

## A Tale of Two Pilgrims

*By Daniel DeKay*

*'Salvitur ambulando'* - St. Augustine ("All things are solved by walking")

Jeanette Lansbergen closed the front door of her home in Rotterdam and began walking south. Two months later she arrived in St. Jean Pied de Port. Along the way she camped out, cooking her own meals. "It was a lonely time. I was alone almost the entire two months. But that was alright with me, I wanted to meet myself on the walk."

Walking through Belgium, Jeanette came across an old castle that housed the Sisters of Jerusalem convent. Jeanette's mother had been a nun until her thirties when she left the convent, married and had eight children. The Sisters invited her in, and gave her a meal and a bed. They took her into their walled garden and asked her, "Tell us your story." The following morning at mass they prayed for Jeanette, and all sang together. Jeanette says, "They opened my heart, I felt I was coming home. I found my belief again." After that Jeanette stopped in every church she found along the way, feeling "free and protected" within those ancient stone walls.

Franc Chacon, member of American Pilgrims and 2009 hospitalero trainee, is a firefighter in Santa Barbara, CA. He had been working long hours, lots of overtime, and found himself wondering about the purpose of it all. He is a big man with a hearty laugh and a quick smile. One instantly feels at ease with Franc. He'd been to Spain before, on a surf trip with his son. "But I only saw Spain through a window", he says. "I wanted to go for a long walk, and I wanted to see Spain." He found the Camino on the internet, and only spoke to one person who'd been there before. "He wouldn't tell me very much about it", Franc says, "and now I know why. He just encouraged me to go. Everyone has their own Camino experience and he didn't want to interfere with mine."

"The first pilgrims I met were in St. Jean Pied de Port", says Jeanette. "I was so excited to finally be among pilgrims, and to be able to talk, and laugh and be with people again. We camped and cooked meals together. After two months alone it was so wonderful."

Franc flew to Barcelona and then took the train north to begin walking the Camino Francés. When people asked him why he was walking the Camino he told them he didn't know, he just needed to go for a long walk. His first few days were filled with what many of us experience: new friends, blisters, and the beauty of the Camino in early summer. Franc remembers seeing wild asparagus shoot up in the fields after a good rainstorm. He picked some, planning to cook it for lunch in Estella. While cooking the asparagus that day he met Jeanette for the first time, and he offered to share some of his asparagus with her. The next day Jeanette greeted him with "hello amigo". She says "I'm not usually forward with men, but I liked him. I wanted to him to talk with me."

Their days of walking ended more and more often at the same albergue, and they got into the habit of cooking their meals together. A pilgrim named Pedro whom Franc had been walking

with also joined them for their meals. In Nájera, the three of them began walking together. They ended up walking all the way to Santiago together. They attended evening mass whenever possible. One night in Bercianos they took part in a spiritual reflection with other pilgrims, led by a volunteer hospitalero. Franc remembers, "I wonder if I could do this?"

"Pedro, Jeanette and I shared everything", recalls Franc. "I never had a whole banana, or a whole peach, or a loaf of bread. We had miracles every day. If one of us cried, we all cried. When one of us laughed, we all laughed." One day Pedro said to Franc, "you like her, don't you?" It was then that Franc realized that, yes, he did like Jeanette. He liked her a lot.

The three of them arrived in Santiago on July 25th, Saint James' Day, 2008. It had been three months of walking for Jeanette. Franc's six weeks of leave was almost at an end. He and Jeanette drove to Madrid where they parted with plans to meet the following December in Rotterdam. But that was not to be. One evening Franc's phone rang in Santa Barbara. It was Jeanette. "I have a surprise for you", she said. "I'm coming to Santa Barbara." He met her at the airport dressed in his best suit, a dozen red roses in his hand.

Last March Franc and Jeanette attended the Hospitalero Training in Santa Fe, New Mexico and then stayed on for the Annual Gathering in Albuquerque. They applied to work as volunteer hospitaleros and in July of 2009, a year after they met, they were posted to the albergue in Grañon.

"I know how difficult the Camino was for me", says Franc. "The albergues made it so good for me; I wanted to give back. Hospitaleros shouldn't just feed your body, they should feed your spirit as well. I learned to accept people, not to judge them. You don't know someone until you know their story, and everyone has a story."

"Grañon was a wonderful experience," says Jeanette, "and it was a lot of hard work. Every day the Camino brought us gifts in the people who arrived as pilgrims. So many people pitched in, we never lacked for bread, or wine, or helping hands. We expected to give all that we could to help the pilgrims but they gave us so much more. It was incredibly fulfilling for both of us."

Many pilgrims who came to Grañon were very touched by the experience of the communion of the Camino. In the evenings after dinner Franc invited anyone who wished to join him in the 700- year-old church attached to the albergue in Grañon. There he would hold a short spiritual service in many of the languages spoken by that night's pilgrims. "One night there was a Korean woman who spoke, only in Korean. She was in tears and by the time she was finished speaking many of us had tears rolling down our cheeks. We were all very touched."

"We walked the Camino together and had a wonderful time", says Jeanette. "Now we want to make a pilgrimage to Rome, and after that perhaps to Jerusalem."

"And", adds Franc, "after working in Grañon, after facing the challenges of being hospitaleros together, we realized we could live together." On October 18<sup>th</sup>, on the steps of the Santa Barbara Mission, Franc knelt down on one knee and asked Jeanette to marry him. Of course she said yes!