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A Journey of a Lifetime

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Juan Manuel Gómez is a true pilgrim.

On a recent journey, he traced the footsteps of thousands before him dating back to the 9th century. He covered 1,000 kilometers from Seville to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, over 43 days, with nothing but a backpack and sleeping bag. While his quest was not religious, it was spiritual and emotional. He deepened his knowledge of Spanish history, art, architecture and culture. He learned to rely on the kindness of strangers and to take one day at a time. His journey was a pivotal moment in his life.

According to Dante, there are three types of pilgrims: the “palmieri,” those who go to Jerusalem; the “romei,” those who visit Rome; and the “peregrini,” those who have been to the sepulchre of St. James in Galicia, Spain. They, like James, are true pilgrims because they are away from their homeland, visiting the grave of one who rests outside his homeland. James, the apostle who preached in Galicia, was beheaded in Jerusalem and was martyred.

According to Juan Manuel Gómez, the “palmieri” are always there to help. At a roundabout, when he couldn’t figure out what direction to take, a gentleman stopped to give him directions. In Salamanca, when he had no idea how to find the local inn for pilgrims, a woman stopped him and his companions, asked if they were pilgrims and gave them the number to call. A restaurant owner fed them and refused to take their money.

“Sometimes you are on a trail that is narrow and climbing and you need it for support,” he said. “You also need it to keep away dogs. One time, a dog came after me and if I had not had the stick, I would have been bitten.”

He not only encountered an occasional hostile dog, but also pigs, usually restrained, and cattle, which occasionally were not. At least twice, he opted to jump a fence rather than confront threatening bulls.

He learned quickly that a walking stick was essential. “I thought of home and why I was doing this,” he said. “I am spiritual and religious and believe in the intercession of saints, but I was not going to Santiago in search of a miracle.”

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When he reached the end of his journey at the cathedral in Santiago, he walked through the stunning Gate of Gloria portico, and touched the Tree of Jesse, where the portico owner fed them and refused to take their money.

Gómez was surprised at the intensity of his emotion when he reached the end of his journey. He said, “This is something special.” Gómez said “You always find the people at the right time. And that’s one of those things you cannot overlook. The other thing is that people treat you very well, whether in a small town or a metropolis area. You have those experiences and you think ‘this will never happen again.’ But it does.”

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As an associate professor of Spanish at Linfield, Gómez teaches not only language, but also the history, culture and literature of Spain. His interest in the pilgrimage was sparked during his first sabbatical while researching the literature of Spain. His interest in the pilgrimage was sparked during his first sabbatical while researching the literature of Spain.

“Most of the people who travel are not religious,” Gómez said. “They do it mostly for the experience of the journey, the history, the art or the culture.”

Gómez walked across the wide plains of southern Spain, over low hills and a high plateau. He traveled through hills covered with heather and into an area that resembles Northwest Oregon. He walked through groves of chestnut trees and centuries-old vineyards. The farther north he traveled, the less solitary the land became. Houses and villages were more numerous and he encountered more people who were eager to talk, to learn where he was from, and perhaps to exchange a little gossip.

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The road built by the Romans is still visible and often the trail follows it. There are a number of Roman bridges still in use throughout the country.

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Gómez said. “This is a place that has linked Europe and Spain. Santiago has been, in a sense, a meeting of cultures, where you see the Romanesque, the Gothic, the Muslim influences. Spain received this influx of art, writing and music because of this intercourse of culture.”

Since his return, Gómez has continued his research into how the figure of St. James is used as a conqueror, an intercessor in battles. Much of what he has seen and learned, including some 2,000 digital images, is bringing history and culture to life in his classes. His life is richer for having had the experience.

“I was 60 years old and I had never walked 20 kilometers in one day, or maybe in my entire life,” he said with a laugh. “I walk a mile every day, but that’s with my dog. But 20 or 40 kilometers a day for 39 days? I just feel that I’ve done something for myself that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I have accomplished many things in my life, but this is one of those main pivotal events.”

— Mardi Mileham

When Mujib Kamawal’s family fled to Pakistan from their native Afghanistan, they left a lush, vibrant region. When they returned for a visit years later, the Kama district was a wasteland. They knew they had to help. Mujib ’06, now a Linfield chemistry major, was born three years after his family escaped the atrocities and killings of the Soviet invasion in 1981. In 1983 when he was a year old, his family moved to Portland, where his parents still live. But the Kamawals could not forget the people of their homeland. When he returned to Afghanistan in 1996 and 2001, Mujib’s father, Jamil, was shocked by the devastation. The land was barren. Only poverty and illiteracy flourished.

“I had this vision that I wanted to see, that I could help our people in a constructive way,” Jamil Kamawal said. With modest personal resources, Kamaval, a land surveyor for Washington County, established the nonprofit Kama Relief Corp in 2001. Education is its primary mission.

“Our goal is to provide an education to every child there,” Kamawal said.

The organization has established three schools and sponsors activities at three others, as well as some adult classes at a community center.

Kama Relief also runs a food-distribution program that has helped about 90 needy families, including widows, orphans and people with disabilities, Kamawal said. A small stipend is paid to families who take in orphans, to eliminate the need for building orphanages, he added.

Kamawal also is trying to establish a health clinic in the Kama district, whose residents cannot even afford transportation to medical care. “The roads have been heavily damaged, so it can take two hours or longer to travel 20 or 30 miles,” he said.

Kamawal and his wife, Mahbooba, visit Afghanistan annually at their own expense. He is proud that the tax-exempt organization runs on a lean budget with little spent on administration. Kamawal said its annual budget has ranged from about $20,000 to $40,000. Most of the money, he said, comes from donations collected in Portland’s Muslim community during Ramadan observances.

Mujib, along with his four brothers and his sister, has visited the Kama district and assists with the relief efforts. He designed Kama Relief’s Website and helps with fundraising.

In January, Mujib visited Afghanistan to witness the results of those efforts. He saw a new schoolhouse nearing completion and “moved a lot of rocks,” filling a floor that would later have cement poured over it. He also helped distribute food.

“It’s really a horrible situation,” said Mujib, who had not been there since age 11. “There’s no clean water, and a lot of people don’t have enough food. It hurts to see all those people—little kids who don’t have enough to eat or drink. We do what we can and hope it’s enough. Usually, it’s not.”

Mujib is applying to medical schools and hopes to become a surgeon or a pediatrician. But he also wants to remain active in Kama Relief. “I definitely want to be an integral part of it as I grow older,” he said. “I hope to get involved more and more.”

For more information on Kama Relief, visit www.kamarelief.org.

— Beth Rogers Thompson