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## Interview with Reggie Gazes

Reggie Gazes

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**Interviewee:** Reggie Gazes

**Interviewers:** Mariana E. Jiménez & Kelly Rivas

**Date:** May 3, 2021

**Location:** Zoom

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

From 1890s to the Present, Fall 2020

**Length:** 00:25:14

**Overseen by:** Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

**Bio:** Reggie Gazes grew up in New York and now resides in Pennsylvania. Raised by her Italian and Irish family as a catholic, she converted to Judaism as an adult. She graduated from Bucknell University studying Animal Behavior and is now a professor and scientist running the Primate Lab. Gazes made masks for her friends and family before she discovered the Auntie Sewing Squad, where she sews and sends face masks for marginalized, low-income, and people in need.

**Thematic Outline:** (00:01:26) Reggie Gazes talks about how and why she converted to Judaism as an adult and how she became a member of the Auntie Sewing Squad. (00:06:05) She talks about balancing her life as a mother and scientist/professor as before and during the pandemic. (00:12:00) Gazes then shares her thoughts on how the pandemic was handled, how it affected her, the Auntie Sewing Squad's activism, and her intentions for after the pandemic. (00:18:56) She concludes by describing her grandmother as the person who has had the most influence on her life as well as giving advice to aspiring scientists.

## *Transcript*

(00:00:00)

**Mariana Jimenez (MJ):** So, hello. Today is May 3rd, 2021. And today, we are interviewing Auntie Reggie Gazes. Our location of our meeting is on Zoom and our proposed subject of this recording is the Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Project. Good afternoon Auntie Reggie. Thank you for joining us today. My name is Mariana Jiménez, my pronouns are she/her/hers and I'm in my second year studying Marine Science.

(00:00:29)

**Kelly Rivas (KR):** Hello, my name is Kelly Rivas. I'm a second year studying Biology with a concentration in Molecular Biology and I'm happy to be here interviewing you today.

(00:00:43)

**Reggie Gazes (RG):** Can I ask you a question? I'm so interested that both of you are scientists and you're taking a class on the Sewing Squad. So how did that happen?

(00:00:52)

**MJ:** Yeah, so, we have to take a history class as a part of like our general education requirements and then we're [Kelly and I] both really close friends. And we were like "Oh my God, let's take this class and learn about women" and so, yeah, so we're really excited to be in this class.

(00:01:10)

**RG:** That's great, how cool!

**MJ:** Okay, Kelly, do you want to start with the first question?

**KR:** Yes, okay. So could you tell us more about your background, more so on your Jewish background and how was it like growing up?

(00:01:26)

**RG:** Well, that's kind of a tricky question, actually, because I didn't grow up Jewish. I converted to Judaism as an adult. So I grew up Catholic in New York. My family is Italian and Irish primarily. And the town I grew up in was mostly Jewish people. So all my friends were Jewish growing up. So I spent more time honestly in temple than I did in church. And then when I grew up and moved away, I went to graduate school. One of my very close friends in graduate school

was kind of going through this religious awakening. And so I was talking with her a lot and reading some of the books that she was reading. And I started going to a temple down there just to kind of check it out. And then I met my husband, who is Jewish. And so, I didn't convert before we got married. I just didn't want to feel like I had to, but, I ended up making that choice. And so that was, anyway, that's where I am now. So my background is sort of a strange one, in that I don't really have, I didn't have that Jewish upbringing experience.

(00:02:35)

**MJ:** Interesting. Okay, so you live in New York, right?

**RG:** I did. Now I'm in Pennsylvania. Yeah, so I grew up in New York, but I am a professor at a university in a small town in Pennsylvania now.

**MJ:** Awesome. Okay, let's see, so how or why did you get involved with the Auntie Sewing Squad?

(00:02:54)

**RG:** Oh, that's a good question. It's so packed. I'm sure you probably know a lot about this since you've taken a whole semester on it. Well, so obviously the pandemic hit and everything was horrible for everyone, and it was a hard time. And so for me, one of the things that was particularly hard is when, so I'm a professor, I'm a scientist. My work is a lot of sort of who I am and my identity as a person. And I've always had a very independent career. I have young children. I have a family, but I've managed pretty well to sort of balance those things. And then the pandemic hit and I had to give up basically my whole career and just take care of my kids. My husband works at a hospital and so he ended up having to work more hours because of the pandemic. And so it just fell on me to watch the kids when daycare closed. We didn't have any family nearby. So I was struggling a lot with just like, "who was I?" I wasn't really equipped to be a full-time mother and to drop all these things that were so much of what I loved and how I identified. And so, I started sewing at night just because it felt like this very tangible thing that I could do that I knew I was good at. I have a history of just sewing, just as a hobby. And so I started making masks just for friends and family, things like that, because back then it was so hard to get masks. I'm sure you all remember. Of course, I had an attic full of fabric because I just store fabrics, and so, it was actually pretty good, I had the materials. So I was making things and just sending them out to friends and family. And then a friend of mine, here in town got hooked up with the Aunties early on. I'm not even sure actually how she did, but she was working with them and was posting things on Facebook of all the great works that they were doing. And once I had finished sending all my masks out to basically everyone that I knew that needed them I started getting in touch with her, and just saying, "Is there anything I can do to help you?" Like, "Can I join? Can I join your club?" So I did actually try to join the Aunties last

summer and they rejected me, but I tried again in December and they took me. So, it's been just a great experience. I mean, I've learned so much from it. I didn't get into this as a, like I didn't even understand what sort of like radical care was, it never was something that occurred to me before. It just was this space that felt like something I could do to help at a time when everything's out of control and there was no way to help. And then working with the Aunties and just meeting with them and seeing their activism around all of this, it's just been a great experience for me. I've gotten so much out of it, more than, way more than the hours and hours and hours I've put into it sewing!

(00:05:50)

**MJ:** Yeah, I really love the work that they've been doing. I know my twin sister, she took the class last semester also. And that was like when they were like starting everything and they've just grown so much. It's just amazing how much work has gone into the entire project.

(00:06:05)

**RG:** It's really, it's absolutely incredible. Yeah. And the scale of it now, that it went from just a few people trying to gather materials to sewing. And then there's a book. And then Kristina has her show and there's courses. It's just insane how this has blown up. And I think that that really speaks a lot to this, how much people connect with this idea of as sort of a form of social engagement, right? And just that we can be kind to each other and that can be a way that we can all help each other and sort of bring each other together. I think it's been a really amazing experience.

(00:06:48)

**KR:** Our next question is, so you said that you have Ph.D., could you expand more on why you wanted to be a scientist and your educational background as well as the university you attended and your major?

(00:07:04)

**RG:** Yeah, so, I went to Bucknell University, which is a small liberal arts college in Pennsylvania, which is actually where I'm teaching now, which I didn't expect would happen and I studied animal behavior. So I always was interested in animals from when I was little. I know a lot of people are, right? And I figured I'd be a veterinarian, right? That's what everyone tells you when you're little, "Like, oh, you like animals, you should be a veterinarian." But I definitely don't like blood. And I realized that at some point in high school, I was like, "I can't. That's not going to be my thing." And then I was just looking at colleges and what options were and I found that there were these animal behavior programs. And I thought, "Oh, well that sounds maybe like something I can do." So I came to Bucknell and Bucknell has a primate lab, so they have monkeys on campus. And so my first semester, I just went to my professor and

said, “Hey, can I start working with the monkeys?” And he said, “Sure.” And so I spent my four years there as an undergraduate doing research and sort of getting to know the animals and then I went on and did my Ph.D. also in animal behavior. And then I spent a few years working at a zoo with orangutans and gorillas, which was amazing! And then I came back here, at Bucknell, running the primate lab.

(00:08:19)

**MJ:** That's amazing. Oh, my God. I also really like animal behavior. Like with the primates and everything, was it something that you've always wanted just to specifically focus on, was just primates? Or did it kind of like, “Well, here's a primate lab. I'm really interested in this.”

(00:08:37)

**RG:** I think it was more, it was more that, I mean, obviously everybody thinks monkeys are cool, right? I mean, they're fun, they're interesting. So as a kid, I had like a stuffed monkey, that was like the thing that I carried around. So I was interested in them, but not specifically. It wasn't exactly why I came to the university, but then I just started working with them. They're so fascinating. And interestingly, what I study actually is social behavior and social support, which I never actually made the connection between that and the Aunties until I just said that out loud. But, yeah, so a lot of what I do is I just sort of study, “What do they know about their social groups and how does interactions in their social group, impact their health and their lives?” So it's really relevant to humans too. And so they're a fun balance between like what really happens in the human world and then this escape into the animal world, which is always kind of fun.

(00:09:29)

**MJ:** Right, that's awesome! Okay, and the next question, so how do you balance being a mom, a scientist and like a professor since you had to with the pandemic and everything, it's just your two worlds just like suddenly collided?

(00:09:49)

**RG:** Yeah. I mean, that's the million dollar question, right? Like, everybody wants to know, “How do you be a mom and balance a career?” So, “it's hard” is the answer. I don't know. In so many ways it's been easier than I expected because I don't often feel that there's a battle between work and my kids because I love spending time with my kids and so I just make that time. And I'm also not a person who feels guilty about having a career and so my kids go to daycare and they love daycare and I love that they're at daycare and I can go to work. And so that's always been good for me. But, yeah, it's an interesting time balance. And this year, of course, has just blown it all out of the water. We were lucky enough to have an on-campus daycare that helps with the kids and they have good hours and so that that has made it manageable. This year actually my mother ended up moving here to help me because I just couldn't do it. Everything

closed so much. And you can't really hire babysitters. Normally the students are a big part in sort of how we all manage our kids in this town. It's such a small town and students are always kind of coming in and out and watching the kids and taking them places. But we couldn't do that this year. So, yeah, now I have my mother's support, which is huge and it really, really helps. But yeah, I think it's really important to me that my kids see that I have a career and that I have an identity outside of just being their mom. It's hard for them, of course, that they just would like me to be around all the time. And of course, I am around a lot. But, I think it's really good for them to see that and to understand that everybody has their own interests and their own lives and that we can still be a family together and have independent lives.

(00:11:40)

**MJ:** We applaud you. You're doing amazing!

**RG:** Thanks.

**KR:** Okay, our next question is, what were you doing before COVID happened?

**RG:** In what sense?

**KR:** I would ask if you were working on any research projects?

(00:12:00)

**RG:** Yes, so from a career perspective, I was teaching and doing research, so the semester that COVID hit, I was teaching three classes. So, I teach in the psychology department and the animal behavior department here so I teach classes in both areas. So, doing that kind of teaching and then yeah, doing research here with the primates down at the lab with all my students. So, obviously, all that had to change. And then from outside of work perspective, we've always been big travelers. So we try and go to different places. My students and I had just gotten a grant for us all to go to Japan for the summer to do research with the primates there. So I was supposed to take five students to Japan last summer. So that was quite a blow, mostly to them, we were able to put it off, so we're going to go next summer, but two years to me doesn't make that big a difference. But when you're 18, it makes a really big difference. So they've been sad about that, but we are going to go. So that's really good. Yeah, so I guess just living my life, not sewing every day, I'll tell you that.

(00:13:12)

**MJ:** That's amazing! I would love to go to Japan, that's awesome.

(00:13:17)

**RG:** Yeah. It's really, it was such an exciting opportunity. We applied for a grant and the students wrote the grant, which was really, really great. They, yeah, did a really great job.

(00:13:25)

**MJ:** That's awesome.

(00:13:28)

**RG:** I know. I was so proud of them. And yeah, we got funded, we didn't expect for that to happen. So, hopefully, we'll make it work next summer and we can get there. But they really wanted to be there for the Olympics. That's not going to happen now. But, the grant wasn't about the Olympics. So ...

(00:13:45)

**MJ:** That's awesome. Okay, let's see, okay so what is your perspective on the pandemic and like how it was handled? And, how did just well in the sense of how it was handled, but also just the pandemic, how did it affect you and everything?

(00:14:00)

**RG:** Oh, yeah, well, the way it was handled, you know wasn't good. Yeah, I think, yeah, we left, yeah, the way that it was handled was slow and not serious enough. I think obviously as a scientist, you both know, as scientists, it's difficult to see a situation where there are very clear scientific answers to things and nobody wants to hear them and nobody wants to listen to them and that's going to cost people's lives, that is very upsetting. Ironically, I was teaching a class on science communication last spring when COVID hit, which was a kind of a strange experience for us because we obviously had to pivot. Most of the class was supposed to be at a local children's museum where we were going to be working with kids and talking about science. And instead, we had to shift gears and it ended up that we spent a lot of time looking at COVID and how people were talking about COVID in the news and in the media. And it seemed like a message that just wasn't quite getting through and I think maybe it just wasn't being sent out enough. So that was upsetting. And then, of course, the fact that then, the way that we then handled it just left behind so, so many people, and that was really upsetting. And I think the Aunties stepped in to try to fill this enormous gap, that a small group of women on their sewing machines at home cannot fill. And I think we can send out that love and we can send out the positive thoughts with our masks but we can't save people's lives in the way that you hope that somebody else, like the government, could do. So that was upsetting. And then I think the thing that I was really blown away by the most was more like the personal way that people handled the pandemic in that I still can't get over how selfish people acted. And maybe it's just a lack of



understanding of how this virus spreads and the fact that if you are not careful, you put other people at risk. But, yeah, I continue to be surprised about the fact that people don't seem concerned about that and won't just put on a mask or stay home to protect other people who can't do those things. So, yeah, I wasn't very pleased with those aspects of things. But at the same time, then you see the flip side of it, right? Which is that groups like the Auntie Sewing Squad and so many others have come out of this, right? Which are people that are looking at this and saying, "This isn't acceptable and this doesn't represent who we are and we are not going to let this be the way that we go down, right?" I guess we go down sewing. Yeah, and then I don't know, personally, I think everybody's year has just been crazy. It's been a real nuts situation. I'm very lucky in that I didn't lose anyone close to me to COVID, so, I haven't had to deal with that health aspect of things and the loss side but just it's been a hard year.

(00:17:12)

**KR:** Yes. So after the pandemic subsides, what are your plans and goals?

(00:17:18)

**RG:** Yeah! I've been thinking about this a lot lately. I don't know. It's going to be weird coming out the other side of this. I definitely know that my goals are not to return to normal, right? I think we've all learned over this year, through a lot of different areas, that the way things were a year and a half ago is not the way that they should be moving forward and that we need to make a lot of changes to a lot of areas of the way that we're living. To just make sure that, I mean, "make sure" is not the right word, but to try to limit the harm that we are doing to different groups based on all sorts of aspects, right? There's been economic challenges, the fact that people don't have health insurance is causing huge problems this year, right? Employment, racism, hate crimes, it's just been a year for waking up and seeing so many problems, and how they're intersecting right now with all this health crisis. So, my goal is to somehow figure out how to channel the energy that I've been channeling into sewing things into something else that is also productive. I think I've been surprised by the fact that I was able to find time for this in my life. I would have told you a year ago that I would never have had time to sew thousands of masks, but I did right when it came down to it. And so, we have more energy and more capacity to put into these problems. And, yeah, my goal is to try to figure out how to do that.

(00:18:56)

**MJ:** Okay, let's see, who was the most influential person in your life and why?

(00:19:01)

**RG:** Oh, my grandmother. Is that like everybody's answer? Yeah, my grandma, she just passed away right before the pandemic actually, but she yeah, she's just an amazing woman who really, really inspired me. So her parents both came here from Italy as teenagers, didn't speak English.

She grew up in this household that was very traditional and when she was 16, she went to college to study science, which her mother just was like, “You can do that, but just like make sure that you know how to sew and cook and clean a house because we're going to get you married.” And she ended up having a career as a chemist for a long time and then she had four children, went back to work as a chemist briefly, and then realized that she actually wanted to work with children, particularly in special education. So, she went back and got a master’s degree after her kids had all grown up, and she worked in New York City public schools for years working with special education kids. And she was just like genuinely the nicest person ever. She spoke to everyone she met, found out their whole life story, remembered every detail and then she'd connect it, “Oh I knew someone.” And anyway, she was just an inspiration just professionally. You ask that question about, “How are you a mother and a scientist?” and I don't know my grandma somehow managed it with a husband who sat with his feet up and didn't help cook and didn't help clean. And she was doing all the childcare, all that stuff. So I always had a good model for the fact that you could do that. But then on top of that, that she was just such an interested person and she was so well-read and just kind through and through. And I always look to her for inspiration in all the areas of my life.

(00:20:55)

**MJ:** Aw, I'm sorry for your loss. My grandma was also the most influential person in my life. I love her so much and I lost her like a long time ago. But I just, I love the way that you portrayed the type of person that she was to you because that's how my grandmother was to me too.

(00:21:13)

**RG:** Grandmas really are such special people.

(00:21:16)

**MJ:** They are. They're just something else, there's just something about them.

(00:21:19)

**RG:** I know, I wonder if you get to be amazing when you become a grandma or if they were always amazing. I've always kind of wondered that.

(00:21:26)

**MJ:** Yeah, I wonder that, too.

(00:21:30)

**KR:** What have you learned over your lifetime that you would like to share with others?

(00:21:37)

**RG:** Well, I don't know. I feel ill-qualified to answer that question. Maybe when I'm a grandma. I'll be able to answer that question. I really don't know. I don't know what to say. I mean, obviously, I've learned a lot of things over my life, but a lot of what I've learned is that sometimes what I've learned is not accurate and that I just need to keep updating my learning, right? And sort of keep learning and keep changing my opinions and changing what I know, because yeah, I think this year has been a great example of how the world can shift under you, right? And everything you thought you knew is not necessarily true.

(00:22:17)

**MJ:** Okay let's see. What is one thing that you want people to remember you by?

(00:22:27)

**RG:** That's a good one, too. That's a good question. I guess I hope people remember me as a... I'm going to say like as a coach. I know I'm a teacher, right? So that's what I don't like to think of myself as a person who like tells information, obviously, as I just dodged your last question. But I like to think of myself more as like a coach who helps people get where they want to go, and I do that in my teaching, right? Trying to get my students to where they want to be with the material and with their skills. And I try and do that for my kids, too, right? Just sort of be their cheerleader and their coach and just say, "Where do you want to get to and how can I help you get there?" So, I guess that's probably the thing that I hope people will remember me as.

(00:23:27)

**MJ:** Awesome. Well, thank you so much for meeting with us! We greatly appreciate everything that you've told us and we wish you the very, very best, and we hope that you stay safe and everything.

(00:23:45)

**RG:** Thank you! Thanks so much. This is really fascinating, and I am just so interested to see what comes out of all this.

(00:23:50)

**MJ:** Okay, yeah I'll make sure that we send you the recording, too. If you'd like it?

(00:23:55)

**RG:** Sure, thanks, that'd be great.

(00:23:56)

**MJ:** Okay, thank you.

(00:23:58)

**RG:** And let me know if you ever want to talk about animal behavior.

(00:24:00)

**MJ:** Oh, definitely! I will be emailing you! Kelly, did you have a question?

(00:24:05)

**KR:** Yeah, so, you're a scientist. What advice would you give us as scientists as well? How did you stay motivated? How did you manage to get through all of the science classes?

(00:24:18)

**RG:** Yeah, it's so true. Well, one of the things I would say is just don't feel discouraged by, there's lots of things you probably have to take like chemistry, right? Like physics? And there's like all sorts of things that are not necessarily the science that you want to do. Sometimes the science that you love, those classes are hard, right? So just don't be discouraged, every scientist will tell you stories of bad grades in college and things that they did totally wrong and at the end of the day, none of that matters. It's really just all about your enthusiasm, right, and your interest in making it happen. So just don't get discouraged by that kind of stuff because grades just aren't that important. I know I'm not supposed to say that.

(00:25:05)

**MJ:** Okay, thank you! We appreciate it.

(00:25:08)

**RG:** No problem. All right, well good luck. Enjoy the rest of the semester.

(00:25:10)

**MJ:** Thank you.

(00:25:13)

**RG:** Bye.