

First-Time Hospitalera: A Different Kind of Camino **by Janet Schwind, South Bend IN**

On May 15, 2016, I wrote this entry as the first of my blog on my time in Spain.

I keep saying to myself, *I have not started my Camino yet.*

I do not start walking my second Camino until June 2; my first I did alone in 2013. However, I arrived in Spain on May 9 to begin three months here in Europe, which first includes a visit to friends in Santiago and now my two weeks as a volunteer at a very special albergue on the Camino in a small town called Grañón. I have experienced a lot of nervousness already and haven't even begun walking. I think, *Is this how it's going to be this time? How will it be when my Camino actually starts?*

Then, I knew. I was wrong. My Camino began the minute I got on the plane. The Camino is the way you go, the adventure of each day, the new places and situations, the challenges, the people, and the emotions. They are not on hold until you walk.

I wondered how I would be as a hospitalera. Do I have what people will need? What will I encounter?

I arrived in Grañón yesterday, one day before my hospitalera time begins. So I wasn't even "on the clock" yet and I immediately met a distraught Aussie who wanted a ticket back to Burgos; she absolutely had to leave the Camino. As we sat together to try to understand the bus schedule, I noticed drops of water silently falling on the paper. I did not understand at first. Is she sweating? No, she is crying. She was very emotional about having left her friend who had gotten injured and stayed behind. She felt guilty for going on without her. She is homesick for Australia too. She just wants to quit the Camino. Coming out of my own self-thinking, I had to remember fast what the Camino is about...putting yourself aside to think about others which was my biggest lesson from my first Camino. I need these lessons again and again so they will sink in.

She went to lie down as another hospitalero and I worked out which bus she needed and where to catch it. We came to get her when we had it all figured out, and she was very grateful.

We all took a walk to see where the bus stop is so she would be ready the next day. As we walked and talked, I told her that it is okay that she made the decision to keep walking, and it is also okay that she wanted to now go to be with her friend. No need to feel guilty or bad. She started to feel lighter and happier as we walked in the sunshine past flowers and butterflies to the bus stop, and soon she was enjoying herself again and looking forward to taking part in the communal meal that evening.

When I look back at that, I think that I didn't know if I was prepared to be a hospitalera, but somewhere inside I do have what people need at any given moment. And I'm surprised and glad.

Today is my first official day as hospitalera. It will be demanding mostly from the standpoint of constantly being with people, with the exception of this lunch break. I am liking what it all means. Today I shopped with Jesus, the priest of the parish. I understand Spanish pretty well (I'd estimate I am 50 percent fluent), but for some reason Father Jesus's accent is so thick that I cannot understand one word he says, even when I ask him to *Hablas mas despacio, por favor*. I nod and smile a lot. He

eventually throws up his hands and we go on. I checked in pilgrims from Denmark, Germany, Australia, Canada, Spain, France. I got to draw their stamp on their pilgrim credential because this is the only albergue on the Camino that does not have its own stamp (*sello* in Spanish)... It is such a unique place they want your memories and your mark to be distinctive too.

Tonight I am being indoctrinated by giving the pilgrims' blessing at the communal meal because my fellow hospitaleros, Denis and Ileana (Portuguese and Brazilian), said I have to; I'm the only English speaker of the three of us. They are pushing me past my comfort zone. I love them.

I must get back to my pilgrims for now. To welcome them, show them their mat, and give them a smile and a hug. And I think, soon the tables will turn and I will need a smile and a hug from a hospitalero. So I will do my best today.



Heart *sello*



View from the belltower



Tree with heart shapes