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Interview with Janet Cowperthwaite

Janet Cowperthwaite

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Interviewee: Janet Cowperthwaite

Interviewers: Nicholas Romero & Carlos Lopez

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Length: (00:26:04)

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio:

Janet Cowperthwaite graduated from college at San Francisco State University and has now been a San Francisco resident for 40 years. She is an arts manager for the nonprofit organization, Kronos Performing Arts Association. She serves as a Caring Auntie in the Auntie Sewing Squad.

Abstract: Cowperthwaite begins by sharing about her role as a Caring Auntie in the Auntie Sewing Squad and her participation in the Bay Area Hub. (00:06:08) Cowperthwaite discusses her college experience, entrance into arts management career and how her role as an arts manager led her to a unique film collaboration with the Auntie Sewing Squad called *Radical Care*. (00:12:40) She talks about future plans in helping out the community through her Kronos organization. (00:16:48) Cowperthwaite summarizes the Auntie Sewing Squad in an elevator speech and discusses her plan to conduct an oral history project with the Kronos Performing Arts Association. (00:20:30) Cowperthwaite ends by sharing about her volunteer work as a former candy striper and as a mom to a daughter in girl scouts.

Transcript

0:00-0:05

Janet Cowperthwaite (JC): That's fine. Are you guys up, you're not in Monterey right?

0:06-0:07

Nicholas Romero (NR): Not right now. I'm in Southern California right now.

0:08

JC: OK

0:09-0:10

Carlos Lopez (CL): Yeah so am I.

0:11-0:12

JC: Oh, okay. Great.

0:13-0:14

CL: Are you in Monterey?

0:15-0:16

JC: I'm in San Francisco.

0:17-0:18

NR: And would you like to introduce yourself?

0:19-0:20

JC: Sure. My name is Janet Cowperthwaite.

0:21-0:22

NR: My name is Nicholas Romero.

0:23-0:24

CL: And my name is Carlos Lopez.

0:25-0:26

JC: Nice to meet you.

0:27-0:28

CL: Nice to meet you.

0:29-0:41

NR: So today we wanted to interview you to ask you a couple of questions about your thoughts on the Auntie Sewing Squad and your work with them, and how you feel about giving out to the community. Carlos, would you like to start?

0:43-0:49

CL: Yes, sure. So the first question we have for you is: what are you a fan of in particular about the Auntie Sewing Squad?

0:50-1:08

JC: The thing that drew me to it first when I first learned about it was just the very act of mask making by volunteers that are drawn together as a community, completely volunteer-led and helping, just helping out in the most important way during this time. That's what drew me to them first, to it.

1:09-1:25

NR: Especially during these crazy times to (be) giving out right now, it's really thoughtful. So is that what really inspired you to become an Auntie? Was it giving out to the community?

1:30-1:38

JC: Yeah, and my story is maybe a little different than some of the other Aunties that you're interviewing. I'm what we call a Caring Auntie. I don't sew.

1:39-1:49

NR: Would you like to explain what a Caring Auntie does?

1:53-3:24

JC: Sure, I'd be happy to. And I will say that I did learn how to sew when I was a young person, but it never, it didn't stick with me despite the fact that my mother made practically every piece of clothing that I wore. So I came from a sewing background, but it wasn't my cup of tea. So what a Caring Auntie is: Caring Aunties support the Sewing Aunties. So there is a wonderful tradition, well, it's already tradition, I guess you can call it a tradition, a practice in the Auntie Sewing Squad where there's a group of Aunties that are called Caring Aunties that do things to support

the Sewing Aunties. So that's everything from sending them packages with supplies or with treats, you know, chocolates and lotion and cookies and snacks and those kinds of things. I've also sought out donations of yarn because there was a time in the winter especially when a lot of the Aunties started knitting hats for children and people in cold places and sending them. And so I got a friend to donate a bunch of yarn to me and then I made packages to send out to the Knitting Aunties with the yarn and with all kinds of little treats and a nice note to encourage them. So that's been my role. Some of the Caring Aunties also do baking and all kinds of things. Anything that one can donate to to support the sewing team.

3:35-3:42

NR: It sounds like you and the other Aunties have a really close relationship with each other, like supporting each other through that. That's really nice.

3:43-5:08

JC: Yeah. I mean, I only personally know a few of the Aunties, and it turned out that I, here in San Francisco, live literally five minutes from what we call the hub. So in the main cities or main places, I should say, where the Aunties are there might be one home where, you know, things are dropped off or picked up or, you know, whatever we call it, the hub. To my delight, I found out that I lived literally a five minute walk from the San Francisco hub. So I've been able to, you know, drop things off there, pick things up there, and offer to help the woman who lives there, who is the hub person. Can I take stuff to the post office for you? All that sort of thing. So I'm very much a supportive Auntie and I've also donated financially when I've been able to. And we did a big coat drive a few months ago and I sent a bunch of new coats. So I would say there are definitely close friends within the Aunties but what's really cool about it is, you know, I can count them on one hand, but I also feel that the support of the other, I don't know what the total number is, I want to say it's close to a thousand Aunties, so something like that, so I feel that community and it's all across the nation. So it's a really cool thing to feel like you're part of that. Doing a small, tiny thing.

5:13-5:19

CL: That's really cool. Have you been, like, constantly over at the hub? Like, do you usually tend to walk over there?

5:23-6:05

JC: I do walk over there. I walk in that area quite a lot to where Melinda, it's her name, where she lives. I was there more in the summer. Melinda is a school teacher. So her own routine changed when school started again because, of course, it's all on here (Zoom) and you know all about that. So we were a little more in touch with each other over the summer. But I do see her in the neighborhood and have stopped by. And I dropped off flowers to her on her birthday. I mean,

that's another thing, supporting her, she's just been so busy and just poured herself into this whole thing. I have no idea how many masks she's made, but it's in the hundreds, if not more.

6:08-6:31

CL: So the next question we have for you is what career pathway did you go forward with at San Francisco State? And did you find yourself contemplating different career paths? Because I know that things have changed education wise, throughout the years at university institutions. So I'd like to know, like the college experience for you. And like, if it impacted you in any ways that still apply now.

6:32-8:09

JC: Sure, I spent the first two years after high school at a community college where I grew up in Sunnyvale called De Anza Community College which I really appreciated a lot, especially after high school, which I found especially towards the end, to be not very engaging. I was already kind of done with my high school work, and I graduated, obviously, but I was working a lot by the time I was a senior in high school. So I did the two years at De Anza and then I transferred to San Francisco State, which I really, really enjoyed. In fact, ironically, I live probably a mile from it now. Not my intention, but that's how it worked out. My major was Communications. My minor was Journalism. So when I was a senior, I worked through my whole college experience. So when I was a senior in college, I got a job helping an arts group, a string quartet in their office. And I still have that job. It's been...this is my 40th year. So now you know how old I am. But I am now running the nonprofit organization, the Kronos Performing Arts Association, which is the Kronos Quartet. So I don't know if you know the Kronos Quartet, but you could Google it. It's a world-renowned nonprofit arts organization. So, yeah, I think it's unusual that I still... You know the job I got initially and the job I have now are quite different but it's for the same organization. There were just the five of us at the beginning, the quartet and me, and then now we have a whole organization.

8:13-8:18

NR: That's crazy.

8:22-8:23

JC: Yeah, it is.

8:24-8:35

NR: When we read more about you, you mentioned that you've never helped something like the Auntie Sewing Squad and yet you have a long history of giving out to your community. What sets Auntie Sewing Squad different from the others?

8:40-10:42

JC: Well, it's interesting because I came into it through my work as an arts manager. I read about the Auntie Sewing Squad. I say Auntie (phonetically pronounced ant tee) because I'm from England, so it's just the way we pronounce it. But I read about the Auntie Sewing Squad in *The Guardian*, a friend, Rebecca Solnit, a well-known writer and friend and co-Auntie. She wrote about it in the summer so it was only a couple months old. And at that time we had been invited to create some kind of digital film or work around what was happening with the Coronavirus, et cetera. So when I read about that, I thought that would be a really interesting subject for a film. A short film piece. And we could offer our music to it. And so I was in touch with Rebecca, who put me in touch with her friend Valerie Soe. Also all, these are all San Franciscans. And Valerie is a filmmaker. So it was just like boom, boom, boom. And the next thing we knew, we were making this film, which I don't know if you have seen it, would be good to see. It's called *Radical Care*, the Auntie Sewing Squad. It's about seven minutes long. So that's how I actually got involved. And so when I learned about it beyond this work task, which was really fun to work on, it just drew me in because I just thought the fact that it's mainly women, not all, but mainly women, mainly Asian women, and the fact that they were doing something that was just so organic and generous. I just thought I would love to be part of this and again, to support them in the way that I can, which is probably to be a Caring Auntie. But also to put the story out there, because the film's now been seen thousands of times and been in many prominent film festivals. So, again, that was my role served, I think, very not probably like a lot of the other aunties.

10:48-10:50

NR: Where can we watch this film?

10:51-11:10

JC: Sorry (takes a drink of water) it's been in film festivals, but we at Kronos we're about to announce a digital virtual festival because we can't do a performance one. So you'll be able to see it there. I'm sure we could probably find a way for you to see it as well. I think it would be a good background as you're doing these. I don't know how many of these you've done or if you're halfway. I don't know how many you're doing, but I think it would be informative.

11:13-11:23

NR: Yeah. That sounds like it could be very helpful. We are trying to learn everything we can about the organization you helped.

11:24-12:19

JC: Yeah. Yeah. And so to your question, which I didn't exactly answer. What drew me to it was just literally this sort of hands on volunteer-led, incredibly well organized, just organically grown, as I said, organization that so many people could participate in really active ways or in supportive

roles like mine or just financially, sending money or whatever, donating fabric. There were just so many ways. And of course, when this was all going on last summer was when all of this pandemic stuff was still rolling out. When the Aunties started making the masks, there weren't even mask mandates, really. So it was, as you know, having just lived through this, looking back, what we knew about a year ago is very different from what we know now.

12:20-12:23

NR: A lot has changed

12:24-12:26

JC: Yeah. So that was the other part, just action.

12:28-12:33

NR: That's really nice to hear. It sounds like you're very passionate about helping them out. It's really cool.

12:34-12:39

JC: I love the organization. Yeah, or the collective I guess.

12:40-12:49

NR: So outside of Auntie Sewing Squad or even with Auntie Sewing Squad, do you think you have any more plans that will continue to give out to the community like you do now?

12:53-13:47

JC: You know, it's certainly in my work at Kronos, we do a lot of work, in addition to concerts and recordings and all that stuff, we do a lot of work with young people. And so a lot of my sort of work in that area would be through my professional world. And I have served on boards and that kind of volunteering. But perhaps that's another reason why this is so appealing to me, because this was so more community oriented. So, I think I would seek out other ways to volunteer like this in the future. The job that I have, especially during this time running in a music group, you can imagine it's been tough, you know, it's been hard. So it's pretty all consuming, but it's being able to carve out time to do other things that are rewarding in other ways. Learn that. And I would keep doing that.

13:53

NR: It's really nice.

13:59

CL: So you mentioned that you don't sew in particular, but yet you support them. You did say

that you do know how to sew and yes, you're proficient in it. Do you ever see yourself actually being a part of it and actually like sewing or just, you rather just stick with supporting it?

14:21-15:02

JC: Yeah. you know, I really haven't sewn on a machine for decades, honestly. I certainly can sew by hand if I need to mandate that sort of thing. But I guess I wouldn't see that for me as the best investment of my time to learn how to sew again. And I really admire the Auntie Sewing team. I mean, not only do they sew, I mean they have really exquisite masks. I'm sure you've seen some of them. They're not just that square with the things to tie the way it was when it all started. I mean, they have all this detail and I mean, I guess I'm not quite up for that challenge. I'll just admire them.

15:07- 15:18

CL: Yeah. Have you been a part of any other oral histories in that sense? And if not, what other types of oral histories interest you in any way?

15:21- 16:00

JC: My organization has been involved in oral histories because the Kronos Quartet is going to be 50 years old in 2023. And so members of Kronos have been interviewed. And also we've worked with many components. What we do is they perform music of composers who are living, mainly it's not like Mozart and that kind of work. So all of those composers have also been involved in oral histories. But we are going to embark upon a project of our own around this. So I'll be organizing what you guys are learning how to do. So how do you find it? I will turn it around: how are you finding this experience?

16:03-16:19

NR: It's very informative, like it's something new to the both of us. We haven't done something similar to this in any other class that we've taken. So it's really interesting to find out everything about it.

16:20

JC: And it seems great. Wonderful.

16:21-16:25

NR: So far it's pretty fun going to class and learning everything.

16:26-16:33

JC: Well, and also just talking to people who you wouldn't necessarily engage with, especially if your majors aren't, you know, are what they are.

16:36-16:40

NR: Different perspectives. It's always nice seeing how other people think. Yeah.

16:44-16:47

JC: So I'm a big fan of oral histories, so I look forward to planning the one we're going to embark on.

16:48-17:06

NR: Right. And I think you kind of already went over this, but if you could describe the Auntie Sewing Squad to someone who doesn't know what the organization is. How would you put it?

17:07-17:10

JC: Yeah, in my business, they call that an elevator speech.

17:11-17:12

NR: An elevator speech?

17:13-17:50

JC: It means you have about one or two sentences or the amount of time that you would spend going up a few floors in an elevator to explain what it is you're talking about. So the elevator speech about the Auntie Sewing Squad: a volunteer collective of very dedicated women and men creating...I'm doing a terrible job with the elevator speech. Let me start over: a volunteer collective of people making masks and distributing them to hundreds and thousands of marginalized people in need.

17:52-18:40

NR: That's really nice. Your work at the Auntie Sewing Squad is really inspirational. Because, I mean, for me, for example, I feel like my days are so busy, like you put it. You say you do things to get rewarded in other ways. I think that's really nice. Sooner or later, I hope to get to a point where I'm able to use my time wisely to help other people, but the work you're doing at the Auntie Sewing Squad is really inspirational and the whole organization in general is really nice and everything we're learning about them.

18:42-18:48

JC: Well, I know this is a class that you're taking, but this (conducting the oral history), in fact, is something really good that you're contributing to.

18:49-19:20

CL: Yeah. Yes, it's great knowing, like, different perspectives as we mentioned before, like because it's something like way outside of a major like something we would never correlate with in our normal day lives. It's actually really interesting to us, like, to have different factors come into play when things like education and just like going when going with the courses that we're taking. So it's really interesting to know what the community is doing as well outside of school and outside of all that.

19:22-19:37

NR: Learning all this is very different because both of us are actually marine science majors. We study a lot of STEM things so coming to classes where we're able to communicate with other people, it's always nice seeing the different stories.

19:38-19:59

JC: Yeah, well, and I will say that that's an interesting thing about the membership for the collection of volunteers, such a diverse group of people, professors, as you know, writers, you know, I'm in the nonprofit arts world. I mentioned Rebecca Solnit. She's a world renowned writer. I mean, just such an array of people involved, which is really, really interesting too.

20:01-20:30

NR: So you mention, I had one question too, in your reading you mentioned when you were 12, you were a candy stripper, striper?

20:31-22:20

JC: Striper. I forgot I said that. That's true. I did do that when I was twelve. I was forgetting what I wrote in that (spreadsheet). But it's true when I was 12, so do you know what a candy striper is?

NR: No, that's what I wanted to ask.

JC: It's a term from another time, it was even a dated term when I used it back in the 1970s. So what that is is it's a volunteer in a hospital or medical setting. So a candy striper, the kind of candy striper I was, I volunteered at what we used to call a nursing home, a long term care facility for elderly people. And so my grandmother did that as a profession. She worked in helping elderly people in facilities, basically. So I think that must have influenced me because I don't recall anyone, it wasn't like it is now, I have a junior in college, so we just went through that whole thing that you're going through getting into school. Back in that day, you didn't necessarily do a lot of extracurricular activities for reasons other than you just did them. They weren't going to help you with applications or anything like that. So not really sure what led me to do that. But I would go over once or twice a week for a few hours and visit with the elderly people, many of whom were confined in their beds. And then the ones who could be involved in Crap's. And this

was kind of a really traditional kind of nursing home, if you've ever experienced one of those. So, yeah, I did that when I was 12. So I guess somewhere in my DNA, the volunteering was (there).

22:22-22:31

NR: That's what I was going to say. Do you think that's what kind of led you to keep choosing your career path and continue giving out to the community?

22:32-23:17

JC: Maybe. I have always been interested in the arts. And I mentioned my daughter. She was in the girl scouts from 1st grade through 12th grade. So I really enjoyed volunteering with the girl scouts as well and all the community activities that group does and did. I didn't know much about girl scouts before she became involved and I'm really impressed with the organization. Yeah. So and then before I had my daughter, when I was in my first many years of my professional career, I did volunteering that was more towards my work. I served on boards and mentored younger people and, you know, sat on grant panels and all that sort of thing.

23:18-23:29

NR: My sister is actually in girl scouts, too, right now. So I understand how much as a parent, how much work you put into that, too.

23:30-23:46

JC: It was a lot of work, but I just really liked the values of girl scouts and what the girls learn when they go through that.

23:47-23:53

NR: Yeah it's a lot of work. My sister, she's been in it for about almost twelve years. She's been in it since first grade and she's about to graduate high school.

23:54-24:09

JC: So she and my daughter...A lot of girls just drop out along the way or their groups disband or their troops I guess we should call. But the ones who stick it, they are...

24:10-24:17

NR: Yeah, I think she has one other member who has been there since she started.

24:18-24:21

JC: Good for her. I think it's really great. To the thing about college, I do think it helped my daughter get into college because she could talk about all the girl scout stuff.

NR: Oh yeah, a lot of experience there.

JC: That's not why she did it. But it did help. Yeah.

24:29-25:04

CL: Well, that's really interesting to see your perspective on it. And like your whole lead up to this moment, you could say, like from when you were twelve. We don't have any more questions. You answer them very, very well. We want to thank you for giving us your time for answering these questions and giving your side of this whole experience in this organization. You know, it's like a giant, community thing that's going on and it's really interesting to find out what your side of it is.

25:05-25:10

JC: Well, it's been my pleasure. And I hope... Will you be back on campus next year?

25:11

NR: Definitely.

25:12-25:16

JC: Oh, good. We looked at the campus. It's a nice campus. And it's obviously for what you're studying. How could it be any better?

25:21-25:27

NR: Yeah, I love it there Monterey, it's really nice.

CL: They added a new building as well. So we haven't seen it ourselves.

25:28-25:32

JC: Good luck with that. I hope it goes really well. What age are you guys in? Not age, but what year are you in your school.

25:33-25:35

NR: When we go back, we're both going to be 3rd years.

25:36-25:41

JC: OK. My daughter's going to be a senior next year. I'm glad you haven't missed your senior year.

25:42-25:45

NR: Yeah, that year is fun. A little hectic, from what I heard.

25:46-25:52

JC: Well, good luck to you and thanks for your time. This has been fun.

25:55

CL: Thank you.

26:00

NR: Thank you.

26:04

JC: Bye bye. All right