



*Sue Kenney finds  
her spiritual self  
on an ancient path*

Photograph: Emily Magee



Muskoka pilgrim, author, speaker and leader Sue Kenney has walked the famous Camino de Santiago trail in Northern Spain four times for spiritual awareness including a trek in October 2005. Her first journey – a 780 km hike in the winter of 2001 inspired her book *My Camino* released in 2004. The former gold medal master's rower from Toronto is pictured above skating on Lake Ontario. Kenney dries her socks on the Camino on a sunny day (opposite top) and forms a silhouette on her pilgrimage.



Photograph: Emily Magee



Photographs: Courtesy of Sue Kenney



# A pilgrim's journey

Article by Barry Grills

There's a persistent connection between people who are writers and people who are pilgrims. In this regard, Muskoka-based author Sue Kenney, who describes herself as a pilgrim, author, speaker, workshop designer and coach, is among many writers. This is especially true if one adheres to one definition of pilgrimage in the Oxford Dictionary, namely: "The course of human life figured as a journey."

Everyone writes about human life as a journey. It's what we all enjoy reading too.

But here the comparison with Sue Kenney ends. Because Kenney has transformed the human necessity of making a pilgrimage, along with its transformative powers in changing whom we are, into the literal act of making a pilgrimage. Not once. Not twice. Not even three times. But four.

In fact, this past October, Kenney was back in Northern Spain to walk the Camino de Santiago yet again, one of the most historic and celebrated pilgrimages in the world – a 780 kilometre walk dating back to Medieval times – that she first journeyed for 29 days in wintery conditions at the end of 2001.

The result of that first pilgrimage was a candid memoir entitled *My Camino*, published in 2004 by White Knight Publications. The book, now having sold more than 3,000 copies, tells the story of Kenney's pilgrimage from conception through completion, not only the actual pilgrimage itself, but the greater one that relates to life's transformational qualities.

In the telling, her story talks about her realization

that self-love is her life's goal – that once self-love is achieved – happiness, peace and the other rewards of life become possible. And she learns that her "voice" is the gift she is to share with the world.

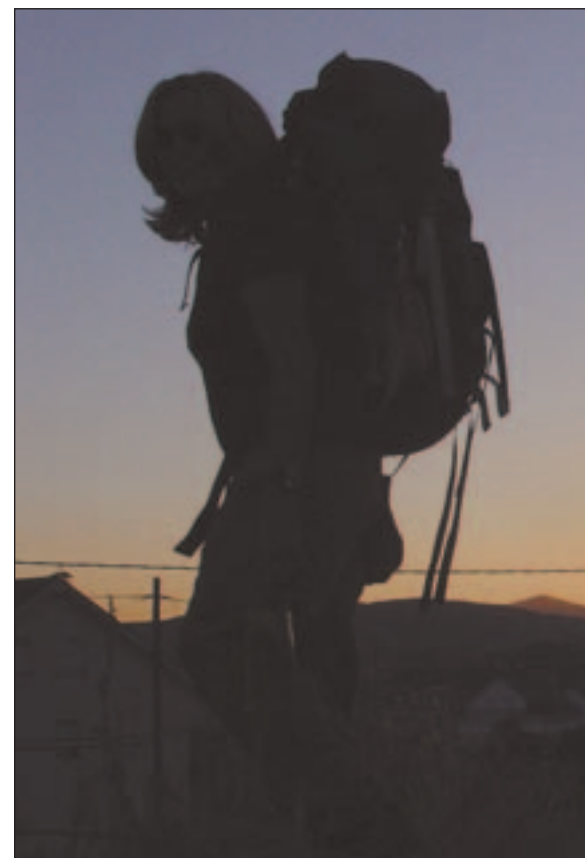
The friends she makes along the way, both human and canine, and the romantic encounter that brings her first pilgrimage to a conclusion, is additional fodder that keeps the reader focused on Kenney's extraordinary journey.

But like all good stories, Kenney's relationship with the Camino begins much earlier than her actual walk through the towns and villages of northern Spain. It begins in Toronto where she was born, the second of seven children.

"I grew up with this idea," she says, "if I worked hard, set goals and moved forward, I would be a success."

That success took the corporate route in the earlier period of her life as she climbed the corporate ladder in the telecommunications field. She also married, a marriage that lasted 20 years. She raised three daughters – Meghan, Simone and Tara, now all young adults – bought a home, followed her career to England for a time and suffered the job losses and changes in the 1990s that resulted when companies restructured, bought and sold each other, and downsized.

She enjoyed the telecommunications industry saying, "it's fast, it's aggressive, it's constantly changing." She continued through all of this corporate process until she lost her job again in October, 2001, declared redundant.



Photograph: Pasha Patriki

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Kenney had begun to realize there was something missing in her life and some other direction might be the answer. Earlier, during a television show, she had heard of the El Camino pilgrimage. The idea of the rugged journey remained with her and, as she contemplated which way her life was to turn, in the wake of losing her job, she began to contemplate how making the pilgrimage would inspire her to self-knowledge and self-love. Shortly, she booked her flight to Paris and then on to Spain, so that she could make the pilgrimage.

It wasn't the only time in her life that she had felt compelled to deal with life by taking up something arduous and even competitive. At the age of 40 she embarked on rowing not long after learning her sister, Donna, only 15 months younger than her, had been diagnosed with terminal cancer.

"I was angry at the world, angry at God," she recalls. "I decided this was a sport I wanted to try. I could put my anger and sorrow into the water. I rowed through her death and I rowed through my grief."

Afterwards, she began to row competitively, ultimately being selected to be in a crew competing for the World Fisa Masters. They went on to win the gold medal but, in Kenney's case, it again took some self-examination and an adjustment of motivation.

"At first I thought I should go to the worlds just to say I've been to the worlds," she explains, pointing out that her coach noted she wasn't putting her best foot forward. Based on his advice, she made the adjustment and says, "From that moment I started to show what it was to be a world class rower."

The time factor here in Kenney's turning point is fairly concentrated: the rowing championship came in September, 2001, her job disappeared in October and, in November she was on her way to the El Camino, a pilgrimage that would change her life.

Immediately prior to her departure, though, she spent time training physically for the long, arduous walk and then asked the personal questions often lurking on the eve of a major transformation: "Now, Sue Kenney, who are you? What is my purpose? I'd worked hard, played by the rules . . . there was still something I'd missed."

Her book, *My Camino*, is largely a parallel exploration of a historically important pilgrimage route and the pilgrimage that is life, namely answering those questions she was now asking herself. The process, she says, can be broken down into the belief that her purpose in life is fundamentally linked to the fact that everything comes from a place of love.

Part of her training regimen then became a daily repetition of her commitment to live a life focused on love with the appropriate amount of self-love as the passage with the drive of a rower.

To use her own words from *My Camino*, "I acknowledged that I had accomplished what I had set out to do. I had faced my deepest fear. By unselfishly loving myself and others, without condition, I ultimately embodied absolute love. By being love, I discovered self-love. Through self-love, I learned compassion. Through compassion, I became more enlightened. Through enlightenment, I learned the Camino is God. Through God, I am guided to my higher purpose."

"Through my higher purpose, I inspire by sharing



Photograph: Pasha Patriki

Comparing calf muscles after a day hiking the Camino are Margie McParland, Laura Cooper, Mony Dojeiji, Anita D'Amario, Sue Kenney and Anita Shuper.

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Photographs: Emily Magee

**Kenney relaxing in Muskoka. Her certificate for completing the Camino pilgrimage.**

my light. By sharing my light, I instill absolute love. Through absolute love, I find peace. Through peace, I find joy.

“Through joy, there is happiness. All I really wanted from the beginning of this journey, was universal happiness. On the Camino, I had finally found my way.”

But *My Camino* doesn't just explore the transformation of its narrator; it also tells the story of the historic pilgrimage itself and readers are introduced to a myriad of characters along the way, so much so that the act of going on a pilgrimage itself becomes a metaphor for life's experience.

There is even a dog named Bernie who selects a pilgrim each day in the village in which he lives. He adopts this pilgrim and joins him or her on the journey, then abandoning that person at the end of the day. How does Bernie get home? A willing villager, knowing Bernie's relationship to pilgrims and the pilgrimage, drives Bernie back home so that he can adopt another Pilgrim the next day.

For Sue Kenney, though, the journey of her self-knowledge didn't conclude in 2001 when she walked the famous El Camino, when she found her way through love and self-love. No, upon her return, she discovered

she had many stories to tell and, when she did tell the stories, people kept coming back for more.

“I discovered my purpose in life was to use my voice,” she explains.

In the wake of her 29-day pilgrimage in the north of Spain, realizing that her purpose was to tell the story of her life-transforming walk, she “started living and being my life's purpose.”

While this led to the writing of *My Camino*, she maintains “the book wasn't about me. It was about me being the conduit for the story.”

Her pilgrimage also led to the creation of a CD called *Stone By Stone: Inspirational Storytelling: A Pilgrim's Journey To Self-Love*. On this CD, she quite literally utilizes her voice.

But there was a book in the adventure she had experienced as well and in September, 2003, she discussed the pilgrimage as a book idea with publishers taking part in the Toronto Word on the Street Literary Festival.

Three expressed an interest. In the end, she signed a deal with White Knight Publications and the book came out in June of 2004. Since then, she has become a professional speaker and has even been selected as a keynote speaker at the Calgary Cham-



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As for Muskoka, she has lived in the area for three years and often can be seen at the Gravenhurst Farmers' Market where her work is on display. She had come to live in Muskoka in much the same way many residents have, having spent years cottaging in the area, or camping in Algonquin Park, and then feeling the compulsion to move up here on a permanent basis.

Her walk on El Camino even had an impact on her decision to move to Muskoka. Her exposure to the outdoors and nature on her pilgrimage shortened her return period in Toronto. "I lasted nine months. I couldn't stand the noise, the concrete, the speed," she says.

In Muskoka, she belongs to a writers group in Gravenhurst and, for a time, ran her own business in Washago, a little shop called The WhistleStop.

As for El Camino, "I told everyone I would never do it again. I had learned more lessons in 29 days than I would ever have needed." But during the writing of *My Camino*, she confirms that she was the vessel of the story rather than the story. "I realized it was time to go back to Camino. I felt I wasn't finished."

"Finished," in this case, meant that she had only traversed the pilgrimage one way. On her second journey, she would do the return walk as well.

Since then, her first book has done quite well and she has embarked upon a second book, *The Journey Of The Eagle Feather* soon to be completed.

Kenney is also busy on the development of a movie version of *My Camino*.

This project first came about because of her working relationship with writer-producer-director Bruce Pirrie, during the making of her CD.

Working together, they produced an outline and treatment, and developed a screenplay for *My Camino*.



Photograph: Courtesy of Sue Kenney

**Kenney hiking the Pyrenees in an early snowfall.**

Around the same time, Kenney met with a Toronto production company that had indicated an interest in producing a cinematic screenplay. But they warned that a film project such as this one could take four years to complete due to government funding application deadlines.

To honour the Camino with respect, she has gone ahead with the project on her own, offering the

screenplay outline, treatment and sample scenes to prospective private sector producers.

While she admits it's a tight timeline, she has hopes that the film could premiere as early as the International Toronto Film Festival in 2006.

But her main focus remains the inspiration El Camino has had on her voice, on her purpose of serving as a conduit for the story of self-transfor-

mation. The rest of her busy life is merely a matter of utilizing that voice.

"If you can touch one person in your life, then you've contributed," she says.

Life, like El Camino, is itself a pilgrimage. No one knows this better than author Sue Kenney. And the stories she tells of her walk in the north of Spain, her "voice," continue to demonstrate that fact. **M**

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