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Interview with Wendy Bable

Wendy Bable

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Interviewee: Wendy Bable

Interviewers: Rocio Ponce-Montanez and Yelitzi Ortega

Date: November 30th, 2021

Location: Zoom

Collection: Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 112: Women and Social Change,

From 1890s to the Present, Fall 2021

Length: 00:33:09

Overseen by: Chrissy Lau

Bio:

Wendy Bable is a white, cis, neurodivergent woman who is from and currently resides in Pennsylvania. She works in theater, but when COVID-19 pandemic hit, her contracts were cancelled. After making masks for local nurses, she wanted to find ways to serve Native American communities so she joined the Auntie Sewing Squad in late April of 2020.

Thematic Outline:

(00:00) Bable shares her story of how she became involved with the Auntie Sewing Squad after her work in theater came to a halt. (05:49) Bable recalls her family history, including the fact that her grandmother worked in a pants factory and that Bable is the oldest of 11 siblings. (11:33) Bable identifies two aspects of the Auntie Sewing Squad: first, Aunties were supportive and generous in observing and sharing with sewers at every skill level and second, Aunties were unapologetically resourceful. (14:58) She then discusses the game changing aspect of Auntie care and the role of a Super Auntie. (20:34) Bable reflects on how being a white, cis, neurodivergent woman has shaped her participation in the Auntie Sewing Squad, particularly how she learned and witnessed Asian American women contend with their immigrant family histories of garment work. (24:49) Bable recounts what it was like to meet Aunties in person and attend Kristina Wong's performance in New York (30:00) She ends with noting the intentionality of how Kristina Wong led with humor.

00:00:00

Rocio Ponce-Montanez (RPM): Hi, so we have the live transcript option available. You just need to enable it. It should appear in the live transcript button.

Wendy Bable (WB): Yeah. Ah gotcha, I see it okay. Great, thank you. How are both of you?

Yelitzi Ortega (YO): I'm doing good, thank you.

RPM: I'm good too, thank you.

WB: I'm good. I'm a little red-faced from being out in the cold. I'll try to fiddle with the lights a little bit. We'll see, but it was our first snow today. It didn't really accumulate anything, but just trying to get a few things put away from the garden that didn't get put away when the weather was still decent, so I'm a little pink.

YO: Oh you look fine. So my name is Yeli Ortega.

RPM: And my name is Rocio.

YO: And today is Tuesday, November 30th, and we're doing an interview through Zoom today. And today we'll be talking about the Auntie Sewing Squad and our interviewee today is going to be Wendy Bable. And we do have a couple questions for you.

WB: Can you remind me what class or program this is associated with?

RPM: So we're with Professor Chrissy Lau from the class Women and Social Change.

WB: Okay, Women and Social Change. I couldn't remember the title of the course. Thank you.

RPM: Yeah, okay so I'm going to start with the questions. So our first question for you is: Have you ever been part of projects similar to the Auntie Sewing Squad?

WB: I have not, at least not on this scale. I would do small things when I was a teacher in Corpus Christi, Texas, and a lot of my students qualified for free and reduced lunch, so that's how Texas decides whether a student is at a level of income that they need assistance. So there are things we would do around the holidays for those students to help support them but nothing of this scale before the Auntie Sewing Squad, this was new territory for me.

RPM: What motivated you to join the Auntie Sewing Squad?

00:02:59:

WB: I have a neighbor who's a nurse, and shortly after, it was the second week of March in 2020, all of my theater contracts canceled so I had a lot of empty time to fill and I wasn't looking for a source of income at the moment, I was just trying to figure out how to be useful. And I had heard that nurses were struggling to have enough PPE. My mom sews, my grandma sews before

her, and it goes way back to all the women in my family. When we come across patterns and things, we often send them to each other and my mom sent me something she said, “I don't know what these fabric masks are helpful.” So I just happened to be out in my backyard at the same time my neighbor was and I asked her, “As a nurse, is this something that can actually be useful?” And she said, “I think it would be a big help because we're so limited on the N95's that we have, that having something to go over it so that we can kind of prolong the life of it would be something that would be really helpful.” So I made a couple for her and asked for her feedback because I wanted them to be comfortable and actually make a good seal around the mouth. I didn't want it to just be a cosmetic, something that wasn't actually going to work, so then after she and I tweaked it a little bit, then I sewed masks for my family. And shortly after that, I read about how hard COVID was hitting Native American communities. My husband is of Navajo descent, and I was trying to find if there was a group already happening. I reached out to a playwright friend of mine who is of an Indigenous community. She said, “You know who you should talk to, you should talk to Kristina Wong.” So I had never met Kristina, and that is the beginning of my Auntie journey. Once I reached out to Kristina, she said, “Yeah, I started this thing and it's this Facebook group. The Super Aunties will tell you what to do, and then we'll go.” That's how I got involved. About a month after she started it, I joined.

RPM: So that experience you had, you said that your mom and grandmother that helped you, and you help other people now that you're in the Auntie Sewing Squad.

00:05:49:

WB: Yeah, I remember my grandma used to, so before I was even born, there were photos of people wearing dresses and my mom would say, “Oh, grandma, sewed that for this community fundraiser kind of thing that was raising money.” So she did a lot of things at the local level and then she also sewed clothes for us. She was also kind of a crafty sower, so she made dolls and different things. A lot of our things were handmade. We didn't buy a lot of stuff because we didn't have a lot of money when I was growing up. My mom learned how to sew from her. I just enjoyed spending time with both of them, and they were both really good teachers so I had that background. Plus I went to school at a time when home economics was still in every middle school in my state, so I also had like a semester of split between sewing and basic cooking stuff. So between my family and that I learned enough that I can figure out patterns and make adjustments. I can't do garment work to do tailoring and alterations, but I can do enough to get by. I could never make it in the costume shop, but masks, I can crank that out.

RPM: That's good. Where did you grow up?

WB: I grew up in a little town called Darlington, Pennsylvania. The nearest city, if you want to call it that, is Beaver Falls. And my great grandma worked in a pants factory there, making pants. She needed to find a job because her husband passed away when she had two very little ones at home, and so she had to go outside of the home to work relatively early in her time as a parent. So really small town and where we live is actually outside of the town of Darlington itself, it's very rural, kind of hillbilly.

RPM: Did you go to school there in that town?

WB: Yeah, I went to school there, went to college in the area and then my first big move was to Wisconsin for my first professional job in theater and then I moved to Texas shortly after that for another job in theater. I lived in Texas for about 10 years and then moved back up to Pennsylvania. I just live in a different part of the state now, but I'm about a four and a half hour drive from where I grew up.

00:08:47:

RPM: Oh okay. Do you have siblings?

WB: I do. It's a complicated question, I'm the oldest of 11.

RPM: Oh my God.

WB: But they're not all like full biological. I have three stepbrothers and a stepsister, I have four adopted sisters, and then I have two biological brothers, Benjamin and Mathias. My brother, Mathias, just passed away in October. We were really close, but yeah, I'm the oldest of 11 and we're a very blended family. Both parents divorced, both remarried. Stepkids in both of those marriages and then also my dad and my step-mom started doing foster care when I was like a junior/senior in high school.

RPM: Do you consider yourself close to all your siblings?

WB: I'm close to most of them. My oldest stepbrother and I are kind of in an agree to disagree kind of relationship. He just took a very different life path than mine. He's in the intelligence community, so we actually can't really talk about that much because he has to be quiet about so much of what he does. Super close with my brother, Mathias. I'm close with my brother Ben, but in a different way because he's on the autism spectrum and so people who see us interact wouldn't think that we're close, but it's just because he expresses how he cares about people in such a different way.

RPM: Yeah, that makes sense.

WB: Yeah, but we keep tabs on each other.

RPM: That's good. So back to the Auntie Sewing Squad. How long have you been a part of that?

WB: I think my Auntie anniversary is like April 26, 2020, so it's been a year and however many months it's been since April.

RPM: Oh wow.

WB: Yeah. So even though we're officially retired, actually tonight, I'm finishing a pledge of twenty five kids masks to go down to Brownsville, Texas, so we still have been active but we're

just not officially still working. But we're technically retired, in the same way that my mom is technically retired, but she's still working.

00:11:33:

RPM: How would you describe your experience with them?

WB: I think there were two things that I noticed really early on that meant and still mean the world to me. One was how positive and supportive all of the Facebook conversations were. No snarkiness, no criticism, if somebody was stuck and having trouble, so many people jumped in to help. There was just such a caring, compassionate environment to be in and we had people sewing with experience levels, from they taught themselves how to sew in order to make masks, up to a woman who was in the costume department for Cirque Du Soleil and Disney and does really amazing technical stuff. So it was that level of support that was so selfless and generous that really, I didn't realize how rarely I was around that until I was immersed in it and I was like, wow, the rest of my collaborative communities are kind of gross. So that meant a lot, and then the second thing that I love is how resourceful everybody is and unapologetically resourceful. I come from a family that didn't have much, we had to be pretty scrappy and I've also been a lot of the things that I've worked on as an artist have been very low budget and so you have to do as much as you can with what you have. But there's a kind of snobbery that goes with that, especially in theater where you kind of get the side eye because you did something low budget and in the Auntie Sewing Squad, being able to figure out how to do something from nothing or from something that wasn't intended for what you're using it for, like the little ties that go on like coffee bags, they're like a twist tie, but they're stiffer, an Auntie realized that those made really great nose wires when we couldn't get nose wires for anything. All the different things that were coming up to substitute for elastic because you could not get elastic like early in the pandemic. Nobody had it, and it was a two month waiting period for Amazon. So the resourcefulness was really celebrated and very openly shared so that if one Auntie had a great idea, and you had those materials on hand, then you could be like, "Oh, I could do that too, I could figure that out." So that was the second thing that I just thought was brilliant.

YO: That's really interesting, honestly. So in other ways other than making masks and giving them out to other people, what other ways would you say that you were helping the Auntie Sewing Squad or like taking a part of it?

00:14:58:

WB: I think the Auntie care exchange was a game changer for a lot of us, and there's kind of a really strong hub in the Los Angeles region of Aunties. And then the rest of us kind of feel like satellite ships, that's the mothership and we're all up in orbit kind of around it. I'm not sure when we started doing Auntie care, but there was a lot of informal Auntie care happening with folks delivering things to people's homes because they lived within a drivable distance of each other. And then the Super Aunties thought, "You know what, can do this on a larger scale for all of the Aunties?" That is because they were recognizing the fatigue, like the physical fatigue that you get from sitting and sewing for long periods of time, but also just living through a very stressful period and many Aunties doing this because they had time on their hands because they were out of work or they were working from home or were working limited hours, so I think that very

deliberate caretaking of one another is something that, it sounds so simple when you said out loud, but it's actually pretty radical. It's a radical act to invest energy in taking care of the physical and mental and emotional health of people that most of us only know each other through this Facebook group. Haven't met face to face, didn't know each other before we were the Auntie Sewing Squad. So I think that's something that could be easily overlooked, but it's actually very intentional and I think really brilliant.

YO: I also heard you mention Super Aunties. What exactly is that or are they? It sounded so interesting to me. I wanted to know a little bit more about that.

WB: They each have different areas of specialization and a lot of it is based on who they were and what they did in what Kristina always calls the “before times.” So in the “before times,” one of our Aunties was a wizard with spreadsheets and so she offered to be the keeper of all things that had to be in a spreadsheet, whether it was the contact information for someone on a reservation that we were planning on making a donation to, whether it was the Auntie addresses to be able to exchange little parcels that we mail out to each other for Auntie care, like she was the keeper of the spreadsheets. Another Super Auntie is responsible for vetting the requests. We got some kind of ludicrous request. We got a lot of requests from folks that were like, “Can we buy your masks?” No, that's not what we do. I think the one that kind of exploded our brains was when Walter Reed contacted Kristina and wanted the Auntie Sewing Squad to donate masks and we were like, this is the hospital that the president goes to when the president is sick, they should have first tier access to protective equipment. Why are they asking us for masks? Why are they asking us to donate them? That’s bonkers!

YO: That's just shows how much they need.

00:18:50:

WB: Yeah. So the Super Aunties are the coordinators, the schedulers. I think a big part of their job is to follow up. Like once an Auntie would post a pledge, like this most recent one for Brownsville, Texas, was for two hundred masks, Aunties respond with how many masks they can do in the time by the deadline. And then that Super Auntie who made the ask contacts each of them with the address that they need to mail it to and asks, “Can you confirm that you got this address and then can you message me once you've sent your masks out so I can report them as finished and done.” So if they haven't heard from us in a while, then they kind of bump in and say, “Hey, just checking in. Were you able to do this? If not, no worries. I can give this to somebody else.” So I think another big job of the Super Auntie is to follow up and make sure that we don't have any loose threads anywhere. But they're wizards and magicians, and they make it look easy, and I know that it is hours and hours and hours of work.

19:54

YO: So they're like the main ones kind of organizing everything.

20:01

WB: Yeah, they're the, I was trying to make an analogy to the body there, like the nervous system, I guess.

20:05

YO: I was reading a little bit about what you wrote about yourself in the initial part where we're signing up for the aunties. And I do have a question. So how has been being a white, cis, neurodivergent woman affected your work with the Auntie Sewing Squad? If it has affected it, how has it affected it?

00:20:34

WB: I have learned a lot about the history, especially of the Asian and Pacific Islander community and their work in the garment industry and how for many of them, it's a right of passage. That their grandparents or their parents came to this country. They worked incredibly hard in those industries, those are industries that take a tremendous physical toll on the body. And they were really committed to the next generation not having to work in those ways, like being able to go to college or to have a different profession. And so it was very interesting as a witness being in that community. Just really being a listener and just somebody to be encouraging or just to I think just to bear witness, to just say, I hear the story that you're telling and your story matters. How many of them are having conflicted feelings about some of them are college professors and well-known performance artists, and they have significant careers and now they are back at their sewing machines. How strange and wonderful that was for them. I think it has also helped me understand that I always struggle being neuro divergent, so I have, I'm on the autism spectrum, but not to the degree that my brother is. And I have ADHD, so I tend to blurt things and interrupt and overtalk in conversations. That's often at odds with what I want to do as a cis white female in a shared space where I want to not take up so much space, like those two things fight against each other because all of my impulses, they want to engage and then I also like, I don't, this isn't all my space to take up. So I think that this has been good, because it's such a supportive environment, when I have over engaged that's never been met with scorn or chastisement. But I've also been able to kind of just work those muscles on being a little listener, being a witness, being a supporter. Finding ways to take action and not just say I'm really sorry you're experiencing hostility towards you because you're Asian in this neighborhood, but to also follow that up with something like whether it's donating to the funds that one of the Super Aunties put together to get self-defense equipment to send out to our Aunties of Asian descent. If they felt that, that was something that would be helpful for them, not just to say the words, but also do the things. So it's been it's always challenging when there's two impulses I have are at odds, but that's for me to work through on my own time and not in a space where folks with marginalized identities are in real physical danger.

24:20

YO: It seems like you definitely had like a deeper understanding after being a part of the Auntie Sewing Squad. What is one of the most memorable experiences that you've had since being a part of the Sewing Squad? Because you've already mentioned a couple of really interesting ones, but like your favorite or most just-interesting-to-you experience that you've had so far?

24:49

WB: The one that was the most strange and surreal and wonderful. Just a couple of weekends ago, on November 13, I live close enough to New York City that getting up there its a bit of a project but its not like, I don't have to fly, I can drive and then take a train. So I got tickets when some other Aunties were going to go see Kristina's show in New York. And so these are folks

that I feel like I have deep friendships with some of them, I've never shared physical space with them. And we were going to meet for brunch and then walk to Kristina's show together. And it was mind blowing, I mean, some of the emotion I was experiencing was because I was still very much in my grief over the loss of my brother, but also because I just kept looking at these folks who were just pictures on my computer screen and going, oh my gosh, you're really real. Oh my gosh, you're really real. And then meeting Kristina. It's not that she takes up space is that she exudes so much energy, but you feel her when she's in your proximity and meeting her was just incredible. But being able to watch her story, which was also our story, with others who live that story with me, I don't think I've ever had that experience in my whole life. I mean, there are so many layers of things that were going on, it was really uncanny. It was really uncanny. And then I would say the other thing that was really deeply meaningful to me was the way that we kept sewing during the the height of the Black Lives Matter protests, but we also kind of shut down a lot of things to take care of the people that were feeling the impact of that in really serious ways. I think that also happened with the wildfires, we had a lot of Aunties that had to leave their house on a moment's notice because the wildfires were getting so close to their home, it was how the squad responded in those moments of emergency, on top of the pandemic emergency we were already experiencing, that was really powerful and really memorable. That's my bar now for how a community responds to moments like that. I hope that every community I'm a part of, whether it's five people or 500 people or 5000 from now on, responds with that level of care for other human beings.

28:13

YO: So it seems like being part of the Auntie Sewing Squad has been super impactful for you.

28:23

WB: It is, and I think it was. It was really important because I felt such a loss of identity when all my work went away. And I know intellectually that I am not only my work, then I'm much more than that. I'm a sister, I'm a wife, I'm a daughter, I'm a gardener, I'm a theater maker, I'm a teacher. I know that intellectually, but emotionally, to just not have anything to do and to feel so, I've never felt as non-essential as I did when literally my entire industries shut down. So it wasn't just me, it was like my support network of folks that I can usually lean on if I'm having a hard time, they were hit just as hard as I was, so like nobody could lean on anybody because we were all falling down. And I felt like the Auntie Sewing Squad gave me a sense of purpose and a way to use an ability that I had to make a difference to other people who were in incredibly difficult situations, and it's also been an eye opener about just how many communities get forgotten about.

29:49

YO: My last question now would just be, is there anything that you would like to talk about that we haven't already gone over?

30:00

WB: I think the only other thing I would mention is that it was really brilliant to have a leader with an incredible sense of humor. Some of the inside jokes and the things that we talk about that we referred to Kristina as the Overlord. There is a running joke that if we stop sewing she's going

to cut off her fingers. Anytime somebody put a sidetrack post up on Facebook that wasn't about masks, she was like, "You need to get back to work!" She kind of really embodied this hilariously exaggerated persona of the sweatshop overlord. But what it did was it brought a sense of levity and humor during a time when literally thousands of people were dying and all of us were worried that we were going to be next or somebody we love was going to be next. And I think it would be easy to write that off as, oh, that's just Kristina. But I've also seen her reign it in and be really serious, I feel like you have to ask her about it. But my hunch is that the humor was very intentional. So that even though the stakes were very high, literally life or death, we never lost the ability to laugh together. And I think that's another strong marker of a community, is that you share those strong emotions together. So I highly recommend leading with a sense of humor. So the work doesn't feel as heavy as it actually is.

32:07

YO: Well, we really appreciate you taking time out of your day to come have an interview with us.

32:16

WB: It's really great to talk to you both.

32:22

YO: It was really nice listening to you speak a lot about your history and why you are doing the things that you do and even your experiences. I was really interesting to hear.

32:32

WB: Thanks. So what is your how does this manifest for you? Are you doing a paper or are you doing?

32:42

YO: We're doing an oral history project. First we learned a lot about Auntie Sewing Squad and we learned about women's history, and the Auntie Sewing squad is part of women's history now because a lot of women who are standing up and helping other people around the world as well. So it's like a project having to do with women's history and women empowerment.

33:09

WB: Well, thank you for doing that work because a lot of that history isn't written down, it's just passed from word of mouth, from one generation to the next. So thank you both for the work that you're doing too. And leave those artifacts for the next women that come along to find or anyone because we have Aunties that are of all genders.