

# Fiber Artist? Who, Me?

By Elizabeth Cline, - el Zorro Colorado Alpacas

In 2001, Ron Hinds and I acquired "ancient Bolivian and Chilean" alpacas for our "starter herd" at el Zorro Colorado Alpacas. For those who want to learn a little Spanish, el Zorro is "the fox". Colorado is the color red for "animate" objects. LOVE red foxes ... even if they are a predator to our chickens!

Ron and I involved ourselves in the local alpaca industry. Ron had been a pioneer in the industry, starting with llamas in 1994. We progressed from our starter herd to much better quality fiber-producing alpacas thanks to MANY friends who gave us very good breeding opportunities for our growing herd.

I learned how to skirt fleeces for show and production from some of the best: Freda and Carl McGill, Jody Sharp, and Billie Rogers to name a few. I entered the best of our herd into the local halter and fiber competitive shows. We won ribbons, getting better every year. At that time, el Zorro Colorado could compete with the local alpaca producers. We did not have the best nor did we not have the worst. We offered new owners an opportunity to start their herd within modest financial means, all the while providing the best mentoring available.

Then 2008 hit. Now anyone could acquire high quality alpacas for not very much money. el Zorro Colorado Alpacas couldn't compete with them. We intentionally stopped breeding our alpacas.

With breeding and selling out of the picture, fiber became more of our focus. I will wholeheartedly admit I am not a fiber artist.

Nevertheless, I wanted to do something with our fiber other than sending it to the cooperatives and/or storing it in our "cat and fleece" room. We finally had a large batch of fiber sent to a local mill and processed into very nice yarn, battings, and rovings. It was a way to start the "added value" process.

I volunteered at our local fleece shows as a scribe. That is THE BEST way to learn about fiber! You get a free education on the front line while the judges evaluate submitted fleeces. I also took fiber compliance classes offered by the Alpaca Breeders of the Rockies (ABR).

I now volunteer at local shows as a compliance checker. If you ever want to put your hands on some of the best fiber, volunteer as a compliance checker at a large show.

During one of our local alpaca shows, there was a fiber sort, for which I volunteered. It was an opportunity to join the Natural Fiber Producers (NFP) Cooperative. NFP will only accept fiber sorted through the Certified Sorted® System (CSS). We joined NFP and I was a scribe at the sort. I learned much from that experience.

Shortly after that, there was a course and sort offered locally at Sharon and Frank Loner's ranch in Parker, Colorado. I wanted to improve my knowledge of fiber and I will have to say there was no better way. I took the Basic Course with many local and other close fiber enthusiasts. I decided to continue with more fiber education and took the Advanced Course, then signed up to be a CSS apprentice sorter.

My mentor was very patient with my initial years of sorting ours and two other ranches' fleeces. The limit of apprenticeship is 2 years; I extended mine to more than 6 years. Mind you, I need to start all over again because I have overextended my apprenticeship.

During my apprenticeship through CSS, CSS joined forces with other fiber experts to form Sorting, Classing, and Grading (SCG). SCG is standardizing the process of sorting and grading across the country to further the natural fiber textile industry in the United States. I am excited about this collaboration.

Another opportunity arose earlier this year: a Basic Course offered in Nebraska. A fellow fiber enthusiast, Coral Dillon, and I went to the Basic Course and we learned so much. The instructors pass around samples of blankets, both are the same grade of fiber. One was made from fiber sorted by the SCG method, the other, was made from fiber sorted by a novice. There was a huge difference in feel between the two.

## Consistency makes a difference! Who knew?

There are two lengths, woolen and worsted, and 6 grades of fiber, depending on the micron of the individual fiber. Then the colors: white, beige, fawn, brown, bay black, black, silver grey, and rose grey. During an actual sort, the sorter has to class and grade each blanket into that many different bins, then combine same lengths, grade, and color. That's a lot of bins!

My favorite part of this training was a very quick way to establish the first grade of the entire fleece, as our very knowledgeable instructor called it: "the sweet spot". Instead of evaluating every single piece of the fleece as I was originally taught; you evaluate just the center of the fleece. Working out from the center, fiber that does not match that first analysis is placed into different fiber categories.

Another quick trick we learned was the "eye level" evaluation. This is where you determine the grade of your fiber based upon the distance down your body from the fiber. See the diagrams.

I am excited about using these techniques when I evaluate, class, and sort our ranches' 2-years' worth of fiber. In other words, I guess I am a fiber artist after all. If you want to know more about this amazing opportunity to experience and learn about natural fiber sorting, visit:

<https://sortgrade.com/apprenticeship-program/>

