

Raymond H. Fogler Library Special Collections, Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, MF195, NA4234, Jennifer Neptune and Simin Khosravani, interviewed by Katrina “Katie” Wynn, December 3, 2016, in the Bangor Public Library, Bangor, Maine.

Transcript from short clip of the full interview (02:25-07:30; 08:35-09:55)

Simin Khosravani: The kids are old enough and they moved out, they are both in college. And that gave me a little bit of free time to learn something on the side. And it was the spark last summer when this young lady (Katrina Wynn) came to my house to interview my mother. My mother used to do some of these weavings and now she’s older and – the lifestyle change, as I was talking to some of you, the nomadic lifestyle is now changing to an apartment lifestyle and she lives in a very small little apartment with people living below so she doesn’t have the luxury of having the freedom to do all of this. So she stopped doing it. And then she also has arthritis and stuff like that.

So she was here and when Katie was interviewing she said “Why didn’t you teach any of your kids to do that?” (Audience laughter, Katie interjects “I hopefully worded it better than that!”). So I started blaming my mother, “Why didn’t you teach me how to do any of this?” And then she said, “Well I wanted you to go to school and go to college and get educated and find a job because at the time that was seen as a better thing for your kids to do rather than staying home and doing this. So I started doing this and when I’m telling my cousins and everyone that I’m doing this and they’re like “Oh, are you crazy? Why are you doing this?” (audience laughter). Because it’s a difficult job and I guess you know a lot of people stopped doing it. Even back in the tribe, every girl wants to go to college and get a job like everybody’s dream is. So we don’t really see this stuff anymore. Most of these (indicating the samples she’d brought in) were done by my mom and my aunts who are old now and they can’t really do it. And none of the kids in my generation know how to do any of it. So I thought to myself “Maybe it’s time for someone to get back to this.” (02:00) And I have a younger girl who’s in college who was trying to learn at the same time, but she’s busy. I wanted them to be interested. I mean, they like the art when they see it they’re like “Wow, this is great!” but nobody actually wants do it because it takes a long time.

So basically what people do, a lot of women is that is it some kind of family economics, I guess. They do this on the side besides their raising kids and cooking and everything else. They do this and then they sell it in the bazaar or wherever. And sometimes they pay for the kids' education or sometimes they pay to buy a dowry for their kids to get married. So it's important for them to do this as some kind of financial independence, that they are making money. They don't see this as an art, they just see it as, they know something that can bring in money to help the family. So I don't think a lot of people value this as "This is a great art and everybody needs to know how to do this." Unfortunately, I don't think people know how important it is to keep these arts going.

Back then, I think the motivation was that they needed this stuff. Now we need furniture, or refrigerator, or stove, back then they needed this stuff because it was part of their lives: (pointing at various samples) comforter, area rug, cushion, something to cover my bed. But nowadays they've replaced everything with stuff they've imported from China. Everything is cheaper and "Why do I buy this handmade one which is a lot more expensive (04:00) and takes two years to do, when I can go buy..." Actually, I was a little bit disappointed when I saw something on Walmart's webpage, handmade, and it said "Kashkooli rug" (her tribe). In Walmart. For like \$700. And it was machine made. (sympathy noises from the audience). But they took the design and someone knew that that is a Kashkooli design and they had it made in China by machine and they sell it at Walmart. And I'm like "What? No." That's not good. And then for me is difficult, if I'm an artist and I'm making this to sell this to make money for as an income, then if Walmart is selling the machine one for \$750, how much am I supposed to be selling this (for)? How do people compare the handmade work with the machine made? They both do the same thing. So I think the machine, the factory, and all the automation comes in and I think it makes it difficult for the artist to compete, so it's a little discouraging.

(Audio cut to Jennifer Neptune speaking 5:10 into audio clip)

Jennifer Neptune: And similar to what she was talking about, it reminded me of a few years back, all the basket makers were upset because it was Ikea that had baskets that looked just like ours for like \$20 (sympathy noises from the audience). So that cultural appropriation thing that's going on all around the world, corporations just lifting our cultures and undercutting us. It's not too fun to deal with because they have lawyers and money and it's pretty hard to fight that.

Simin: You can't really patent a folk art pattern. How am I supposed to say "This is a trade secret that belongs to my family" for example.

Katrina: Also patent doesn't work like that, it has to be to the individual or a specific corporation.

Jennifer: Right

Simin: I don't even know how that works.

Jennifer: And we have similar issues, like this is a design (pointing to a sample) that people have made for thousands, like thousands of years. I can't copyright that. I mean I can, people could, but there's this unwritten tradition that we respect that and if someone goes and copyrights that what do you do?