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## Interview with Irene Tayag Laut

Irene Tayag Laut

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## **Oral History Transcript**

**Interviewee:** Irene Tayag Laut

**Interviewers:** Lauryn Watkins & Ashley Hubert

**Date:** Wednesday, November 18, 2020

**Location:** Zoom

**Collection:** Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive, SBS 112: Women & Social Change, From 1890s to the Present, Fall 2020

**Length:** 00:50:06

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

**Bio:** Irene Tayag Laut is one of the original members of the Auntie Sewing Squad. She is a part of the 1.5 generation of Filipino immigrant children that came to the United States in the 1970's. She currently resides in San Diego and works in the field of mental health. She dedicates her spare time to helping others by sewing masks for underserved communities during this time of uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Summary:** [00:00:31.810]: Irene Tayag Laut discusses her life growing up in America, her career, family, and how the pandemic affected her life. [00:22:40.440]: She talks about the beginning of the Auntie Sewing Squad how it has changed her life for the better. [00:36:10.350]: Irene talks about how the formation of the Auntie Sewing Squad was pretty smooth sailing, but there were challenges when it came to obtaining the materials. [00:39:36.100]: She talks about how being in the Auntie Sewing Squad has formed friendships and strong bonds. [00:45:53.840]: Laut concludes by stating how the Auntie Sewing Squad has impacted her life and how it has saved her from all the chaos and depressing moments that have happened this year.

Oral History Transcript with Irene Tayag Laut

[00:00:01.290] - Ashley  
All right, ready to start?

[00:00:04.630] - Lauryn  
Yes

[00:00:05.410] - Irene  
I see the record button on my end, if that makes the difference.

[00:00:09.730] - Ashley  
Oh, yeah, we both have it. It's just because Lauryn is the host of the meeting she recorded.

[00:00:19.950] - Irene  
OK.

[00:00:21.100] - Ashley  
OK, so would you like to tell us a little bit about yourself like history and where you live?  
Career. Family,

[00:00:31.810] - Irene  
Yea of course, of course.

[00:00:32.710] - Irene  
So my name again is Irene. I grew up in San Diego and I currently live in Chula Vista, which is pretty much a border town between San Diego and Tijuana.

[00:00:49.750] - Irene  
I work in mental health. I actually do counseling over the phone and I've been doing that for the past 10 years. I have two kids. I have a seven year old daughter, Sophia, and I have a 13 year old son Kanoi. I have been lucky through this pandemic to work from home. I've been working from home for years because I just do phone counseling. I don't ever see clients. So the kids were already used to me being at home for work.

[00:01:20.080] - Irene  
And whenever it was their vacations and stuff, they they always just knew to be that they would be home with me and they kind of had the routine while I'm working. So I also take care of my parents. My dad has all excuse me, my dad has dementia, so I'm his power of attorney. So this year, and especially because he was diagnosed back in December and the pandemic hit in March.

So it's been a little challenging trying to coordinate care for him, getting him to doctor's appointments.

[00:02:01.630] - Irene

A lot of medical providers are switching that to virtual visits. So it's definitely been a challenging year trying to coordinate my life with my family and also trying to care for my parents as well.

[00:02:22.220] - Irene

I joined the Sewing squad because I just needed something outside of my head, outside of my life to really kind of focus on, so that was something that I joined actually within a week of Kristina making the announcement back in March that she was going to start it. So that's kind of me in a nutshell.

[00:02:45.050] - Ashley

Ok, so you said that you work counseling through the phone for mental health in a pandemic.

[00:02:54.290] - Ashley

During the pandemic have you seen, like, an increase in calls and.

[00:02:57.960] - Irene

Yeah, yeah, it's been this year at my job has probably been the most stressful ever.

[00:03:08.840] - Irene

And people and the range of calls that I was getting was from, you know, I don't like my job. I'm unhappy with my marriage. I'm struggling with parenting to suicidal ideation, domestic violence, child abuse. So I would get a range of calls. I think when the pandemic first started, everyone felt a sense doom like nobody knew it was going on. And then back in March, February, March, every day, it just seemed like there was a new breaking news story.

[00:03:49.070] - Irene

There was a new update. There was, every day there was something new. And I think what was hardest was I'm trying to figure out what's going on with me, what's going on with me and taking care of my family. And and I was having really high anxiety myself. I was thinking people were saying there was they didn't know treatment for it. They didn't know how you got all of these unknown factors.

[00:04:24.140] - Irene

So I think for the first two weeks, I was having overwhelming feeling of doom of like, gosh, what if something happens to me and, you know, I have what they considered pre-existing medical. I have high blood pressure. So that put me in another category of, you know, they were

saying people that had pre-existing were at higher risk of not surviving. So I'm thinking, oh, my gosh, I have two kids. I got to take care of my parents.

[00:04:57.320] - Irene

What if something happens to me? I have to think about my saying it. I have to think about my finances. And so the first I would say solid two weeks was really hard for me personally and trying to manage that for myself and then to get calls from 15, 20 people a day and having to be present with them and having to support them through their feelings of doom and trying to be that glimmer of hope, trying to be that ray of sunshine for other people was really, really probably the hardest part in the pandemic for me was how do I put away my own feelings of doom to be present for other people.

[00:05:53.300] - Irene

You know, they're looking for me for support. They're looking for me for answers. They're looking for me to say everything will be OK. And to have to repeat the same conversation, you know, 15, 20 times in a day, every day since March, it's been really exhausting. And I think kind of my I went in self preservation mode. I went into the, I went into survival mode. I went in to just do what I need to do to be able to be present in life.

[00:06:34.470] - Irene

I had to think about, well, emotionally, I like things that were toxic in my life that I just needed to cut off because I didn't have anything to give to that. I just needed to find the energy to be present with my work, with my kids, with my parents. And it took a while. It took a long time for me to come to peace with, OK, I can do this, I can do this. And I'm really close with my sister.

[00:07:04.380] - Irene

She's really been a godsend. She's actually a... to and I probably in the past and we would see each other all the time. Pandemic and I didn't even visit with her. I didn't go inside her house probably until two months ago. So it took me a while to just feel like, OK, I can feel OK with what's going on. I can do some things to work on me. But it really took a lot of energy to be present at work because even though they were kind of the same issues that I had dealt with before, it was.

[00:07:45.580] - Irene

Exacerbated by the pandemic, like people were feeling stressed at work, but people were now feeling stressed at work because they didn't, they were going to have a job. People were feeling stressed about their marriage before, but now they're home with their partners 24/7 and they're realizing how much they don't really like them. You know, they're with their kids 24/7. And they had a break with their kids going to school and now with their kids 24/7. So.

[00:08:14.890] - Irene

It definitely intensified the calls we were getting and then people that already had a history of

mental health, it just put them over. It really just put them over. And the people that. We were getting a lot of calls from senior citizens, a lot of calls from senior citizens, because my company opened the line as a help center line for the public. So even if you didn't have insurance with us, people were calling in.

[00:08:48.840] - Irene

And I honestly, the the senior citizens were the ones that made me feel most hopeful because they are the ones that were like, you know what, I'm 85 years old.

[00:09:03.270] - Irene

I've been through life. I'm not going to let this be the thing that brings me down. So through all the calls that I got that I've gotten in these past couple months, it was actually the senior citizens that were the ones that were saying, I don't know what to do, but. I've gone through all of these things in my life that I'm not going to let this be the one. So a long answer to your question, but it's just so loaded, you know what I mean?

[00:09:44.650] - Irene

It's just such a loaded question because I'm seeing perspectives from everyone across the board. And on the flip side of that, I'm also getting calls from people that don't believe that that covid is real. They don't believe.

[00:10:00.390] - Irene

And wearing masks that are calling because they are stressed and feeling really emotional about all of these mandates and how it's taking away from their lives, I don't get a lot of those calls. But when I do get those calls, I'm like, whoa, there are really people out there, the people that are struggling with fearing for their lives on the same spectrum. On the other end of that, there are people that just genuinely don't believe this is happening for real and don't feel the need for mandates, for masks, for mandates, for social distancing.

[00:10:44.400] - Irene

They firmly believe that all of this is just a hoax and they're calling for emotional support because that's stressing them out. Everything that they don't believe about what's going on. So it's been those are also really challenging calls, too, because that goes against everything I, I, I believe. So those have been really difficult tools to because they want me to validate that that's OK. And I just won't do it. And I'll just say something like, well, you know what, you have to own your feelings for yourself.

[00:11:20.220] - Irene

I can't tell you how to feel about what's going on, but I do want to say that I hope you have a safe. And you make decisions that you feel most comfortable with and that you make decisions that you feel will be most healthy for your family. So it really has been mind blowing to see. The perspective across the United States about what's going on, yeah, and I think a lot of people can

relate to the fact that we're all feeling really stretched thin, added responsibilities and just trying to space your time out between everything you need to do.

[00:12:05.600] - Irene

And I think definitely that can have an impact on mental health. Yeah, yeah, and I see it every day, every day, every day, and I. It makes me feel more grateful that. I'm really OK with my life, you know what I mean? Like, my parents are managing best that they can. My kids are managing the best that they can. We're all healthy. We all have our basic essentials that we need. I still have a job.

[00:12:41.860] - Irene

You know, I definitely am grateful that I am still in a good place in my life. But I also have to recognize that. There is the need for me to take care of me too. In a different way now than before.

[00:13:04] - Ashley

Yes. So. In your bio that we have, you said that you moved from the Philippines when you were a child was more about that experience.

[00:13:22] - Lauryn

I found that interesting.

[00:13:24.640] - Irene

We are well, we moved here when I was probably four, so I don't remember what I wrote in my bio. I feel like it was so long ago. But we moved here when I was four. My parents, my dad was in the Navy. He got stationed here in San Diego. And so we've been here since about nineteen seventy six, grew up here, grew up by the border. So the. I feel a lot of empathy with what's going on with border issues just because you literally can see Tijuana from my parents house.

[00:14:13.020] - Irene

So things that are happening in the border when Trump came here and talked about building the wall, I was really hurt because that's in my neighborhood, like that's like right there from where my parents live. So. And. I have a sister, older sister, she works in public health. I obviously, again, work in mental health. But yeah, we've been here since probably nineteen seventy six. And I don't remember what I wrote in my bio, so I apologize if I'm a little foggy because I don't remember what I wrote.

[00:14:50.990] - Irene

Did you have a specific question about just my growing up?

[00:14:56.650] - Ashley

No, we're just kind of trying to get your background and everything. But did that moving from

the Philippines to San Diego, correct?

[00:15:08.590] - Irene

Yes.

[00:15:10.730] - Ashley

Yeah. Did it have any, like, certain did you struggle with the move?

[00:15:16.640] - Irene

Yeah. So at the time we didn't it was just me, my sister and my parents that we didn't have any family here. We didn't have any family. We knew nobody. So we were we we basically just had each other through the years that we were here. My dad would have. People from the same barrio, from the same community as he was that grew up in the same place as he was, that he grew up in the Philippines, so they became our aunts and uncles and they became our cousins and they became our extended family because we didn't grow up with with any family.

[00:16:04.460] - Irene

We probably didn't. I didn't know a blood relative until I was probably in high school because I never, we never ate here in the United States.

[00:16:15.860] - Irene

We went back to the Philippines probably when I was in sixth grade and then again when I was in college. But in terms of like family here, we didn't grow up with any blood relatives. I didn't need any blood relatives probably until high school. So even though we didn't have any blood family here, I think and I think my sister would agree, we still felt a very deep connection to the Philippines because we knew all of our blood relatives were there.

[00:16:51.890] - Irene

So when we think of our homeland, when we think of where we're from, it really still is deeply rooted in the Philippines because that's where our bloodline is. And we had to, you know, there was at the time, there was no Asian markets here, there was no Filipino markets, there were no Asian Filipino restaurants or bakeries or things like that. So my mom was actually a stay at home mom for a couple until I was.

[00:17:25.980] - Irene

Eight or nine, so we grew up making everything from scratch at everything or five years old, we would make what's called MacGinnis, which is the Filipino sausages. We would make Tocino, which is the Filipino bacon. We would make all the desserts and all the breads so growing up.

[00:17:55.120] - Irene

That's all I remember, the smells of cooking. I remember the sounds of cooking. I remember everything that had to do with cooking because. You know, when you make things from



scratch, it takes a lot of time. So. I have very fond memories of cooking with my mom and again, feeling really connected to the Philippines in that way to.

[00:18:29] - Lauryn

That's really interesting because my mom is actually from the Philippines, my mom, my grandparents, my uncle, and they came here in the 1970s as well.

[00:18:36.590] - Lauryn

So hearing your side of the story and everything you went through was really interesting because my family went through that as well. Like the cooking, having your family here.

[00:18:48] - Irene

Yeah. And I think that's why we're close now.

[00:18:51.440] - Irene

And I think, you know, I when I started having kids, I actually lived in Hawaii for a while.

[00:18:59.630] - Irene

And then when I had my when I had my son, my sister also had her son there. My son and my nephew are five months apart.

[00:19:11.330] - Irene

And when I had my son, even though I was living in Hawaii and I looked away, I just I just I think actively had. That gut feeling of my family needs to be together because I didn't grow up with cousin. I felt like. My son and her son need to know each other. So when my son when I was two, two months old, I moved back because I just couldn't imagine raising him without. Blood relatives, I mean, he had cousins there, he has his Hawaiian family there, but my instinct told me I needed to be close to my family to raise my child.

[00:20:07.860] - Irene

So so we move back and and we I live five minutes from my sister, the pre pandemic. We probably saw each other every week. Her daughter and my daughter are best friends. There are two years apart. So I think it it definitely gave me a different. Feeling, uh. Of. How I wanted to raise my kids and wanted them to know their cousins, their grandparents, their aunt, their uncle, because I didn't grow up with that.

[00:20:50.900] - Ashley

Awesome. Yeah, family is definitely very important, especially in times like this, and you need to be on your.

[00:21:04.030] - Irene

Yeah, my sister and her family have definitely been a lifesaver for us, they've been our lifeline

outside of our home because that's like our pod now, that's the one place where I know she's social distancing. She works in public health. So I know I trust she follows all safety protocols and guidelines when when she goes out and has to do her shopping and stuff. So like I said, it was hard because I was seeing we saw her almost every single week.

[00:21:40.420] - Irene

And when the pandemic hit, we were still we would drop off food to each other because, of course, food, that's how everything relates to food with our family. So we would drop off food with each other, but we would never visit like we. She didn't. She I don't. I would never go into her house, she would never go into my house probably until like two months ago. So even though we didn't really visit with each other, just the mere fact that five minutes of dropping off food to each other was really, I think, a lifeline for both of us.

[00:22:27.180] - Lauryn

OK, so you stated that you were a founding member of the Auntie Sewing Squad, so I was wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about the whole process of forming it with Kristina?

[00:22:38.630] - Irene

Yeah, yeah.

[00:22:40.440] - Irene

I mean, it wasn't like a formal founding member. It kind of just happened organically. I think at this. I think, you know, again, my sister works in public health. I work in mental health. So we definitely both have a very um we're very mindful of what's going on in our communities. My sister has a lot of friends that work in mental health- excuse me, work in the medical field. And when the pandemic hit we both were like, you know what?

[00:23:12.840] - Irene

We both realized that. I think at the same time, my sister and I were like, let's start making masks, at least for the family. And then I think she posted and I posted that we were going to start making masks, and at the same time, Kristina had also posted she needed the help making masks. We were sharing resources because we realized there was a shortage of fabric. We realized there was a shortage of elastic so we would share resources or ideas of what we were finding to get things, materials for the masks.

[00:24:04.240] - Irene

As her request for masks started increasing, she just asked, is there a group of people that would be interested in helping me make masks? And of course, I was like, yeah, I'm going to do that because why would I not? So it just again, it just really started organically. It wasn't like we had planning meetings or, you know, we were just in do mode. We were just in do mode. And we were sharing patterns and we were testing patterns and we were seeing where we can get the best deals for fabric and elastic and things like that.

[00:24:47.410] - Irene

And then it just kind of evolved from there. The more requests that she was getting, the more people were joining. And then eventually it just kind of evolved to like an eight hundred auntie and uncle squad of people that have stayed really committed to making masks. To be quite honest with you, it really was a lifesaver for me, too, because I really needed to feel like I was contributing to a bigger movement, like I needed to get out of my head about the doom I was feeling.

[00:25:29.590] - Irene

I needed to feel like I was really contributing to a bigger cause.

[00:25:35.530] - Irene

At first it was for health care workers.

[00:25:41.260] - Irene

And then we started getting more request calls from communities that maybe just didn't have access to masks. So we did a lot for the Native American community, immigrant communities, migrant camps in Tijuana and on the border, refugee centers, LGBTQ places, homeless shelters, prisons. So we then started shifting. Once the health care workers were much more situated with their PPE, we started shifting the focus to other communities that really just didn't have access. And I don't think people understood that, you know, it was a privilege for them to be able to go to the store and buy masks.

[00:26:34.690] - Irene

But there were communities that didn't have that luxury to be able to just go to the store, or go online and order things, so that's kind of where we filled the void of supporting communities that just didn't have the same access. Farmworker's also, I'm thinking about who we supported, but it all just kind of happened organically. Like I said, we didn't have any official planning meetings.

[00:27:09.060] - Irene

I'm sure more of the aunties that have bigger responsibilities meet with Kristina virtually and speak more about logistical things and planning things, but it all just kind of happened organically. And I think that was the beauty of it. There was a call to action, and people responded genuinely and wholeheartedly and so selflessly and really committed to just helping. I think it was just a beautiful movement that happened because people just gave, period, people just gave, they gave their time, they gave their resources, they gave financially, they gave emotionally, everybody just gave so freely of themselves.

[00:28:03.360] - Irene

And I think it was just such a beautiful thing. It's like something that's going to carry with me. I'm going to get emotional for the rest of my life because people came together, people just came together and you can't ask- this was like the best of everybody coming out.

[00:28:38] - Ashley

It's definitely an amazing thing to witness, like not being in it-.

[00:28:40] - Irene

Really, and I think part of part of it too, I wanted to show my kids that we can feel really hopeless or helpless about the pandemic, but we can still do something to help other people. Like I wanted them to know when there's a crisis in the world, that we can choose to be the helpers, that we don't have to be helpless, that we don't have to just sit around and do nothing, that we can step up and we can choose to be helpers.

[00:29:19.050] - Irene

And make sure that everyone is taken care of. I wanted my kids- it was really important for me to have my kids understand that we have a choice and in what we want to contribute to the world, and that I hope they remember that lesson, that when there's bad things happening in the world that we can choose to be the helpers and be there for other people.

[00:29:50.670] - Ashley

I think that's a very beautiful lesson. I think it's very important to learn-not just learn that, but also incorporate it into your everyday life.

[00:29:59.820] - Ashley

When the Auntie Sewing Squad started, did you ever imagine that you'd get this big of a following?

[00:30:09.360] - Irene

Oh, no. I was thinking about 500 masks. I was thinking, OK well so maybe through April and then we'll call it a day and the government will step in and give resources to everybody and that's it. I have a friend in Singapore and we would message each other early on, and it was amazing how the-I'm going to say the strongest Singaporean government- really stepped in to support everybody in Singapore. They would, I think and I might be wrong, but it sounded like the government officials were going door to door to check in on people. They would give them a schedule to go down to some community center to pick up all the essentials and masks to every single person in Singapore. They got the essentials to be quarantined. They literally cleaned the streets. They went and cleaned the streets and they responded within like a week or two. They were so fast. So in my hand, I'm like, wow, Singapore can do that. Of course, the United States has resources to be able to do that too, so I'm thinking, ok, we're going to make masks, maybe through April, maybe through spring break, and then now we're in December in a couple of weeks and I've slowed down in the past month because my kids started school and I really needed to focus on their schoolwork after my work. But I made about four thousand. I was thinking, I'm going to make maybe five hundred, maybe a thousand, but I hit four thousand masks maybe about a month or two ago.

[00:32:16.570] - Ashley

That's awesome.

[00:32:18.190] - Irene

Yeah, I had zero idea that it was going to be this much for this long, and there are still communities that need masks. We just got to request maybe a couple of days ago for I think it was for one of the first nation communities that asked for six thousand masks. So there are still communities that are in desperate need. You know, while everyone else is arguing about whether or not they can eat and dine at a restaurant, there are still communities that don't have access to masks.

[00:32:56.920] - Irene

So when I see the people on the news and they're crying about not being able to go to the gym or not being able to dine in, I'm like, really? That's the worst part of your day? When there are communities that are completely isolated and don't have access to resources to get masks, and you're complaining about whether or not you can eat at your favorite restaurant? Like no, I can't hear that. Like, that's that's not my reality.

[00:33:31.180] - Ashley

I think that in my opinion, I just think that with the lack of government assistance, I think it's really awesome to see how people can come together and help each other. I mean, it would definitely be a big help to have assistance from government leaders and everything, but it's awesome how people can pull together. And a great example of that is through the Auntie Sewing Squad.

[00:34:01.420] - Irene

Yeah. And that's why I get so emotional when I talk about Auntie Sewing Squad, because it really was a lifesaver for me. I think I really honestly, would have gotten really depressed early on. My anxiety would have gone through the roof, so I knew I was going to get emotional about it because it really was a lifesaver for me. It really was. And then to see eight hundred plus people come together, we didn't know each other.

I mean, I only knew Kristina.

[00:34:49.220] - Irene

To now know that there's a community of eight hundred of us, plus our families, plus our kids, it's not just eight hundred. There's like there's like thousands of us now, right? Coming together, so purely, you know, it's the most beautiful thing that I've experienced in recent history of just the genuineness of people wanting to help. The world can't get any better than that, when people just come together for the pure goal of helping others without asking or anything in return.

[00:35:38.820] - Irene

It's really an amazing thing. It really is. And it touches me very deeply. It really does.

[00:35:56.490] - Ashley

Yeah, it definitely shows a big level of selflessness for everyone who just wants to give and not get anything in return. I think that's really awesome. Were there any challenges that you faced when the Auntie Sewing Squad was formed or was it all just pretty smooth sailing?

[00:36:10.350] - Irene

It was pretty smooth sailing. I think there were obviously concerns about material because you know, I think the folks in L.A. had better access to materials than the rest of us because of the fashion district there. You can buy literally hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of yards of fabric for a really good price. But there's communities that don't have fashion districts where they can buy fabric in bulk. So, you know, there definitely were those logistical issues. I think the aunties that were able to go and shop and do those things for the rest of us were amazing because like I said, everyone just jumped in and said, what do you need and what can I help you with? And let's do this. So we had aunties that went-and uncles to- that went shopping. And then we had other groups of aunties and uncles that helped ship things out to other aunties across the country. So you know, we have hubs of aunties that work on coordinating all of that and like I said, people just stepped up to do it.

[00:37:53.140] - Irene

There was no like, no you do it, you do it, you do it. It was just like, this is the help we need and people just stepped up to do it. So I know, like the super aunties that that took on those responsibilities probably felt more stressed than I did. I just knew realistically I couldn't take on those responsibilities, I was taking care of the kids and my parents. So I knew I could just focus on sewing, so I'm great for all super aunties and uncles that helped with those logistical things cause I think it was like the supplies and the logistics to get that out to everybody.

[00:38:40.980] - Irene

The bigger project that we were working on, the supplies to the Native American communities, to planning the logistics for that, I think we sent maybe five or six van loads of supplies, plus the things that people mailed and shipped, to the reservations. That behind the scenes stuff was a lot of work, but we had people that stepped up and again just did it.

[00:39:30.190] - Lauryn

That's amazing. You stated that when you first started, the only person you really knew was Kristina, but since it's been a few months, have you made any new friends through the Auntie Sewing Squad?

[00:39:36.100] - Irene

Oh yeah, I have. There's just a connection that I have with all of them. Like if somebody from out of San Diego messaged me and said, hey, I'm an auntie- and I mean, years from now- if somebody came to San Diego and said, 'you know what? I was an auntie in 2020 and I'm in San

Diego. Can we meet up?’ I would for sure drop everything and be like, ‘where do you want to go?’

[00:40:14.450] - Irene

Even if I didn't even talk to them. Just the fact that in 2020, they were A part of Auntie Sewing Squad, I would drop everything and go make time for them even if I never had a conversation with them. Just the mere fact there and a.. And there are some aunties that I messaged on Facebook. But, yeah, there's definitely a camaraderie. That I feel with the aunties, even though I don't see them, even though I don't talk to them, even though I haven't meet them.

[00:41:05.320] - Irene

I feel like if anyone reached out and said, ‘Hey Irene, I need some help from you, I'm an Auntie.’ I would step up and do it. No questions asked. Even if it was years from now, just the fact that you were an auntie during this time. Yeah, I would take extra care and make sure I would help you.

[00:41:58.460] - Ashley

So, was there anyone personally, when the Auntie Sewing Squad was created, was there anyone that you personally knew who was affected by the pandemic? Someone who needed a mask and couldn't get to it? Or was it just kind of where you saw communities being hurt by this through social media? Or did you have a personal impact?

[00:42:12.920] - Irene

Yeah. When the pandemic first started in terms of mask making. I had people reach out directly to us, to me and actually my sister too. I have friends that work in law enforcement, so I actually got quite a few requests from people working in law enforcement because they, you know, they were working out in public and in high risk communities, and then I had folks that worked at the post office that were interacting with people and there wasn't mask mandate at that time.

[00:43:04.080] - Irene

So they were fearful for themselves, their families, and their co-workers. They were asking for masks. And then with my parents, you know, they're older. There were concerns about bringing them to doctors appointments and things like that, knowing that they're in that pre-existing condition category and at higher risk.

[00:43:34.070] - Irene

So in the beginning, I didn't know of anyone that was positive or exposed to, but I definitely knew people that asked specifically for masks that were essential workers that feared exposure. I have a friend, a good friend, her dad actually just passed yesterday from covid. Yeah, my co-worker today, same thing. Her best friend, her uncle passed away from covid yesterday, too. So I think when it first started, you kind of heard people that knew people that knew people.

[00:44:24.590] - Irene

But now it's like my friend's dad, my friend's uncle, my neighbor, and it's hitting much closer to home now, I think, than it did initially. Initially, it was friends of friends, essential workers that were fearful of exposure to now where it's people that are in my immediate circle. Yeah, so it's definitely hitting closer to home now than it did in the beginning.

[00:45:05.270] - Ashley

So I think we're just going to have one more question to wrap it up. How has the Auntie Sewing Squad impacted your life so far? Has it taught you any meaningful life lessons? And if so, which ones?

[00:45:53.840] - Irene

Oh, gosh. That's the loaded question, because I think there's just so many things that I've got from aunties that I never expected. Just the humbleness, the genuine humbleness and humility of people stepping up to give wholeheartedly. I think people really pulling from their strengths to share, even if they couldn't sew or even if they didn't want to make the masks, wanting to just contribute some how some way. I think, again, the lessons that we're teaching our children, that's been I think what hit me the hardest is when I see aunties and uncles involving their spouses, involving their children in the process and how that's just such an amazing gift to share with our family, that spirit of giving unconditionally and so selflessly.

[00:46:50.630] - Irene

There's just so many things that have happened with the Auntie Sewing Squad that I'm just so grateful for. Just, oh gosh, it's such a loaded question because it just- being part of the Auntie Sewing Squad really saved me this year. It really did. It really, really did. As much as I have given, I have definitely received tenfold. I mean, I definitely feel the love of the aunties with each other, with me.

[00:47:37.690] - Irene

Just bringing the whole community together of strangers and knowing we can get things done without government assistance, without, you know, these bigger entities in place. It definitely makes me feel hopeful that when push comes to shove, good people find each other, good people do good work together, and it all comes from just a place of loving each other and loving our communities.

[00:48:29.960] - Ashley

I think that's beautiful. Are there any last remarks that you would like to make and bring up? Anything Specific?

[00:49:11.060] - Irene

Thank you for doing this. Like I said, I knew I was going to get emotional just because it really has been powerful for me to be a part of this. Again, I can't emphasize enough how much it's



really saved me and really brought some feelings of humanity back when I was really feeling like at a loss when all of this started. So thank you for listening. Thank you for caring about what we do. Thank you for giving space to share these stories. I think they're really important in the bigger picture of, again, humanity. These are the these are the hidden stories that we just don't see enough of people just coming together and doing good things for each other. So thank you also for being here and doing this.

[00:49:46.61] - Ashley

Thank you for letting us interview you. It was very interesting.

[00:49:50.690] - Lauryn

Yeah, thank you so much.

[00:50:00.950] - Irene

Of course. Of course. Of course. And let me know if there's anything else I can share with you or anything else you want.