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Interview with Camille Edwards Bennehoff

Camille Edwards Bennehoff

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Interviewee: Camille Edwards Bennehoff

Interviewers: Annie Jones and Britney Ortiz

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Length of Interview: 00:30:00

Overseen by: Dr. Chrissy Yee Lau

Bio:

Camille Edwards Bennehoff is a tax lawyer and works in an advisory capacity for the federal government. She lives in Maryland with her husband, cat Oscar, and dog Ziggy. She hand-sewed since childhood, started making masks for family and friends at the start of the pandemic, and joined the Auntie Sewing Squad in July of 2020.

Abstract:

(00:00:00) Camille Edwards Bennehoff recalls growing up in southern California, how she decided to go into law, and how she ended up in Maryland. (00:06:00) She attributes her volunteerism to the election of 2016 and shares memories of how Washington DC was a ghost town after the election (00:13:00) Edwards Bennehoff discusses the transition from working in person to working at home at the start of the pandemic, as well as, when she first began to make masks for friends and family. (00:19:01) She relays how she joined the Auntie Sewing Squad and how the Squad has served as an outlet for her volunteering. (00:25:00) Lastly, Edwards Bennehoff hopes the Auntie Sewing Squad will continue after retirement less as unsustainable labor and more as a community of sewers.

00:00:02

Annie Jones (AJ): Hello, my name's Annie Jones and I'm with Britney Ortiz and today, we are interviewing Camille Edwards Bennehoff on May 5th, 2021 on Zoom. We're recording about the Auntie Sewing Squad and Britney, take it away.

Britney Ortiz (BO): Yeah. So just our first question just leading in 'cause not a lot of people know about you and like, so we just want to know about like, your childhood and like, what was your life before the pandemic? Like, what is your family like? Just give us the rundown with everything.

00:00:33

Camille Edwards Bennehoff (CEB): Yes. So, I'll start with my family life. I grew up in southern California. I have three younger sisters. We lived mainly in San Bernardino County, a suburb called Rancho Cucamonga. I was born in like the L.A. area, lived there for a bit until I

think maybe kindergarten. And then we moved to San Bernardino County, Rancho Cucamonga, and I grew up there. My mom stayed home. My dad was a truck driver and was gone all the time. My mom even home schooled us for four years. I remember, like, we just went to church a lot. My parents were Christian. Yeah so, I grew up there, lived in Southern California for a while. I went to college. Well, I went to local community college in San Bernardino County nearby called Chaffey College, did a few years there, transferred to Cal State Fullerton where I studied accounting, and I did not like accounting that much. And I was like, what should I do? Also, it was 2009 and the economy was going to garbage because of the first recession, the Great Recession, as it's now called. It was kind of like, well, what should I do? And I had taken a law class, like a business law class, I think. And I also taken tax law, it's part of the accounting program and I actually liked those. And also, I had broken up with my boyfriend and I said, "What should I do?" And I just said, I'm going to law school, which is not the best way to do it, I would say, but I think it was kind of a conflagration of everything happening. I said, "I'm going to law school!" And everyone was like, it's too late because it's the end of senior year and you have to take the LSATs and everything; I don't know if you guys are familiar, but there's a whole process. So, I said, ok, well, I guess there's not really time for me to plan anything. So I got a job and was for a year in between college and law school, I worked at a law firm. I did kind of like assistant stuff. And I studied for the LSAT and everything, took that, did all the applications you are supposed to do, and I went to law school in 2010 in San Diego. And did that, and I did joint JD and LLM. So JD is a law degree and then a Master of Law is the LLM and I got one in tax. And the school I went to, University of San Diego School of Law does a joint program where you can take tax law classes during your JD and have it count and then you do your LLM in one semester. So instead of a full year, you got to do it in one semester. If you do it all together, you save a semester, you save a bunch of money. So I did that and graduated with my JD in May 2013, took the bar exam, went back to school, did a semester of the LLM, and graduated in December. So knocked that all out in that year. I met my husband at the end of right before I started to study for the bar so like, late April. We met we started dating, not a good time to meet someone because the bar is really intense. Apparently, I do everything the wrong way you're supposed to do things. But so then that was like law school, LLM. And I got a job at an accounting firm in San Diego, PWC, and worked there until we moved out here to the D.C. area in early 2016. My husband was in the Navy and he was in San Diego when we met; obviously, he was working there and he eventually was transferred to the naval base in Annapolis. So we were transferred out here and we live in Maryland suburbs right outside D.C. And I got a job for the government working for the United States Tax Court, which is the, they only hear tax cases, really tax court. And I worked there for a few years and now I work for the IRS Office of Chief Counsel, still as a tax lawyer. So I work on like tax cases for the government, but I work in an advisory capacity, so I don't go to court; I just review things and write things and provide advice as a tax law expert. So, yeah, that's law school, job, I'm trying to think what else. So I've been a lawyer for about almost eight years now then I guess. Yeah, 2013. And so I've been a tax lawyer the whole time. And like I said because in college I said "Oh, I kind of like law and tax," that's

how I ended up doing that. So, yeah, I'm out here in the D.C. area teleworking indefinitely because of coronavirus. And let's see... I've been now with this job for almost three years, working at home for over a year. And yeah, let's see, what else. Yes, my childhood, job, career, people, what else?

BO: Do you like SoCal better than D.C. or do you like D.C. better? Like, which one?

00:06:06

CEB: It's just really different. I mean, I always lived in California until most of my life, basically until five years ago and so I don't really know anything different. I just lived in various parts of California. I did, I lived in San Bernardino County, I lived in San Diego, I spent a couple summers in northern California area like Sacramento, San Jose, I spent some time there. So I kind of know a pretty decent idea of a lot of parts of California, and that's the only place I've lived until I moved out here. It's just so different. California is definitely like they say, like a little more laid back. I obviously am in the law world, so it's its own thing, but I think one thing about D.C. is that people here are definitely more political. A lot of people just either work in government or politics or something. There's a lot of lawyers, so many lawyers. But I've met, a lot of really great people, the weather sucks here, but what are you gonna do? It is in a literal swamp. But there some differences I like. I love using public transportation, being able to walk. I take the metro or the bus or something usually. So you can organize your life that way, which is, I like a lot. There's a lot of cool stuff to see and people and things and good food, too. So it's just different. I mean, my family's all still on the West Coast and my husband's family is there, too. So, that's like a six hour plane ride to see them. But there are definitely things that I like. It's a very different vibe and the one thing about D.C. is that a lot of people aren't from here. So, I have a decent number of friends who went to my law school and grew up in California or from wherever. So you get a lot of transplants. So, yeah, it's just very different.

AJ: Does the political nature of D.C. in general inspire you to volunteer for the different democratic campaigns you've volunteered for? Was that an inspiration for you?

CEB: I think it was the 2016 election. *laughs*

AJ: Okay yeah.

CEB: Like, I have become, I mean, I kind of grew up in a red household. I don't know if you guys know, but San Bernardino County is actually fairly red. And I grew up in that. And San Diego kind of too. I don't know, you just don't, you're not as political there. And then I moved out here, and I moved out here in March of 2016, so it wasn't that long before the election. No one really thought Trump was going to win at all.

AJ: Right, yeah.

CEB: And it was just like a crazy time because I moved out here, I never lived here or anything. And I moved out here, I quit my job and I had to find a new job. So it was kind of like for several months until I got a job, it was kind of hectic and it was like, we moved without a place and just was like a lot for those six months, getting a job and all that, so it was just an interesting time. And so I did get to settle in a tiny bit, and then the election happened and I think just did not expected it and it was kind of a big shock. And I don't know, it was kind of like let's work for the midterms and try to get the House back, which we did. I think that's what it was really. Maybe, I don't know how it would have been if I would have been in San Diego, but it was interesting, like the day after the election, D.C. was a ghost town. (laughs)

AJ: Wow.

09:55

CEB: It was so strange. So I was in this D.C. tax law society thing through the D.C. bar and my friend who was running it had this panel. And so she had invited a couple speakers to come speak on the panel. And I was at lunch and she said, you know, "Can you come this?" I was like, "Sure." And it was me and her attending. That was it.

AJ: Wow

CEB: And I was like, "Oh, man, sorry." Because usually these things, you have people.

BO: Yeah.

CEB: And I think some of them were from out of town, even they had flown in for it. But it was literally just the two of us because nobody went to things. And I think my boss at the time took the morning off. There was a lot of people in mourning. It was an interesting day. So, I don't know, it's just kind of like a wake up call. I think that was kind of it. And maybe if I'd been in San Diego, maybe it wouldn't have been quite as political or not as many people involved in things. But I think that was a big thing that kind was a wakeup call. So then I started volunteering with the Democrats, knocking doors back in the day when people were still doing that.

AJ: Yeah, I did that once for a representative election here. We're both from the Central Valley, so we're in the very, very red part of the state, so we understand the whole red pockets of California.

CEB: Oh yeah, it's a big state. A lot of red people. I mean, not all of our representatives are Democrats. We have Devin Nunes, for example.

AJ: It was Nunes vs. what is his name? Andrew Janz. I'm forgetting what it's called now, but I did knock on doors with a friend who is an intern for him. So I've done the political intern, I was a state assembly intern last summer. So political internships are very interesting. Very difficult, but very interesting.

CEB: Yeah. I mean, I've never done that, but I've volunteered. I mean, so when I volunteered for the court, I was not allowed to speak about stuff. I think I was allowed to do things, but anonymously but I wasn't allowed to post or anything. The courts are big on hearing neutral political matters.

AJ: Yeah, that makes sense.

CEB: But when I changed jobs, I was allowed to do more stuff in that field, like speak about things. I don't remember if I could volunteer, but it was definitely like don't say anything online, don't wear a t-shirt. I work for the federal government agency and it's still a little, you couldn't wear a shirt to work. There's still rules like the Hatch Act, I don't know if you guys know what that is, but certain things they don't want federal employees to say to appear neutral. But the courts are way more strict and conservative about it. So I can do more now with my current job.

00:13:00

BO: Let's see. So, since talking about your job, how has it changed with the pandemic? Is it worse? Is it better? Do you like being home?

CEB: So this job I would telework occasionally as needed, like someone's coming to do work in the house or something. And I wasn't doing it regularly and that was fine. And then we went to March of 2020, yeah that's when it was, basically pretty soon after they declared a pandemic or whatever, we went to, they were just like, "Pack up your laptops, you're going home," and we're like, "Ok, it'll be a few weeks," and then it wasn't and they kept extending it. I think there was a bit of a transition because for example, we did not expect to be here this long so I didn't really bring stuff from home like my second monitor, which I like. So it was harder to transition at first. And there's a lot of procedures and things that we had that were all paper. So it was everyone figuring out how to adjust to that, but now that we've gotten over kind of that hump, I think it's pretty fine. There's certain things that you miss, like seeing coworkers in the hall and stuff, but I don't feel and they've even said, "Oh, people are doing well at home." I think I've done fine, I can be productive. There's certain things I still miss, but they sent me a printer, which helps because it's really hard to do everything only on the computer. But, yeah, I think now that we're able to get things little more figured out because we just weren't prepared. We never had anybody

teleworking full time and they definitely didn't expect everyone to be doing it. So it was just kind of figuring things out and I had to kind of get a setup. Like, I was in the living room in front of the window and then we moved things around and now I have a little office. So, once I was able to get a little more comfortable, I think I'm doing fine. I went to my office, took out some stuff I needed. It's fine.

BO: Do you know when you're going back?

15:05

CEB: No. One thing about here is the D.C. has a ton of federal agencies and different federal employees in D.C. And a lot of them live either further out of D.C. or Maryland and Virginia and everybody, not everybody, but so many of us commute in by metro to our office. And I know one concern, and I'm not a decision maker or anything, but I know that I'm sure one thing they're thinking about is that once people go back to work is that everyone's going to be on the metro. Because first of all, the city is not equipped if everyone's switched to driving and it's just not going to happen. So, I think one consideration they have is when are we going to be ready to fill the metro again? Because that's what would happen. And I think, my guess is, and I haven't heard anything for sure, my guess is that we'll phase it in. But right now we're not in office. We have to ask permission if we want to go in just because they want to track everybody, like contact tracing and stuff. So yeah we'll see. I'm fine if we do, if I have more teleworking going forward cause I think I like it.

AJ: So to switch gears a little bit toward the Auntie Sewing Squad, did you previously know how to sew before the Auntie Sewing Squad? And how did you learn how to sew?

CEB: Yeah, so I used to do some hand sewing and stuff as a kid. I would make clothes for my dolls and stuff. And I remember that my mom would hem clothes and she'd made some costumes and things and I think I learned, picked up some things from her. I don't think she had a sewing machine, but I definitely knew how to do basic stuff. And then we moved out here to D.C. in March 2016 and my job before had been really demanding, worked a ton of hours, long hours and I didn't really have time for anything. And before that, I'd been in law school, which was really demanding. And then so, when we moved out here, and I ended up getting a job at the federal government that's more regular like 40 hours a week type job. I was like, "Oh, like I can have a hobby. Cool." I forgot what that was like. And so I don't remember how I had heard about it, but there is a little sewing store that's owned by this very nice lady named Katie here in, I live in Hyattsville, Maryland and the sewing store is called Three Little Birds and she opened it. She just loves sewing and just ended up opening like a fabric/sewing store. And she used to teach in-person classes like how to sew on the sewing machine. And I took one of those and I was like, "This is cool." And I bought a sewing machine and would do crafts like make pillowcases and stuff. And I make other things by hand too. I made ornaments and I do cross stitching. But I

learned the machine sewing from there. I still buy stuff from her and she does things virtually. Katie, the owner, was the one who in maybe in late March or early April, whenever people started talking about wearing masks, she sent emails to people on her list being like, "If you will learn how to make a mask, I'm doing a virtual class." And that's when I first learned about making masks and I learned how to make it from her. And so that's when I started with that. But I already knew how to do some basic machine sewing. I had made a skirt with her in class and made a purse and stuff. So I did have some basic skills. Nothing super involved, but I had already learned.

00:19:01

BO: So how did you get involved with it, the Auntie Sewing Squad? Cause there's a community of women all doing it together. How is it ran?

CEB: I saw the *Washington Post* article in the summer, last summer. And then I think I just asked to be added to the Facebook group because I had been making some masks. I made them for friends and family first. And I had a lot of free time now, because I was home more. I just couldn't go to the gym or anything like that I usually would do. I started making them for friends and family and stuff. And I had seen some people online asking for, like when the native tribes and she gave me an address and stuff, but it was not very organized. And then I saw a *Washington Post* article and I said, "Ok. This is good." Because the way I had been doing it was just kind of piecemeal and just sending them to friends and family. And so then I just read the article, I think in July last year, yeah. And just talking about it and I just asked to be added to the group. And then they have all these FAQs and everything, when they want you to read when you join so that's kind of how I learned more about the process of how it worked. But I don't know, I just saw the article and thought like, "That's really cool" and, I can do a little more organized and efficient way. So, yeah, that's how I found it.

AJ: How would you say the Autie Sewing Squad has overall impacted your life?

20:37

CEB: Well, I mean, it's been a really good way, like an outlet for my volunteering. Before the pandemic started, I was knocking doors for the Democrats, and doing VITA in person, VITA's the free tax preparation. I was also volunteering at a walk in legal clinic. And I was doing all that and then everything immediately shut down pretty much. I just had all this free time and I just was like, "Ok." And I was just sitting home feeling kind of miserable and I couldn't do anything. And I guess I'll learn how to bake bread, which I did a couple times. And then I was making masks here and there, but it wasn't really organized. And I think things kind of died down after kind of everyone got a mask or two themselves. It just was a good outlet for all of that energy I had and need to do something and feel like I'm contributing and helping. Then also there's the Facebook group, the online community, everyone's very supportive and they share tips. And then

we do Auntie Care where they send you things to do self care. And you just meet all these cool people and everyone's like-minded in the sense of they all want to contribute in the same way and all know how to sew. I don't really have friends that sew. I mean, I kind of know the lady who owns the sewing store but it was a good match for a lot of things, so it just was a good way to do that. And then yeah, it was just a really nice supporting online community. And actually, I met one of the Aunties who lives in the area near me. There was, what's it called, this organization where people donate fabric and craft supplies and they sell it and then they use the money for their nonprofit, so they had a popup thing and we planned and met up at that socially distanced, masked, and everything. But it was cool because I got to meet her. But yeah, it's a great community. And it's run well in the sense of you can just say I have masks and they'll tell you where to send them and you know someone's going to get them. I guess there was problems when people were donating, it would like sit on a floor somewhere cause it wasn't organized. They vet who is going to accept it and who's going to handle masks once they're received and things. So it's nice. A lot of good things to it. So, yeah, it's been a great recourse. Sorry?

BO: How many masks have you made? Do you know?

CEB: I think I'm almost at 500. I'm in progress right now. I've tried to keep running total. Well, just for the Auntie Sewing Squad. I had made some, like I said before, for random places and I need to check that. But 500 for this. There are Aunties who have done a lot more. They're either way faster than me or else or maybe don't have a million other things going on. But *laughs* maybe they're not lawyers.

BO: How long does it take to make just one?

CEB: I don't know. I'm really bad because... So, I'll cut a bunch of fabric and then when I have time, I'll start sewing and then I'll pick it up again later when I have time again. I don't know. I don't know if I've ever timed it. What I'll do is I'll just keep working on it until I have enough done where I feel like I can send them out, so it's real hard to gauge. I kind of just fit it in evenings or weekends or lunch breaks or whatever. So yeah.

BO: When you have time, yeah.

CEB: Yeah, it's hard to know. But, yeah, I just keep going until I have maybe 20 at least and then send them out.

BO: So do your dogs help at all?

CEB: He watches. He supervises. And he sits on the ground and the cat actually likes the sound of the sewing machine and he likes to sit near the sewing machine and watch. We actually had a

really bad incident with the cat swallowing a needle four years ago, maybe? It was Thanksgiving weekend of 2017, my cat swallowed a needle.

AJ: Of course Thanksgiving, of course it's a holiday.

CEB: Yes and I had to take him to the ER and he had to have it removed from his stomach. So we are careful when the cat is around sewing things because that was a very expensive incident.
laughs

25:14

AJ: Always holidays, always pet emergencies on holidays.

CEB: Yeah, and of course, we get there, and they're like, the lady, whoever it was, I can't remember who it was, whoever is going to do the x-rays and stuff isn't here. And then they're like, cause we need to know where it is in his body. I'd figured out he'd swallowed it and I ran over there. And we need to figure out where it is so we know how we can remove it or not, because I guess sometimes they can pull it up this way and if not, they have to cut it out because it was a needle on thread, so it was super dangerous.

AJ: Oh yeah.

CEB: I guess it could wrap around things. And so anyways, by the time whoever does the x-rays or whatever got there of course, because it was Thanksgiving weekend, they're like it's in his intestines, we got to cut it out and now like, we've got to get the person whoever cuts it out. And they got there. So now I have a metallic, what's it called, it's got a magnet on it. I run it on the ground to make sure there's no needles and stuff so he can't swallow it because I don't want to go to the ER again.

AJ: Yeah that's understandable.

CEB: So, Oscar "promotes cleanup" in a very expensive way. But he does like the sewing machine. He likes the vibrations and stuff, so he likes to sit by me.

BO: Probably like soothing for them.

CEB: Yeah. Maybe it's like purring. I don't know. Because I've been sewing for a while, so maybe also he's just used to it. What did you say?

BO: I said it's not like a vacuum where they run away from it.

CEB: Yeah. Yeah. He doesn't like vacuums, but I mean, he knows the sewing machine. I've been doing it since he was a little cat so...

BO: How old are they?

CEB: They're rescues, it's hard to know. Oscar's five-ish and Ziggy's six, maybe, seven? I'd have to look. Oscar's from the pound, and Ziggy was rehomed. A lady, she actually couldn't keep them and she posted it on NextDoor and was like, "Does anyone want a free dog?" And I said yeah. So, but they had gotten him from the pound. He's gone through all sorts of who knows how many owners he's had so...

AJ: Do you think the sewing squad's going to continue after the pandemic? And would you want to continue to be a part of it after the pandemic along with your helpful little supervisors?

CEB: As long as they're not swallowing needles. Yeah, I mean, I think it'll stay on more as just a community of a Facebook group. I know one discussion has been it's a really important discussion of valuing our labor and not abusing it. We joke that it's like a shadow FEMA or something came in and to fill in where the huge gap that was created because the government didn't do anything in terms of masks and pretty much anything for a long time. So yeah, I mean, it was together to fulfill this specific purpose and I hope that we don't try to go on forever. I know we've occasionally we've had drives for warm weather clothing and stuff, and I've like made hats and things for that, but yeah, I like the idea that we become obsolete and just are able to hang out on Facebook and talk to each other about sewing stuff and there isn't the same urgency anymore. I mean, I know masks are going to be around for a while, but hopefully, we're able to, or even just like dial it back for a lot. Because it's been, I mean, I've been a member of the group now, let's see since July, so definitely not as long as I like some other people who started, but going just sewing as much as you can, whenever you can, it's not sustainable, so hopefully just we're all friends on Facebook after this!

AJ: So maybe exist on a much more casual level as the pandemic dies down?

CEB: Yeah, just maybe just keep the community aspects and take out the work aspects.

AJ: Right.

BO: Yeah.

CEB: Because it's work. And I have spent money on fabric. I mean, I've gotten some stuff from it, too. But, some money on like fabric and thread and things and just time.