

by Abby Franquemont

*Everything was arrayed on a table in the elementary school cafeteria, ready as could be. I stood, tuft of orange fiber in one hand, doing something I've been doing most of my life, as children started filing in. They seated themselves at the cafeteria tables, murmuring to each other: "What is she doing?" A light dawned in one girl's eyes. "She's making YARN! From stuff that isn't yarn! With that stick thingy! She is! She's making yarn!" I grinned.*

"Is everyone here?" I asked the teachers who had brought me their charges. Both nodded, and I introduced myself. "I'm Edward's mother, here to share with you about my job. Some of you have already guessed what it is. I'll tell you a little about it, and why I do it, then everyone will get to try. First, let's get a show of hands: how many of you are wearing clothes?"

Fifty-four hands shot up, amid giggles. "That's great!" I said, "That's everybody! Now, who knows what clothes are made out of?" I called on a boy in the back. "Cotton?" he said hesitantly. "That's one thing," I replied, gathering more responses – wool, and silk.

"We all know clothes are made out of these things – but how? They are sewn from fabric, or knitted from yarn, or made in various ways, but they start with yarn. And yarn doesn't grow on trees or the backs of sheep; you have to do something to make it. That's my job – I do it, and I teach people how to do it."

These skills, I explained, are part of a science and technology essential to human civilization. We need yarn, not just for clothes, but ropes, nets for fishing, cloth used for lots of things. Making yarn gives us the tools we need to build permanent homes, plant crops that grow year after year, and build towns and cities that have libraries and schools and everything. "If you look around you, you'll see yarn in lots of places you probably didn't notice it before. There are threads of fibers in your paper. You have books that are sewn together. When you leave on the bus, and go over the bridge, look at the cables on it – they're giant yarn made out of steel. It's everywhere!"

I caught my own son's eye. When you're a parent showing up at your fourth-grader's school, you don't know: will it be cool, or will he be cringing in horror at how embarrassing his mom is, here to talk about her job? And when your job is "spin yarn, and teach people how to do that," how will it stack up to someone whose mom is a firefighter or a doctor or an auto mechanic?

We handed out inexpensive spindles I'd brought, each with a little bit spun onto it and a tuft of carefully prepared wool. "Now," a teacher asked, "These aren't something they get to keep, are they?"



“They absolutely are,” I said, and a cheer arose from the kids. It had taken me and my husband most of a day to get the spindles ready to go, all for this moment. For the rest of the hour I circulated, showing them ways to play with the wool in their hands, talking about things you can do with yarn. “An important thing to remember!” I told the class at large, “This is hard. It looks easy – and once you know how, it kind of is – but learning it is pretty hard for most people.”

“It’s totally easy!” one small voice piped up. “No way,” said another, “it’s way hard.”

Successes, failures, frustrations, trial and error... times fifty-four. “I’m never going to look at my shirt the same way,” one kid pronounced -- my victory for the one-hour session, I told the teacher in a brief aside. “My goal here isn’t to create fifty-four new spinners,” I said. “That can’t happen in an hour, so what I wanted to do was talk about how old a technology this is, why it’s important both now and since the dawn of history, and to give everyone a chance to have their hands in it.” If some of those kids go home and keep trying with their inexpensive spindles and cheap wool, then indeed, those are kids who will never look at their clothes the same way again. If half of those kids really do start looking around them for all the places yarn is that they never noticed before, it’s a victory for me as a fiber arts educator. If the ten-year-old girl who was such a natural keeps at it, who knows what she could do.

Leaving, kids filed past my table, where laid out for them to touch and feel were raw Cormo wool, clean Merino wool, gleaming locks of mohair, fluffy soft camel down, soft shiny silk, and a few

cotton seeds. “That's from a goat? Which is camel? This is a worm's cocoon? This one is my favourite.” With the kids heading out, I picked up. “I think you made an impression,” said a lady coming in to set up for lunch. “There's a boy out there waving a stick around with some wool on it, who says he's going to learn to knit and make a sweater.”

I gave extra wool to the teachers, and extra brochures with more information. I left with my son and his teacher, who thanked me as my son flung his arms around me in a hug. “Thanks, mom,” he said, “everybody thought that was cool.”

“I'm glad,” I told him. “You never know if it'll be interesting.”

“I knew it would,” he asserted, confidently. “Mom, my friends always like my hats.”

Ah, yes, his hats. You see, every year, he gets a new hat – from yarn I spin from fiber I dye and prepare just exactly how he wants. This was why he wanted me to come talk to his class about spinning. He's tried to explain how his mother made his hat, and in so doing, realized that even though he doesn't knit, and rarely spins, he knows things about the creation of the garment, things that aren't common knowledge anymore – but which he wishes more people knew about. “I just think,” he said, earnestly, “that once people try spinning, they know more about yarn than they ever did before. Everyone should get to try it.”

He means that not just about those of us who enjoy knitting or working with yarn, but about everyone, period. From the reactions of his teachers and classmates, I think he's right. For those of us who do knit, crochet, or do other things with yarn, spinning opens up whole new worlds of possibilities and makes us better at judging yarn, choosing the right yarn for projects, and free from the limits of what someone else has decided to produce for sale to us.

With that, I'd like to share the recipe for my son's fourth grade hat, a recipe suited for use with almost any kind of handspun yarn you might find, including very first efforts and samples or leftovers. Look for it on [page 31 of this magazine](#).