

11-24-2021

Interview with Renee Swink

Renee Swink

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Interviewee: Renee Swink

Interviewers: Aislynn Chappell and Natalie Searls

Date: Wednesday, November 24, 2021

Location: Zoom

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

Length: 00:21:21

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio: Born near Santa Monica, California, Renee Swink is a white middle class woman who moved to the Bay Area in 1998. Growing up in Los Angeles, she sewed costumes as part of a folklorico for ten years. At the start of the pandemic, she began to make masks for NextDoor before joining the Auntie Sewing Squad. She thoroughly believes in giving back to others and supporting the community.

Thematic Outline:

(00:00:00) Renee Swink explains the purpose of the organization A.S.S as well as shares a little bit about her background, including her childhood and family. (00:05:00) Swink goes into detail about her educational background as well as how she began to make masks for her community on NextDoor. (00:10:00) Swink discusses her time creating ethnic dance costumes for Folklorico along with the diverse community in Los Angeles that influenced her world. Next, she reflects on the 2000 masks that she created for the Auntie Sewing Squad as well as the impact the Squad had on her and the surrounding community. (00:15:00) Swink ends with how she got involved in the organization, her sewing history, and the relationships that were created during her time with the Auntie Sewing Squad.

Oral History Transcript

(00:00:00)

Renee Swink (RS): Is it me? Is it me?

Natalie Searls (NS): Ok.

RS: Ok.

NS: No worries.

RS: And hold on, I got my professional tech man here too.

NS: That's so awesome.

RS: Uncle Bob. Say hi to Uncle Bob.

NS and Aislynn Chappell (AC): Hi.

Bob: Hi, how ya doing?

NS: Good.

AC: I'm so sorry about the confusion. It wasn't working when I sent it so we tried again.

RS: No worries, no worries. But like I say, ok, operator error here. Thank you so much.

AC: So how are you doing today?

RS: Very good. Thank you. Well, I work in retail, so I have the day before Thanksgiving off. And so life could not be much better at this point, that's for sure.

NS: Oh nice!

AC: Oh yeah!

RS: For sure. For sure, definitely.

AC: Ok, perfect. Well, are you ready to start your interview?

RS: Sure. Sure, absolutely.

AC: Awesome! Ok, so on the spreadsheet, I noticed that you mentioned an organization. I believe it is called A.S.S. Is that correct?

RS: Yes, Yes.

AC: Would you be willing to explain some more about this particular organization and what they do?

RS: Yeah, absolutely. So it was founded by a woman in the Los Angeles area, Kristina Wong. And because people started to reach out for her when mask wearing became a necessity to make masks for them and she was able to interface with a lot of different organizations and found that there was such a huge need. And then I think friends and referrals and oh my goodness, certainly, I don't know if there's one in every state, but certainly there's a lot, I think there's like 800 people or something, I don't know, a lot of people who are participating. And it was basically just filling a need, whether it was for definitely for underserved communities, whether it was anything from the unhoused to the incarcerated to Indigenous communities, did a lot for Navajo Nation and for the Standing Rock up there, immigrants at the borders and schools and just really in communities that were underserved, like I say, just anybody who had the need for it.

NS: That's really exciting. I'm going to take it back over this way. But, what was your early childhood like? Tell me about like growing up.

RS: So I grew up in Santa Monica, California, and basically 60s and 70s, and just had a very, I would say pretty much WASP upbringing: two parents, four kids, public schools. I think that one thing that was really great about living in Santa Monica at that time was that it was very, well in the time period anyway, was very progressive. And the westside of Los Angeles is pretty much known for that as well. So, from a very early age, I had interactions with diversity, with, very politically minded people who were very active in our communities and went to an alternative school for high school. So that was pretty great. And just kind of broadened from there. It was a lovely, lovely time.

AC: That's awesome. Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with your family? If you're willing to of course.

RS: Oh, sure. It was, I guess I can only speak for my own experience, it was very probably for the time, pretty normal, my mom was a homemaker. She taught what would now be called like a TK class. We live right next to a public park, so she would teach over there, but otherwise was home to take care of kids in the home. And I had to my two older siblings were 11 and 12 years older, I am the baby. And so they went up to San Francisco in the 60s to go to school so that was pretty, pretty wild and crazy at the time.

AC: Yeah.

RS: Lived in the Haight, the the whole shoot and match. And then my older brother is five years older than me, and he too was what these days are commonly referred to hippie and lived in his camper and had an arts and crafts store and things like that.

NS: Awesome.

RS: Yeah, it was a pretty happy childhood, I would say.

(00:05:00)

NS: And I know you mentioned a couple of your siblings went to San Francisco for school, but I was kind of wondering what was your educational background? I know you said you did a lot of public school, but kind of after high school, what happened after that, if you're willing to tell us of course?

RS: Yeah, for sure. I went to junior college. We lived just about a half a mile away from Santa Monica College, then known as Santa Monica City College. And so I went and got my AA there, and it took me longer than I probably should have because I started working when I was 17 and kind of decided I liked working and making money and having free time better than going to school.

NS: Yeah!

RS: So I was at a somewhat indifferent student at certain points. I would say.

NS: Nice!

RS: Yeah, it was

AC: I'm so sorry I did not mean to cut you off.

RS: Oh not at all. Not at all.

AC: So during your time with the Auntie Sewing Squad. What were some of the fundraising techniques? Like what worked best for you and just overall, did you guys do anything in particular?

RS: So I personally did not. Throughout this time period, I was very, very fortunate in that I was being paid to be at home. At that time, I was a furniture sales associate for Crate and Barrel, and they paid their full time workers throughout the shutdown. And so I was very, very fortunate to still be home. Since we didn't have computer access, I didn't, I couldn't work. So it was actually weird to say, but a very lovely time and on many different levels. And so initially, I had a friend living across the bay. I live in Oakland and she was on the other side who was making masks to send to Spain because Spain was really bad at that time. And since everyone knows I sewed, I was kind of more or less shamed into doing it.

NS: Oh no.

RS: And so I started doing it for, we're on NextDoor, and so I started doing it for NextDoor because my community is definitely diverse in many, many aspects economically, for sure. And so I felt that it was something that I could do that was giving me a great creative outlet to work off whatever it was that we were and still are all going through because of this crazy thing. And there was a need and I was brought up spiritually that you gave back and that you did what you could if you saw a need, you tried to fulfill it. And so that started me and at that point, so many of my neighborhood around here were so very generous and would because it was absolutely

gratis, I didn't want anything and literally they started the first masks were made out of old Pottery Barn sheets.

NS: Oh I love that.

RS: And I know a lot of people started with old sheets, and I'm sure you may have heard about the Buddhist fabric and stuff like that.

NS: Oh yeah.

RS: And so I absolutely did not want payment. I did not need payment. I know that some people were making masks who did need that at that time. And but they would leave a little something or other. So I ended up being able to contribute about 200 dollars to the Alameda County Food Bank up here.

AC: Oh wow!

RS: And I did that because, like I say, we, thankfully, our needs were absolutely well met. So I everything that I did, I did purely just on my own dime.

NS: That's so awesome.

RS: I count myself very fortunate that I was able to do that.

NS: That's amazing. Kind of looking back to the questionnaire that you filled out, I know it said on there that you started sewing with ethnic dance costumes. What inspired you to begin with that?

(00:09:15)

RS: So I was thinking about this because I was thinking about the questionnaire and today is a different time, because I just think about how would that be viewed now in, hopefully positive, in the park that I used to live next too, of course, there were many, many more activities during that time and one of the things we had was there was the head of the park actually taught folk dancing. And it's like kid folk dancing like if you had to learn some kind of square dancing in elementary school, kind of like that. It wasn't amazing. But we did that. I mean, we did everything because we were right next to the park. And so I always kinda had that in me. And then I started as a high schooler, I started to go up to UCLA to go international folk dancing because I had friends who did that. So that kind of got me into that. At one point, I was in a Hungarian folk dance group. And we embroidered for that, didn't make costumes as there was a little more intensity going on with what needed to be made. And some of my very good friends went into some very famous in the folk dancing world groups in the Los Angeles area. And while I was at college, there was also a class on ballet folklorico. And so I started to take that, and then from that class, there were people who are in a local folklorico so I started dance with them. And so I started to make the costumes for that. And I was in the folklorico for about 10 years, I think.

NS: Oh that's exciting.

RS: It was great, it was great. It's funny because like I say these days, you think about appropriation, you think about all these different things. And I do feel very lucky. And I think that part of growing up in Los Angeles is that it is very diverse and the Latinx culture is just so prominent there. It was certainly in the sixties and obviously ongoing, if you know anything about LA. Just to me in the circles that I ran in and it was also just part of who you were, what you did. It was your culture along with everything else. So...

NS: For sure.

AC: Yeah.

RS: Did that.

AC: So going back to your role as a mask maker in the Auntie Sewing Squad, How many masks did you sew in total? Do you have like a rough estimate?

RS: I sewed. I don't know if that's the plural enough, probably over 2000.

AC: Oh wow!

NS: That is so many!

RS: It was. Well, I was compelled. We did not have a dining table for what, six eight months?

Bob: Yeah. Eight-Ten.

RS: Yeah. And I'm kind of. It's totally honor, and there are people in the in the group who've done like 5000 just like crazy amounts. And I kind of consciously made the decision not to count because I wanted it to be more about the meditation of doing it and the thought process of doing it than counting. So it's really more like I would write down on the packing slips that I'm keeping 50 adult 25 kids. So I kind of had a basic idea, but I haven't totaled.

NS: Yeah. And again with the Auntie Sewing Squad how did that impact you and kind of help you through the pandemic as well as your community and others around you?

RS: Yeah sure. So, it was just just pretty amazing to be part of a group. I'm not a joiner and not that my role, although I'm a very public role professionally and just to be acquainted, albeit virtually or just on messaging or Facebook or whatever with amazingly talented people out there from all different walks of life. Obviously, I think there are people down in the L.A. area, I can speak to that since I'm over here, I don't know about New York, who are in the garment industry, who can just whip em out like crazy and cut with these industrial cutters and just all kinds of stuff, but also the most giving, warm, talented people that you could ever have the pleasure to meet. It was just such a wonderful thing to run up against all these people and I've had the opportunity to meet one of them in the flesh and certainly hope to meet others in the future to.

NS: Yeah thats amazing!

RS: Yeah. Yeah.

AC: Yeah.

RS: And I have to I still have to. There is a book, if you weren't aware there is a book, I have yet to receive mine and I got a stream Kristina Wong's play.

NS: Oh yeah!

RS: Is it just I think that historically from women giving up their nylons in World War II and sewing and keeping the home fires burning and stuff, I think there's always ways that women contribute and step in and take care of the job.

AC: Yeah, I agree with you on that!

RS: Yeah.

AC: How did you get involved with the organization?

(00:15:00)

RS: So like I said, I was doing NextDoor and then we have a very good friend who is curandero. I, at that point in April of 2020, my oldest sister passed away and so we were going through her house and we ended up with a wheelchair and our friend had a referral for someone who could use it. And so we met our now friend and she is active in all kinds of various causes, whether it's disability, whether it's Indigenous rights, all kinds of things. And so when we were talking about this whole thing she had mentioned that she had a good friend who's actually her old roommate who is involved in Aunties.

NS: Oh thats exciting.

RS: And so I met. Yeah, yeah. So it kind of signed with that and saw the whole six degrees thing. And because of course, we're friends now and that kind of thing. So that's how I got indoctrinated.

NS: That's so exciting.

RS: Yeah, yeah.

NS: And then, I'm so sorry about that, one moment. I know one of the other questions that was there was other than the ethnic costumes that you had touched on earlier, did you have any other sewing background before the Auntie Sewing Squad or was this kind of a whole new experience for you overall?

RS: Oh no, I was a single parent. And so as a young mother living in L.A., I had a private clientele for sewing, for clothing and continue to do it when I moved up here making not clothing at that point, but making like curtains and duvet covers and pillows and stuff like that. So it's something I'd always done and I had stopped. I hadn't sewn in quite some time. And so this seemed like, when I stopped sewing, it was a pretty unconscious, conscious decision that I was done, and that was probably well, it was just eightish years ago and when this happened, it was just like, well, let's do this. And yeah, so that's that's how I started. And then, it was kind of great, once again I think it had to do with just getting through it. Even at the level that we were, which which I'm amazed, we were just so well taken care of. But purchasing fabric, hoping you're helping someone out, but looking at all these beautiful, they tended to be, and I apologize and I will send you attachments if you'd like of some of the pictures.

AC: Yeah that would be great.

RS: Cool. But a lot of, given my interest in the folkloric, a lot of African fabric, a lot of Latinx for lack of a better term, and just whatever caught my fancy, some of the digitally printed things and stuff like that because I love color, so I think that was also psychologically really, really helpful just to be surrounded by that.

AC: Yeah. And to finish off the interview, what is your favorite thing about being a part of the Auntie Sewing Squad?

RS: I think that there are the relationships that have been started. And just knowing that to look back that I was part of something that made a difference and helped people. I think it's very easy to feel dismayed about stuff and I've grown to think that the only way we can, most of us can make an immediate, what's the word I want to use, contribution is locally. And I think that once again, as a meditative process, I think it's something to take something from your hands and put it into somebody else's. And I think that makes the difference in the world. So I'd say that was probably the biggest part of it.

NS: For sure. All right. Well that is all of the questions we have for you. Thank you so much for agreeing to do this interview. It really does mean a lot to us. And just to hear about it is so amazing too.

RS: Im sorry?

NS: Just to hear about you experience and about you life is really amazing, too. So, thank you.

RS: Oh, that's sweet of you. I feel I'm very fortunate. My life has been very fortunate. So you got it. You got to give back. You get back what you give, that's for sure.

NS: For sure.

AC: Yeah! Thank you so much!

RS: Sure. Do you want me to send you some pictures?

AC: Yeah!

NS: Yes please that would be amazing.

RS: Okay, cool. Yeah, I'm happy to do that

(00:20:00)

AC: Well, have a great Thanksgiving.

RS: You too. You guys are going to go, are you home or going home or?

NS: Yep, we are home or at least I am. I'm back in Colorado. I moved out to California for college, so it's a big shift from Colorado to California.

AC: Yeah. I'm actually in Texas. I was born here, but I've lived in California for the past nine-ten years, Im just visiting family for the holidays.

RS: Oh neat.

AC: Yeah.

RS: Well have a great time. Be safe.

AC: Thank you.

RS: Eat as much as you want

AC: Oh yeah. I'm ready.

NS: Oh yeah. I will be.

RS: Ok guys. Well, if I can do anything else, don't hesitate to get in touch.

AC: Thank you so much.

RS: Oh sure, sure. Thank you. Thanks for this work. That's fabulous.

NS: No worries. Have a great day today.

RS: You too. Bye bye.

NS: Bye.

AC: Bye.

NS: Ok. And then so I just hit the stop recording button and hopefully I will have it.

AC: Yeah.

(00:21:21)