A Colorful and Rich Textile Heritage
Weaving has been a part of New Mexico’s artistic heritage since long before the Spanish arrived. But as with so many of this country’s historical endeavors, the skills and knowledge to recreate the ancient arts are fading away. That’s why, almost two decades ago, a group of women from the Española Valley decided they wanted to save this artistic heritage.

The Adobe and Glass Storefront

“These women saw there was a lot of weaving in the area, and saw how the next generation did not necessarily know how to weave; or that’s what they heard, and that’s why they were motivated to start a center,” says Olimpia Newman, programs manager for the Española Valley Fiber Arts Center (EVFAC).

After starting in a church basement, the Fiber Arts Center grew—thanks to a number of grants from local foundations and organizations, and also city, state and federal grants—to where it rented a space and today, the 501(c)3 non-profit owns a 7,200 square-foot building off Paseo de Oñate, on the direct road to Abiquiu and Chama, and just a left turn away from the road to Taos.

The adobe and glass storefront is what most visitors first stop to see. Inside, they can purchase everything from blankets and scarves to shawls, caps, jewelry, and wall hangings, all made by local artisans. Many are made on site in the studio rental space EVFAC members can use for projects. Another third of the building is designated for classes, where members and non-members alike can learn the techniques of a variety of fiber arts.

Spin and Weave

“We offer a wide range of classes, so that our members and the larger community can learn about all the different types of weaving that exist, and are exposed to numerous fiber arts techniques,” says April Jouse, EVFAC’s general manager. “We do not want to limit ourselves to just traditional practices. However, we want to preserve the traditions and make them grow, even beyond our imagination.”

Classes are offered in every fiber art technique from quilting to spinning, to embroidery to weaving, to felting, for both beginners and more experienced artists.

“At Española Valley Fiber Arts Center we believe offering educational programs to fiber enthusiasts develops us all; therefore we are dedicated to growing our community and their skills,” reads the EVFAC brochure.

You can come into the center with any amount of knowledge: the classes and workshops are designed with everyone in mind. A tourist just wanting to try their hand at the art can schedule a Walk ‘n’ Weave, where, Newman says, “We’ll set up a loom for you and you can weave a rug, within the shortest period of time.

Pushing the Pedal

And, that is exactly what Jane Lewis and her two children from Camp Verde, Arizona, did over the Christmas holiday last year.
Though they didn’t schedule a class, Hannah, age 7, and Paul, age 6, tried their hand at weaving with the help of Andrea Garcia, the center’s assistant. Before leaving Arizona to visit family in White Rock, Lewis said she checked the Internet for activities to do in the area. That is when she came across the Española Valley Fiber Arts Center’s website. She thought it would be a wonderful and educational experience for her children. Indeed it was. Each child waited in anticipation to sit at the loom. When asked what they liked the best about weaving, both children agreed they had “fun pushing the pedal.”

The Heritage Blanket Program
“‘We know there is a lot of weaving going on that we want to support,’” Newman says. “And in order to increase income opportunities from weaving we have developed innovative blanket designs that are ‘inspired by the local imagery and traditions.’ Under the Heritage Blanket program, we employ weavers from the community; we train them to operate sophisticated looms and we market the blankets nationwide.” These beautifully hand-woven blankets out of Churro wool emphasize the handmade traditions, and with their deerskin branded label, are prominently positioned in many high-end retail stores in New Mexico as well as Colorado and California.

Mora Valley Spinning Mill
Most recently the center entered into a partnership with the Mora Valley Spinning Mill. The mill, also a nonprofit, was founded in 1998 to provide vocational training in the art of weaving to rural, low income and unemployed northern New Mexicans, as well as provide an outlet for their work.

Wool carding and processing equipment donated to the EVFAC from the estate of Luisa Gelenter, a founder of the former Taos Valley Wool Mill, was placed in the Mora Mill, allowing that facility to diversify its processing capacity. The mill buys wool locally from shepherds of Churro sheep to fibers from alpacas, llamas and mohair goats, and processes them into weaving and knitting yarn. Jointly the organizations develop new products expanding the offering for fiber artists and increasing the demand for local fiber.

All of which continues the expansion of fiber arts in northern New Mexico. From the farmers and ranchers who provide the fibers to be spun, to the artists who turn that wool or thread into finished products, to those who purchase the products, the threads of the Española Valley Fiber Arts Center are always expanding.

New Mexico fiber arts go back to the Pueblos and Navajos, with the Spanish influence still evident today in the works of northern New Mexico artists. Colcha embroidery, woven wool blankets and natural dyes all speak to the wide traditions the EVFAC is working to continue.

Unique in Many Ways
“We are very unique in many ways. We are unique within New Mexico, but we are also unique within the United States,” Newman says. “Our center provides services to an active fiber arts community. Since we are surrounded by a farming community with wool shepherds, creative spinners who design innovative handspun yarns; weavers who weave intricate scarves, colorful blankets and expressive tapestries; and artists who felt and quilt. We have a mission to support them all.”