Valuing Neighbors and Community through Craft

A group of Del Rey women fights against the pandemic and the monotony of staying at home – provides face masks, joy and hope to community

“We are living in not quite normal times, and Doug Barish, the Land Use Officer of the Del Rey Neighborhood Council (DRNC), has been proudly hailing batches of face masks made by a talented group of volunteers and distributed – *all free*, of course – to Del Reyans, especially seniors and other vulnerable groups. More recently, medical caps have been added to the mix.

From Villa del Sol Care Center east of the 405 (yes, Del Rey extends all the way there) and Mar Vista Gardens (the westside’s only public housing project), to Villa Marina near Lincoln Boulevard, residents and local healthcare providers have been thrilled to receive these unexpected gifts. But how did it all begin?

**FROM AN IDEA TO A SEWING CORPS WITH A MISSION**

Well before a city-wide order asked Angelenos to wear face coverings when going to public places like grocery stores to help minimize the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, Doug had the idea of getting community members to sew non-medical face masks. “With so many people
stuck at home but wanting to make a difference,” he wrote to his fellow DRNC Board members, we have an “opportunity to help” in the COVID-19 crisis.

As the Land Use Officer, Doug had developed relationships with community leaders. He reached out, asking them to send word to their neighborhoods: “We are looking for people with sewing machines.” Many of the current volunteers joined then. A DRNC newsletter with a similar call and further word of mouth brought others to the fold.

A crucial piece of the puzzle fell into place when another Del Rey resident, Zoë Melo, joined the group. Other DRNC Board members first met Zoë during the Heart of Del Rey activities last fall and learned of her community-centered design project, Neighbors by Design, which brings together community members to create products from donated materials. Connecting her with Doug was a no-brainer.

Doug Barish separates materials in Zoë Melo’s garage studio, which has become the de facto “Command Center” for the project and Neighbors by Design.

LAUNCHING A PRODUCTION

A bag of fabric donated by Stefanie Fletcher “allowed us to get started quickly,” observed Doug. “Combining this with Zoë’s materials donated to Neighbors by Design helped launch the production.” Zoë was quick to add that Doug bought 1000 yards of elastic. She also reached out to her contacts at LA Relaxed and A.L.C. Each responded with generous donations of fabric that were added to donated materials from local volunteers.
Doug created a group email for the volunteers so they could easily communicate with each other. Zoë, who was already making masks and donating them to her friends and neighbors even before learning of the Del Rey-wide effort, prepared and shared with the group a document with her patterns and tips. But both strongly encouraged the group to be creative, “to share designs, ideas, and sewing issues.” Doug noted that Zoë offered to be a resource, fielded questions, and was “instrumental in getting everyone in production mode as quickly as possible.”

Made of two layers of cotton and lined with interfacing and elastic, the masks come in different sizes and patterns. The group’s creativity and talent are evident in the vibrant collection of chic, high-quality masks that Doug and Zoë have regularly shared via pictures before they go out for distribution – their passion for the project infectious! Doug has even injected some much needed levity to an otherwise serious initiative, “Get excited for the newest additions to our Spring 2020 catalog! Ward off the plague and show everyone your fashionable side wearing the latest in face mask chic!”
Maximizing the safety of all involved was a priority at the onset. This meant ensuring the volunteers need not leave their homes for any element of the process. “Some of the volunteers are seniors, so I decided to broadly take on the leg work element of the project,” said Doug. “Once again, Zoë proved to be invaluable to the project by offering to prepare the fabrics and elastic, each bundle placed in a tidy white bag. This allowed me to consistently fulfill volunteer’s material requests and meet promised deadlines.”

Zoë Melo celebrates over a display of finished products.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

About once a week, Doug would pick up finished products from the volunteers, which he and fellow DRNC Board members would deliver to senior centers and care facilities throughout Del Rey. They have also distributed the masks to elderly individuals in their own neighborhoods.
With over 1000 masks and 100 medical caps that have been produced and delivered, this project undoubtedly has been a ray of light during the COVID-19 crisis. DRNC Outreach Officer Melanie Mihal remarked, “When I’ve handed masks out to seniors, their eyes have literally filled with tears. This effort has been priceless to so many people.” Doug echoed Melanie’s sentiment: “The mask recipients cried tears of joy that people from the community care for them.”

But it is not just the recipients who have been touched. The volunteers, themselves, have been grateful for the opportunity to help their community. “It makes me feel great,” Petra Staal said. “It’s nice to know that I can do something to help.” Both Doug and Zoë, who have worked very well together to organize this special group and have relished being partners in this project, are ecstatic to be part of an undertaking and a story that has been emotional, inspirational, and uplifting for all involved.

And the community is all the better for it. Even those not directly involved have been impacted, evident in responses to DRNC Facebook and Instagram posts about the project. “So amazing!”
“Go Del Rey”, and “That is fantastic!” are just a few of the reactions. One even wrote, “Let me know if you guys need anything. I’d love to contribute and help any way I can.”

The unfolding of the Del Rey face mask project has been a moving testament to the power of a seemingly simple act, a hobby of craft, bringing together a community in a time of crisis. It is a compelling confirmation of neighbors who care for and rely on each other during difficult times, giving us hope for better and brighter days ahead.

![Image of volunteers contributing to the face mask project]

**VOLUNTEERS**

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<tr>
<th>Doug Barish (co-organizer)</th>
<th>Judith Sacco</th>
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<td>Zoë Melo (co-organizer)</td>
<td>Leslie Klein</td>
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<td>Amanda Byrne</td>
<td>Martine Calluaud</td>
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<td>Chiyo Hartley</td>
<td>Perlita Lossky</td>
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<td>Dana Moravecck</td>
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<td>Deborah Gregory</td>
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<td>Evelyn Goodman</td>
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**NEIGHBORHOOD COUNCIL**  
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