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Sew Ready to Help

In ordinary times, the behind-the-scenes team in UC Santa Barbara's Department of Theater and Dance specializes in bringing art to life. Nowadays, the deft fingers of the costume staff are working their magic for people on the front lines of the coronavirus pandemic: They're sewing masks for health care workers.

With classes now being held online and all live performances on campus canceled, the idea of making masks began to percolate through the staff. Soon, sewing machines in the homes of two women, Denise Umland and Lillian Hannahs, began to whir. The pair so far have made more than 200 masks, most of which were delivered to VNA Health and Cottage Hospital. Others will go to Ventura County Medical Center (VCMC). Each organization will receive more as Hannahs and Umland continue to work.

"It is time consuming, monotonous and deeply rewarding," said Hannahs, a cutter and draper.

Umland, the costume shop manager, said making the masks is a group project, even if she and Hannahs are doing the sewing. She noted that Ann Bruice, a continuing lecturer in theater and dance and faculty costume designer, spoke to them about the need for personal protective equipment (PPE) for health care workers. After consulting with production manager Daniel Herrera, the game was afoot.

"I contacted my friend at Cottage Hospital," Umland recalled, "and Daniel reached out to his contacts, and that is how we started. Initially, Lillian and I both had

separately chosen the mask pattern that was designed by a nurse who sews. I think we both felt she knew the best way to construct the most useful mask. They can be used on its own, or over an N95 to prolong its usefulness."

The masks, Herrera said, reflect the women's skills and dedication.

"The first batch of masks went to VNA Health and the response we got was, 'Wow, these look so professional,' " Herrera said. "It made me smile because they are professionals and masters of their craft. They create amazing costumes from scratch. These are top-quality cloth masks, and if I were selling and marketing them I would definitely tag them as 'Handmade in the USA!' "

Also pitching in from home is Devin Gee, theater production supervisor for scenery and props, who is 3D printing PPE for health care workers. He's making tension release bands, which are in high demand for use with cloth masks, and face shields.

"So far I have printed 115 of them for distribution while simultaneously working on the face shields as well," Gee said. "However, the shields take more time and resources to make so we have not been able to distribute any of those to date."

The early round of masks was made from Umland's own "personal fabric stash" and from material found in the costume shop. After Hannahs saw that Cattywampus Crafts, a yarn and craft store in Ojai, was coordinating an effort to help VCMC, she secured a donation of two bolts of fabric — about 20 yards of material. They produce about eight masks per yard.

"The masks themselves," Hannahs said, "are from a very basic pattern available to the public for free — there's a huge amount of crowdsourcing going towards these efforts on a national scale — so actually building the masks is incredibly simple."

For Hannahs and Umland, the real challenge came from working at home. The on-campus costume shop is spacious and equipped with all they could ask for. Home? Not so much.

"The worst part, for me, was setting up a work space in my apartment that can stay set up," Umland said. "Because like for everyone in Santa Barbara, space is a premium, so it couldn't be that I pulled out my sewing machine and then had to put it away a few hours later every day. That wouldn't be efficient. Also things like, 'Where can the ironing board live?' "

Hannahs agreed: “Our costume shop is fitted with several cutting tables, sewing machine tables, two ironing boards with industrial irons and all the thread, notions and tools we would need. Working from home, especially in a home where I live with three other people, two of whom are also working from home in opposite corners of the same limited space, has certainly been an adjustment, but patience and creative solutions have helped ease the stress of it.

“My other challenge,” she continued, “has been to figure out the best ways to produce a whole bunch of masks with as short a turnaround as possible, especially with just two of us working on them. With each batch, though, we’re figuring out ways to make more, more quickly, and it’s really fantastic to be able to look at a box of 75 masks you’ve made and know they’re going to essential workers who really need them.”

Irwin Appel, professor and chair of theater and dance, said the mask project reflects the department’s commitment to bringing art and heart to the community.

“Because of the nature of the work we do in theater and dance,” he said, “we take very seriously our roles as contributors to community. We also have a kind, generous and selfless contingent of staff in our department. Our staff members took this completely on themselves to initiate this project to create PPE, and they deserve all the credit for giving their time, energy and great skill to helping us all to get through this challenging time. We also believe that creating inspiration is more important than ever now, and our department hopes to engage the UCSB community and beyond in both life and art.”

About UC Santa Barbara

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