatown. So this was something that was a skill and honorable job that people could do at home to contribute to the family. And of course, we weren't child labor but whenever my grandmother needed something ripped or the stitches taken out or ironed that became our job as kids to keep her company. And she would pay a few dollars at the end. So we could see that that was very useful and that contributed to the family kitty of expenses. And we also learned how to do certain things like, in fact, the whole time that I was sewing these masks last year, I could do exactly what my grandmother had when she watched soap operas and game shows back then. I watch Netflix shows and Amazon shows, entire six to eight episodes at once while I was also sewing. But I have no training in sewing whatsoever.

KM: So how did you get involved in sewing the AIDS quilts?

00:15:41

MER: I was living in San Francisco at the time in the Haight-Ashbury and some of my well, I would say I was the only woman living in an apartment building with nothing but gay neighbors, and a couple of them had AIDs. And one of them died in hospice right downstairs. So, when you know, one or two people before you know it, five or ten people who are dying at once. And there is nothing you can do about it. There was no cure for it. There is hardly any, well, there were a few memorial services for so many people who were dying so quickly that the only way that people in the community could figure on commemorating so many at once was to create some sort of memorial like a flag and that turned out to be the quilt. And by that time, I had my grandmother's sewing machine. So I wasn't really very good at creating any artistic looking squares, but what I could contribute to the effort was sewing those squares together in straight lines so that we could flatten them out and we could make like basically a flag, which is ultimately a huge quilt because we didn't know how many squares we'd ever have. There was no

real planning for it. It was just who can do these together because it didn't take too long to do by hand. And in fact, you probably know that we made a quilt in honor of Kristina Wong when we finally retired this effort, and you've probably seen it, but that was planned out and designed by professional quilters, the AIDS quilt was not. It was some sort of folksy, ad hoc, completely amateur effort to a point where I am told later on that some of the squares have been sewn together so badly they had to be redone. Oh, I wonder if some of those are mine? But again, it's just when you can't do anything else, you contribute what it is you can do. And that was true, I know even in this Auntie Sewing drive, a lot of people who didn't sew said, I can precut fabric for you. If you gals can just sew, you guys are good with sewing machines, I'm good with a pair of scissors. Other people let us know we can drive supplies around or you guys need food? We can deliver food, coffee and cannabis products, wine, beer. I was like, wow, where's all it coming from? But that's it. It's like when you think about the skill that you actually have is ingenuity of saying, OK, this is where we have a supply breakdown. Maybe I can be that truck. Or I can't sew with a machine, but I have a very good pair of scissors or I'm going to go buy some better scissors. So we had some people who were cutting fabric that was 100 thick. You know, they had like mechanized scissors that could cut really thick amounts of fabric. And they got really good at that and that saved us a lot of time and sewing. So, you do sort of realize what your specialized skill or function is in that basically factory. And ironically, that same factory is the way they make cartoons. Everybody has their specialty and you stay within that specialty. You get better and better at it, and very rarely will you jump or do something else like color design. That is not a gift I have. I should not be hired to do it. I would fire myself if I did. And so that was good. But I got good enough at sewing three or four different kinds of patterns. And that's all based on what little I learned sewing for my grandmother. Because she would never let me do anything too complicated because I would jam up her sewing machine or she's "ahh get away, you're messing it up." Yeah. So I was like in the third grade, so I shouldn't have been operating the sewing machine anyway. But like straight lines, I knew I could do. Gathers I could do, I could attach, what is it called...elastic. And then I figured I could do about 200 masks if I wasn't doing anything else except binging that Netflix. And so for us, I was an unemployed TV writer at the time, so I thought, yeah, this I can do.

KM: Yeah, yeah. During lockdown. Yeah, all the time in the world.

MER: Yeah. And I had no schedule, so I know the one night I sewed my finger. It was right 1:45 in the morning. Who was I going to call and say, I need help. I'm stuck in a sewing machine. I couldn't even reach my phone. But you learn needles now are all plastic. They break. Thank God. So you bleed on a couple of masks, but you do learn what it is you really can do, even if you're an amateur at it, as long as you don't panic. I just learned. And then just think in the years of the sewing factories, how many people lost fingers, actual fingers and those machines? I'm lucky. Yeah.

KSB: Yeah! Do you mind telling us maybe a little bit how you got involved with the Auntie Sewing Squad?

00:21:53

MER: Again I'm not on Facebook that often, but somebody posted, it wasn't even Kristina the founder, it was somebody else in the group who posted an announcement of, "Hey, I have 500 feet of fabric, anybody want some?" And right away, I said, "Oh, look, free fabric!" And I had been cutting up old jeans and old cotton material and all that, and that's where I realized, "Oh, there are other people doing this." I had just started doing it on my own and suddenly I found a group, and very organized (one) and somebody said I'm keeping a spreadsheet. The Navajo Nation needs 500 children's masks. They were listing all the people in need who had requested PPE because remember back then there wasn't any. That was a problem. And I just said, "Oh, good!" By that time, I'm no longer an animation producer, but whenever I see natural organizations and people who take responsibility, doing that, it's like, I don't have to be head of anything anymore. All I need to do is participate and be accountable for what I promised to do. And that's why when I see young leaders like you gals, it's like, oh, good, now I can sit back, I don't have to supervise anybody and, whatever system it's going to be, I will contribute to it immediately. I said, "Yeah, I'm going to be an Auntie!" And then I found out that Kristina Wong, who is a performer, I still have never met in person, she was actually the organizer of it. And I thought, what a writer and actress doing organizing this? And I was just so amused. I would later find out, well, yeah, her parents had, well, I think they actually ran a laundry between different sewing factories in San Francisco. And I said, well, yeah, we're probably related. We're in the same home town. And my grandmother might have done piecework for one of those places, but I thought, oh, this is sort of a cultural connection that I have with her. And then, as I didn't know at the time, Kristina is also a city councilwoman for Koreatown here in Los Angeles. She doesn't just have one or two jobs, she has several. And one of them is that she is a public servant, a civil servant. So a lot of this organizing is like campaigning to her, and she's very good at using social media to do that. So I was not surprised. And then ironically, last year it was about April, I'd written a theater monologue for a friend's theater company, which again had to go on Zoom rather than producing off-Broadway, and she and her producers in New York decided to take all these comedic sketches and monologues. A lot of us women writers had written on the subject of menstruation. It was called period piece about periods. And I wrote one. And Kristina Wong was cast to play my character.

KSB: Wow.

MER: So that was just another crazy...

KM: One of those small things.

MER: Yeah, coincidence. And meanwhile, there I am trying to sew hundreds of masks for her effort. And then suddenly, oh, she's working for me. She's performing my monologue. And we still haven't met. She just came back from New York. In fact, she just did a one woman show which is called Sweatshop Overlord, based on so much of what she talks about in this book. But I think you will find that I certainly found this working like on the first Obama campaign and several other campaigns is that entertainment people are such a hodgepodge of skills that we become useful to things like political and social activist campaigns because we know what it is to juggle and collaborate with people and to not get stuck on too much tradition on the way it was or the way it's to say, oh, ok, pick that up. That's not working next, what, and we don't take it personally. It's like when the Auntie Sewing circle, they changed the pattern, because of feedback we were getting from people, we were delivering the product, they were saying, "Oh, could you use these kinds of metal benders at the nose?" Because the current masks are too loose. Or they were finding out that children had a harder time breathing through a certain kind of fabric and they just requested your next batch, "Could you use this material or could you do it this way?" And we did. We adapted to every piece of feedback that came back or in certain cultures, this color is not cool. Please, no red masks. Why or know what it means, death? I was like, oh, we didn't know that. Or if you're going to use printed material, these kinds of images are really frowned upon. And so the more we knew about certain American Indian tribes or certain Asian cultures, Caribbean cultures we would not have known and we would have sent masks they would not have used. So again, I think if you come from a work culture where we're not IBM, there is not one way to do tech, right? We will adapt. And also, if you come from, we're not big money corporations, so it's like, OK, what's a cheaper fabric we could use and where could we get it? We're always that kind of open to it, and I realize a lot of people who are very steeped in tradition or, well, money, people are the ones to say, "Oh, that's impossible, we can't do it." And that brings me back to The Simpsons because I ended up managing The Simpsons crew. Well, we were nonunion. We're a nonunion studio and no union studio in Hollywood at that time thought they could do that show. Because, they were getting paid a very steep wage and they were really set in the ways of how Hanna-Barbera or Warner Brothers ran cartoon shows and The Simpsons was not going to run like that. So much as I am a workers' advocate and all that I'm saying at certain times, you need to be untethered from tradition to get going. Of course, The Simpsons is now a union run show and everything is fine. But in those early days, everyone said, you can't do that. No, you can't do 26 episodes. No, you can't. No, you can't. You can't. You can't. Well, they stopped asking those people and they came to us. Young upstarts who didn't really know what was possible because we couldn't get jobs and those union chops, we did that. So making sewing masks and making cartoons is not that different. It really isn't. But then there comes, is it fair? I mean, shouldn't the US government or all the world governments have been paying industry to make these? Well, if they asked. Did the industry step up? We don't know that. We don't know the whole story behind that yet. But I know that isn't the question you asked. It's kind of a long answer.

KSB: No

KM: No it's good for yeah

KSB: Yeah, it's relevant because it's where we were actually wondering if you've ever found yourself frustrated with any government assistance or lack thereof?

00:30:18

MER: Well, yes, definitely if you were applying to get unemployment or PPA any of the federal financial aid programs last year, yes, you were going to spend a lot of time on the phone or trying to get on the phone or any local or federal system. It's always going to be a headache. And I just kind of learned also in helping other people sign up for benefits and all that that it is a weeding out process. The people who can't take it are going to fall away. And that is how the government almost expects that there will never be a 100 percent participation because they are not geared up for 100 percent anyway. If everyone who is eligible for benefits, were on the phone at the same time. Or on the website, we would crash it, right? So they are expecting less than full participation. And because they don't have enough workers and they don't have the best technology. For doing even the early years of Obamacare covered California, what a disaster that was. But now nobody wants to, even the Republicans don't dare take it away. It is necessary. So the thing is once you figure that out, yes, it is meant to frustrate you and a certain percentage of us are just going to fall away because we're so frustrated and we will not get what we deserve. And that is not right. So when you think back a year and a half ago in PPE you had Trump saying, Oh, anyone who wants masks can get them on the open market. Yeah, get them where? Pit them against each other so that you're out pricing all the states that just can't get their act together or announcing this or that plant in the Midwest is going to start making PPE now. Well, why haven't they? What's stopping them? And in the meantime, you have all these Aunties in L.A. and San Francisco and all that suddenly cranking them out hundreds at a time. I think we've now made 300,000. And even though the group has disbanded, some people are still doing it. They're still doing it because they still see the need. So, yes, the government should be the answer. It isn't always. And if this is one way to boost the government and say, look, if we can do it, why can't you? Yeah, what's the problem, boys? Well, we know what the problem is. It's just that, unfortunately, it's like a sports team in D.C. right now, even though Trump's gone. What are they still fighting over? It's a dicking game that has no point anymore. So, I would like to take both houses of Congress, put sewing machines in it and say, OK, guys, show us what you got, do it. And they'll say, well, this is what I have a legislative staff for. You don't. But that's it. We get the government we demand. And the problem is that sometimes we don't demand specifically what we want from them, we just say we're unhappy, we want more, we want better, but we have to say this is exactly what we want by this deadline or your ass is out of office. And, where do we get taught to do that? We are never educated, do you guys remember what your civics class was in high school? Well, we obviously passed it if we got into college.

KM: Yeah

KSB: Yeah

MER: I don't remember what mine is, but at the moment, actually one of my other activist projects is that I work with formerly incarcerated people who in California now parolees have the right to vote. Well, nobody's ever taught them how to vote, and their only experience of government has been public school and jail. So how incentivized are you going to be to vote? Actually, one of our uncles in the Auntie Sewing circle, there were several men who are also sewing, is a parolee that I work with and I didn't know he was sewing he was so humble about it. But yes, this is also kind of the continuing civics lesson. What we have is that the government should do everything that we ask them to, but sometimes we ask really badly. Or yes, during the pandemic, we had the wrong jerks in office, so no matter how specific we would have asked, they would never have delivered because they had no interest in us surviving this. So that's a point where, yes, this is a very quiet revolution where we have to basically say up yours. You don't want us to have PPE because you don't care whether we live or die. Well, guess what, we are going to live and we are going to boot your asses out. Nobody goes to jail for that, but we have to get better about doing that, and I would say that in the Auntie Sewing Circle, I know there were many more who were conservative, especially, this was a nationwide effort. So when I looked at the Facebook group, it had people in Mississippi and other places, but I would have to say that I think the bulk of the people, at least that I knew here in San Francisco and L.A., were more progressive or left wing. And I thought, wow, progressive, left wing people own sewing machines. How can that be? Most of them, I would say, well, when they would post their photos now that they were older, they were like people 40 and up. Yeah, we're home. The younger ones were doing a lot of the deliveries and all that, but not that many young people. But then there would be grandmothers who, because the kids were home during school, would be teaching some of the kids how to sew.

KM: Like people my age, I don't think I know anyone who knows how to sew.

00:36:52

MER: No, I mean, unless you're sewing for artistic purposes, you want to be a fashion designer. Nobody sews their clothes anymore. So, well, my sister did because she was very small, she was like 4'10", so she was always customizing clothes for herself and then finally starting to design, and that's how she got into costume design. I made curtains and potholders, but that's as much as I ever learned to do. It's kind of embarrassing, but now I am interested in learning how to sew clothes from easy patterns, but it'll be a while. I'm not leaving the house, I don't need any new clothes. But it is kind of an activist sort of movement. And the only reason I bought my Costco sewing machine was because it was cheap. It was one hundred and seventy-five dollars and I

said I could make some new curtains. I haven't yet. I mean these, I'm going to mend these curtains that are behind right now. But they have moth holes on them. So I said, I'm just going to make some new curtains. And that was two years ago. Other priorities.

KSB: Yeah, that's OK.

KM: Earlier you're talking about all the different roles in the Auntie Sewing Squad. How would you describe your role? Was it mostly sewing or were there like other roles that came into play for you?

MER: Well, for me, it was just sewing because especially as I started out, that was hard enough for me. I wasn't very good at it. I have at least 20 masks here that were so bad, they were so lumpy that I could not include them. So it took me a while to get up to speed. But once I did, I was trying to meet, if I could do 50 in a week and I'd say, let me see if I could do 10 more. And then I would sign up for more. So it was just enough for me as a sewing amateur to stick to that. And then it was a bit of driving around and sharing or picking up materials because as you know, there was such a shortage of so much supplies that even with JOANNE's, which is the big sewing and fabric store, there was no what you call it elastic. We had bought out all the elastic. So somebody bought two big rolls that took three months to come from China and we all got together, and again, we couldn't do this in person, we cut up in length. So we were there with a yardstick and cutting a thousand lengths and then delivering it or mailing it to somebody else who needed it. So the Post Office saw me a lot, right?

KSB: Yeah.

MER: But that was the assignment. It's like, can somebody cut up this five million bolt thing and into this length? There was one length for children's masks, one for adults. And sometimes I would sit there and watch Netflix and just cut and then bundle them up, put them in an envelope, send them on. So that was it. But I never progressed. But some of our group actually did load up trucks and vans and drove to Arizona and New Mexico to some of the Indian reservations and deliver. And they brought like used sewing machines and all that, but some of those places on the res don't have electricity, they don't have running water. I mean, it is the Third World, and that is the U.S., but no, they could not make their own. They could not sew their own masks, if they wanted to, because they don't have reliable electricity, they have a generator that'll go out. So it was nice to be able to just do that. And I think I delivered food a couple of times when some food deliveries arrived, but that was it. People would just post on the Facebook site something that needed to be done, and if it were in your neighborhood, you could go do it and just say, I sign up for this. So there was no duplication and I was able to do that a few times, but mostly I was just trying to get my sewing quota up and not go so fast that I'm ruining fabric because I did that a few times.

KM: Right or sew your finger.

00:41:25

MER: I only did that once, but as we found certain kinds of fabric were harder to sew and we were trying to stay to cotton that could be washed and that was easily breathable. And then we found out that you needed a second layer in between to really catch the allergens and the particles. So we were sewing extra sort of fluffy material that people could wash. So it was a learning curve for everybody. I mean, like the first masks that I made that were too heavy denim were no good for anyone because they couldn't breathe through it. And all I did was cut up some old jeans and figured this is good, no wrong material. Wrong material. And I felt bad about dumping those. That's how I learned how to sew. And if you weren't checking into the website, you wouldn't know what the feedback was from where those masks were sent.

KSB: Yeah.

MER: It's good, it's like grades. Grades are for reasons. Not to tell you suck, but uhh let's try another fabric or the kids say these are itchy and they won't wear them.

KM: We have a couple more questions here for you. How would you describe your overall experience in the Auntie Sewing Squad and what did it mean to you?

MER: It was an absolute pleasure to see other people doing what you wanted to do because I think. One thing that struck most people in the pandemic was the loneliness, how solitary everyone felt cut off even with Zoom, and that you couldn't socialize or recreate with other people, or even just have a chat with someone at the Laundromat because it could be dangerous. But this way you were meeting like-minded people, even if it was only on a Facebook group or even on dropping off. We meet each other on the doorsteps, all masked up. And that was good, too. It really did sort of emphasize the goodness of people. At a time especially early in the pandemic, it was all blaming and lying and people being suspicious of each other or envious or resentful. And here you have perfect strangers saying, hey, we need 500 masks, to Navajo or the Lakota Nation by next Thursday. Can we do it? People say, yeah, sure. And then seeing that we met that goal and it's like, OK, we need a thousand for farm workers in North Carolina and we have three days. We did it. That doesn't happen that often, usually it's in raising money, it's a Kickstarter, we need to have \$30000. Well, we didn't have thirty thousand dollars, but we had people with sewing machines and that tells me that we are better people than we sometimes think we are at a very bleak time. And I am told by people old enough to remember and my mom and my grandmother are all passed now, but they were saying, this is what World War II was like. That when people, it's Thanksgiving and people would ask, we need the food for the soldiers, so would you mind having beans for Thanksgiving? Would you mind no Turkey or would you mind

having meatless and people said, I don't want to, but ok yeah, I'll do it. People sacrificed. And sure, a lot of people cheated, a lot of people lied and all that, but most people sacrificed because we were in that war for five years.

KM: Right.

MER: And at the end of the war, we were still feeding Europe and all the devastated countries. So there were still, up until like the early 50s, we had shortages of stuff here too. So it could be done, and I think that this pandemic is our World War II and not everyone has been stepping up. And I'm not sure why. And part of it, yes, is leadership, we didn't have the kind of leadership that said this isn't just about you and me, this is about something else. Yeah, we could have done it. So it's nice to discover it in your own backyard.

00:46:10

KSB: Yeah! And to kind of a wrap up for the last question, do you have any favorite memories while involved with the Auntie Sewing Squad that you'd like to touch on?

MER: Well, I think it's just from time to time we would have like zooms just among each other just to meet people, and that was really great because we only saw them from posts or their pictures on their Facebook page. And a lot of people have left Facebook. It was nice to see that they were just ordinary people like the rest of us. And usually they were doing a zoom right on their sewing table and you could see the mountains of fabric and all that or their grandchildren in the back ironing. You felt like you were making a home visit. And that was really nice. And then from time to time, there would be a zoom and it would be someone among the recipients just on their phone wearing a mask that one of us made. And that really sort of brought it to life, and it does give you hope in thinking that, yeah, this is something people will do for perfect strangers. And just think of all the other things we could do in this country if it were sort of looked upon like that like, not just food drives but student tutoring or foster kids who need homes or even over the holidays, all the kids that have to leave your dorms and don't have a home to go to. They're not just strangers anymore. So, it's kind of like there was a Simpsons song that said "Strangers are just friends you don't know". It's a parody of a musical that we did one year, but we all learned that song, and I think that's the biggest lesson I got from the sewing circle that with all that has been done to divide us and to separate us and create this elitism that, oh, we all want to be rich people, we all want to be the one percent. And why? Because advertising everything our culture says, that's what we aspire to. We're like those people are pretty unhappy. And they have no skills. I mean, you look at Trump's kids. What actual skill do they have, even if they did go to college, you just sit there and just say, well, we kind of got it backwards. And if anyone actually sat Ivanka down at a sewing machine, she'd break her nails, right? And she's supposedly a fashion designer. I'm sorry. And then Eric and the rest of the Trump boys like no and it's like it, I think it does make the country evaluate what do we really

value in this country? What are the skills and if the skills are just being rich, no these guys working on Wall Street. No they aren't, that isn't a skill. That is luck. That is sure you can major in econ and all that, but so much of making money like that is not productive.

KM: Luck and connections.

MER: Yeah, it goes away so quickly. And then when you have to look at what skills really matter in our society, we say, oh, these are essential workers. If they're so essential, why do we pay them shit wages? And why are we saying that they're okay to die? They can be on the front lines and they'll die first? Well, that's exactly how we run our military, too. So it is really forcing us to think of what our traditions and values are. And this is not communism. This is not socialism. This is kind of like, wait a minute, if the American hero is somebody who can go out into the frontier, which isn't really a frontier because the Indians had it first, that could make a livelihood for themselves, build their own house, kill their own food, make their own clothes. Well, who do we have in our country, who can do that now? And why aren't we teaching this in universities? We don't teach carpentry, plumbing, all the things that make this society run or even cooking. You say, well, poor people should know how to cook. Well, they need housing first before they can cook. So I would say that, yeah, if you got a big term paper, you need to do it. These are the bigger questions that you know you guys can answer or can start asking more questions about, because the answers that we're still getting in the society right now are wrong. They did not prepare us for anything.

KSB: Yeah.

00:51:05

MER: And if we have another year of this pandemic, then who's teaching us how to get out of it or what we're going to have to do to win the next one comes because there will be one. So, but I don't say that to be on the bleak side, it's just that we know what we have to do and sewing masks was only one of the simple things we could do. That was the one thing some of us could not fix, but help out in. I really wish during this time was sitting there saying, Dang, I wish I really were a doctor. I wish I'd stuck with it at Berkeley, but I didn't have the grades. So you do find out what the other important things are to do, and I hope you two will find that also and that you'll also question in school and say, Hey, how come we don't teach this or that there? Why is that not a university level class? And that's the only way anything changes, because somebody says, explain this to me like I'm a five year old. Why don't we do this here? So I hope those are my parting words to you, be bold and never accept anything that's told, simply because when they say that's just the way it is, no. That's a lie, that's a lie. You just caught them and they're embarrassed, so they're not going to tell you so. Okey doke. All right. Thank you so much.

KM: Thank you so much.

MER: Okay. All right.

KSB: It was a pleasure interviewing you. Thank you so much.

MER: It's wonderful to meet and I'm so glad that you've taken this project on because then we will not be forgotten. OK, all right. Thanks.

KSB: Well, thank you.

KM: Thank you.