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Why I Make Wearables.

While most third graders dreamed of becoming a firefighter or princess, I was dead set on becoming a jumbo popcorn dispenser. Once the calendar flipped to October, our intense family debate was "Does spray insulation or carved foam look more like soccer ball sized popcorn?"

Before I knew the words “product designer” or “mechanical engineer”, I simply loved to make. Making was something tangible, a mix of art and engineering, with hot glue, paint and any random materials scavenged from around the house. Ever since my grandma helped sew my first Halloween costume (a princess fairy complete with sparkling rhinestones and a rainbow skirt, of course) every Halloween sparked the same question: what else could I be? Every Halloween became a reason to solve new challenges and dream more ambitiously: spray insulation foam became Cheetos, while colorful pool noodles from past summers transformed into donut-sized Froot Loops with the power of a bread knife. I made simply because it was what we always did. And, because it was fun.

At an Arduino microcontroller class at my local makerspace Junior Year, while others built robotic arms, I learned how to code a spinning spoon for my Froot Loops costume. I quickly incorporated dispensers and lights into every project, as I aimed to be more mobile and realistic: October meant instead of studying for my AP Calculus test, spending hours studying whether Toucan Sam’s feathers were azure, navy or perhaps even cobalt. My projects rarely worked the first time though.

In 6th grade, I proudly assembled my completed 4-foot hamburger costume only to realize I had forgotten arm holes (it did allow me to roll down the street and win limbo though). In 7th grade, my popcorn dispenser got stuck, and the year after my Froot Loops costume leaked, leaving a trail of cereal everywhere I went. Yet, every flopped attempt and experimentation taught me how to fail and redirect, how to dream big and worry about making it possible afterwards. Halloween slowly stopped being just about making costumes, but about dreaming up whimsical impossible ideas that sparked surprise and wonder. I made because it was a way to learn how to ask the weird and bold questions, and how to value “nonsensical” ideas.

At first I made costumes because it was fun, but as I grew from kinder to high school, so did my responsibilities. So I guess the question is why did I *still* make even when it meant an hour less of sleep (my most prized possession). On one level, making was still a fun tradition, but on another level it became my way to connect.

It was bonding with my mom, waist deep in the dumpster behind UHAUL hunting for the best perfect cardboard box, or learning with my dad about material properties. It meant having something to chat about with my brother over late night calls as he found a different life in college: that despite time passing and each of us growing into new people, its something that tethers both of us to the past, to our old lives together. Continuing a tradition that helped me connect with my younger self.

Slowly, making wearables grew beyond just my family and into my way of connecting with my community in a new isolated age throughout Covid and a screen isolation epidemic among teenagers. As more of my life moved onto screens, we had more ways of connection than ever, able to send a text across the globe in a second, yet have less connection. Making began to be driven by a need for the thoughts in my head to connect with the real world: it became a tangible way to connect with others when the 1 am anxiety hit or stress left me isolated.

I remember a few years ago lying on the floor overwhelmed with friends, school, and family. I was blasting music and rereading my grandpa's little notes of blessings, encouragement, and reminders to see the world with happiness, written on the back of red envelopes that he used to give at family celebrations. Being able to physically hold his words, something beyond just a memory, made me wonder how I could help not only myself, but others feel less isolated by constructing a physical representation of our shared stories.

I saw how a handwritten note can carry a special feeling. In an atmosphere increasingly shaped by flat screens and AI-generated everything, from recipes to images, I found myself craving cardboard that can crease, embossing that shimmers in the sun, even the burn of hot glue on my fingers—distinct sensory experiences. In very little time, I embarked on a journey filled with to continue my grandpa's tradition of tangible blessings and wishes through what I do best: making. I began by inviting 500 people to answer one question: *what do you wish for?* I captured their handwritten answers on the same red envelopes and auspicious paper my grandpa once used. I wove their wishes into a collectively authored wedding dress that sparked conversations among individuals from different worlds.

While asking people to share something so personal felt awkward and *very* unnatural to me, my dress gave me a reason to pause, ask, and listen. Some people were hesitant to share or honestly just extremely confused, yet it was completely worth every awkward moment. Chatting about a mentor's wish for a H-1B visa so she could stay with her family opened the door to stories I would never have otherwise known. A friend wished for the courage to be fully themselves and a neighbor wished her daughter would call more often. And, it wasn't just deepening connection between us, but between communities. As a teammate's wish to grow closer to God led to invitations to try mass, temple and worship from others, while another classmate's wish to cease bloodshed in Ukraine sparked discussion. My communities began having conversations that extended way beyond myself. Each wish became an invitation into someone else's inner world, and as the hundreds accumulated, we became cheerleaders for one another, experiencing a feeling of collective effervescence: the feeling of belonging that emerged as we created a shared link of humanity tangible through our wishes. I found myself making because it is a way to force myself to challenge my assumptions that people would rather be left alone, or even assumptions that I don't have anything to connect with someone about on a personal level.

After painstakingly sewing fabric, folding ten pounds of paper into fans, and gluing them into an 8 by 4 by 5 foot wedding dress, I still keep adding more wishes, and am currently transforming the gown into another stage yet again (#Déjà vu). So why do I continue to evolve this wearable? As I grow and gain a deeper understanding of what belonging means, I love being able to physically embody a living testimony of our collective hopes.

My notebook is still filled with doodles of wearable creations because making taught me to ask audacious questions and to be unconventional. Because it became a family language, then a way to process the world, and later an excuse to cross the awkward distance between myself and someone else. In a gentler world, perhaps I would make to simply honor my childhood whimsy. In a world where hate is often defaulted to, where sexism and racism are prevalent with empathy is often lost and inequity runs free, I'm compelled to create toward a larger movement: to confront what feels fractured inside myself and in our society. At a moment when AI is reshaping how we define what it means to be human, while people themselves act without a shred of humanity, making has become my way of insisting on empathy, connection, while not giving up my whimsy. Simply put, making wearables lets me not only be a giant Froot Loop, but also physically embody a world I hope we can create.