

“We are all pilgrims in this world”

A group of staff from Metro Achievement Center spent a week walking the Camino de Santiago together. They found that the pilgrimage experience paralleled their work serving low-income families in Chicago.

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It had been a busy summer, but for the staff team of Metro Achievement Center for Girls, the adventure was far from over. In September 2025, a group of 24 young professionals,

family members, and friends journeyed from Chicago to Spain for the experience of a lifetime: walking the Camino de Santiago.

“This was the first time we organized something like this at Metro and the first time on the Camino for many of us,” says Pilar Pardo, who coordinated the trip. “For some people, it was the first time they traveled outside of the United States, and for others their first time going to Spain.”

Pilar is the director of Metro Achievement Center, a nonprofit organization that accompanies low-income families in Chicago to guide their children, as Pilar puts it, “toward pathways of success.” That success includes academic achievement but also goes far beyond.

“What we try to do at Metro, which is for girls, is to build character in our

students,” Pilar explains. “We do this through mentoring, tutoring, close contact with the parents, and of course support in academics, but with a holistic view of the person.”

For 40 years, Metro has been carrying out this work through an after school program throughout the academic year, working with about 100 volunteers to serve about 200 students, and a full-time summer program with a paid staff that serves about 300 students. It was during the staff meetings of the summer program that the idea of a group bonding trip first arose.

Preparing for Pilgrimage

“The initial idea was to create bonding time,” Pilar recalls, “a special time together with our Metro staff, who are young professionals, between 25 and 30 years old. We were also very open to inviting other people. One of the staff members

invited her mother, another invited her sister, and someone else invited her very good college friend.”

The Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage to the tomb of St. James the Apostle in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, draws hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world each year. Since the 9th century, when the pilgrimage was formally established, pilgrims have been journeying along one of the many paths to Santiago, ranging from 55 to nearly 500 miles. Over the past few decades, the Camino has gained increasing popularity in the United States especially through documentaries and social media. Because Pilar is from Spain and was especially familiar with the pilgrimage, the idea quickly accelerated into a plan.

“It's not expensive, we could do it for a week, and we had the chance to do

it at the end of the summer,” says Pilar. “So it was born from a kind of collective enthusiasm.”

Walking together

Like most pilgrims walking the Camino, the daily routine consisted of an early rise and breakfast, walking for about 5 or 6 hours a day, evening Mass at the local town parish, and a meal together before sleeping in a simple hostel.

One of the Metro staff members, Hannah, recalls the trip as a profound personal and spiritual experience.

“The main highlight for me was attending the pilgrim's Mass each day,” she says. “It was very meaningful to carry all of my intentions on the way (I put some rocks in my backpack for specific intentions!), and offer them to our

Lord in the Mass at the end of the day's journey."

Hannah also found that her experience with Metro bolstered her amid the challenges of the Camino.

"Working at Metro has helped me to recognize each person's potential for growth even when circumstances seem difficult," Hannah explains.

"This helped me to persevere on the Camino, as I saw my journey as an opportunity for my own growth and as a way to pray for the growth and healing of some of the families and students at Metro."

One of the most impressive parts of the journey was meeting people along the way, hearing their stories, and learning why they were walking the Camino.

"There are many reasons, it's true — the beautiful nature, the history, the art," says Pilar. "But everyone also

has a spiritual and very deep purpose when they go. Or, if they don't have it, they discover that along the way.”

“For example,” Pilar continues, “we met a woman in her 50s from Australia, who walked about 10 days along the Camino. And she told us, ‘I’m not doing this for me. I’m doing this for my friends because I know so many people who are in need of prayers.’ And so whenever she reached a sign with a yellow arrow and shell symbol to guide pilgrims on the path, this woman would stop, leave a little stone, and pray for her friends.”

“A metaphor for life”

Along the way, the group discovered that the pilgrimage was more than an isolated experience. It taught important lessons about other aspects in life, including their work at Metro.

“We discovered that the Camino is a metaphor for life,” says Pilar. “We are all walking, we have a destiny, we have a purpose. Some days are good, some days are bad, sometimes you are in pain, but you continue, you keep going.”

Hannah found this lesson important to pass along to others working at Metro.

“On the Camino, I contemplated the fundamental truth that we are all pilgrims in this world,” she reflects. “I would tell someone who is about to start volunteering at Metro that each student you will encounter is a pilgrim in this world, whether she recognizes that truth or not.

Mentoring teen girls at Metro can be difficult at times, as it can seem like the girls do not desire to change. However, coming back from the Camino, I have approached mentorship through the lens of

pilgrimage, recognizing that each girl is in a process of growth, and each girl, whether she knows it or not, desires the good and is seeking to reach her ultimate goal of happiness with her Father in heaven. So, be patient with the process of growth! Seek to accompany these girls on their way, pointing them towards what is truly good, and encouraging them to know and live in accordance with their dignity.”

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