

## REDONDO BEACH

# Making masks at home turned into a national sewing squad

by Genie Davis

Name one essential item needed to help you safely navigate the coronavirus pandemic.

Time's up, because, of course, you answered correctly: a mask.

During March, the first month of the pandemic, with N95 masks impossible to find, Jason Jenn did what many crafty individuals did. He pulled out his sewing machines, dug into his stock of leftover fabric and went to work.

"I had a used N95 mask in my painting gear, but I knew supplies were impossible to get and other friends were expressing their need," said the Redondo Beach artist, who has always made his own theater costumes.

Jenn, along with many other home sewers, aided in an effort begun by performance art colleague Kristina Wong: The Auntie Sewing Squad.

The Auntie Sewing Squad, said Wong, is a national collective of volunteers from age 8 to 93 from all walks of life, who have turned their living rooms into sewing factories.

And, Jenn is one of the squad's first "uncles," said Wong.

Now, more than sixth months into the pandemic, Wong and her squad are still sewing after what she thought would be just a stop-gap to get Personal Protective Equipment to nurses before factory-made masks hit the market.

"But what became clear," said Wong, "is that there are very poor communities that cannot access masks, and that's who we sew for now."

Jenn also makes masks for the LA-LGBT Center Seniors, and has friends donate to Auntie Sewing Squad in exchange for making masks for them.

At first, Wong only took requests from nurses "desperate enough for masks that they would be okay to get a messily sewn one from my Hello Kitty sewing machine with its loopy stitches.

"Initially the offer for a mask was for anyone who was an essential worker who needed a mask and couldn't find one," Wong said. "I didn't know this would be everyone."

Auntie Sewing Squad began as a Facebook group focusing on diverse groups of essential workers and immunocompromised individuals, Wong said.

As the benefit of face coverings to protect against droplets from the coronavirus

KINDNESS



Redondo Beach artist Jason Jenn at his sewing machine where he fashions face coverings.



Kristina Wong started a national collective of volunteers called the Auntie Sewing Squad, during the early days of the pandemic to aid in providing protective gear for first responders.

became documented, Wong's army of sewers swelled.

Wong said she transitioned into mentor—teaching people how to sew, distributing materials and corralling a virtual team of people, who not only volunteered their time, but actually cared for one another.

During the first week, Wong said, elastic and cotton fabric were hard to find.

"Basically, I screamed to the Internet:

"If you can sew, sew, if not, cut. If not, feed those of us who are running around ragged trying to make medical equipment from home with bedsheets."

While masks are now readily available commercially, Jenn believes artistic creations elevate the mood during pandemic times. He still gets personal requests for his vibrant designs. "I greatly enjoy mixing up patterns and bold col-

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ors—so that even if a face must be masked, it has personality.”

Jenn, who co-owns video production company LA Art Documents and works as Outreach Specialist for the Torrance Art Museum, has incorporated his mask work into some of his video art and upcoming performances.

Before the Auntie Sewing Squad, Wong was an internationally touring artist with a timely political performance work. She also ran for public office and won twice. She's now serving on the Wilshire Center Koreatown Neighborhood Council, and performing her work online, filming in her living room with fabric sets mounted over her fireplace.

Auntie Sewing Squad now takes donations and puts funds towards not only mask making, said Wong, but providing face shields, N95 masks and KN95 masks to “indigenous communities, poor communities of color, incarcerated communities, migrants seeking asylum, day laborers, the undocumented community, farmworkers and solidarity requests for Black Lives Matter.”

Both Jenn and Wong said they are both committed assisting communities that need help the most.

"We don't sew for individuals," Wong said. "We've never sold our masks."

She recently sent PPE to the Navajo Nation.

For Jenn, Wong is not only a friend, but a "personal hero."

"She's an inspiration in her dedication to making socially aware art and activism," Jenn said.

To donate to Auntie Sewing Squad, visit [patreon.com/kristinawong](https://patreon.com/kristinawong).