

## 400 Masks

In late March, when it became clear that the pandemic was not only real but that the U.S. was wildly unprepared for it, crafters and sewing-enthusiasts put needle to fabric to create PPE for hospitals. As someone who can, technically, work a sewing machine, I was intrigued. Honestly though, I didn't feel up to the responsibility of sewing something for a medical worker; I didn't trust my skills. But one thing I do when I'm worried about the unknown is research, so I started scouring the internet to find out what scientists were saying about transmission and determined that it would be a good thing to make a few masks to have on hand and to give to my parents; what followed was hours of research into best fabrics, patterns, nose pieces, filters, and even whether or not to use pins, which put extra holes into the fabric through which the virus might pass.

I dragged my 20 year old sewing machine out of storage for the first time since moving to Eastern Kentucky. Fortunately, I'm a bit of a packrat when it comes to anything I might be able to use in a craft or for a play, so I had fabric, elastic, pipe-cleaners, and even interfacing on hand—everything I needed to start making masks—which was particularly important since every sewing enthusiast in the country had already cleared out the fabric stores.

Those first masks were ... serviceable, let's say. Awkward, stiff, and flaring out weirdly at the pleats, they at least covered the mouth and nose and made transmission less likely.

Upon completing these first few masks, a friend reached out to me. She'd heard from her fellow Navy spouses that there were no masks to be had on the American base in Japan, and would I send some? I jumped at the chance to make a concrete contribution in such an uncertain time. Immediately upon shipping those off to Japan, my undergraduate college put out a request for masks for the students who would need to stay on campus, so I whipped up another batch. By this point I was running low on fabric and still had no way to restock, so my mom gathered up a whole bunch of fabric she had and mailed it to me, and I made another batch, this one for a friend of a friend who mentors youth who have recently been freed from incarceration in Baltimore.

Over time, I not only got better and faster at making the masks, but the masks themselves evolved. The first ones had a small hole for inserting a filter, one that wearers sometimes struggled with, so I did more research, found more patterns and adapted mine for a smoother, more improved filter pocket.

Once mask-wearing became wider spread, I started getting special requests from people who couldn't find masks that fit them well. Back to the internet to discover how to make adjustable ear pieces! I even finally managed to order fabric online so I was no longer working with a mishmash of patterned cotton scrounged from who knows what dark recesses of my parents' house.

Sewing masks became a kind of therapy, and a way to wrestle a little control over an uncontrollable situation. I also enjoyed the creativity of putting together patterns and the trial and error of making improved versions, and I admit to a thrill at sending these masks into the world

to help people. More went to Baltimore, another batch went to the Navajo Nation. I did have the occasional setback. Halfway through the summer, my little old machine died and at that point there was nowhere to get a replacement, but a friend came through and lent me hers. And I did end up at an Urgent Care once, because, as it turns out, rotary cutters are very sharp.

By late summer commercial masks for personal use had become easy to get, so I no longer felt quite as driven to spend every waking moment sewing. Still, I continue to make masks for friends and relatives – now with official metal nose pieces and adjustable elastic straps – and I'm glad to do my small part.

What's on display here are a few of the nearly 400 masks I've sewn since April, starting from one of the very first to one made just last week. None of them are perfect, but if they help keep someone healthy, and if the cute prints make someone smile, that's a win.