

A woman with a mission: Stephanie Dodaro blazing a trail connecting California Missions

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Dressed in a bright red shirt, tan pants and comfortable shoes, carrying everything she needs on her back, 38-year-old Stephanie Dodaro walked up to the Santa Barbara Mission on Saturday with a smile and countless stories to tell.

Ms. Dodaro, of San Francisco, is on a mission to walk 800 miles from Sonoma to San Diego to visit all 21 California Missions. She is more than halfway there, having traveled about 500 miles so far with about 300 still to go.

She has seen many beautiful Missions so far and Santa Barbara's was no exception, but she was surprised to see Mayor Helene Schneider.

"I've never met a mayor before," she laughed, shaking hands with Ms. Schneider in front of the Mission.

Ms. Schneider had followed her story and wanted to meet Ms. Dodaro in person.

"I was intrigued that someone would take this on and do this alone," the mayor said. "It is inspiring and I am happy to welcome her to Santa Barbara and the city."

Ms. Schneider is impressed, but doesn't plan to follow in Ms. Dodaro's footsteps anytime soon.

"I like to take a hike here and there, but I don't know about walking the whole state. It is pretty inspiring," Ms. Schneider said.

So why would Ms. Dodaro, who was raised Catholic but doesn't consider herself religious, put herself through such a physical and emotional test? She was a disenchanted freelance Web producer and copy writer in San Francisco and even though she made a decent living, was overwhelmed with bills and busyness.

"I needed to get away and get perspective, take some time to think," she said.

Last year, Ms. Dodaro traveled to Spain and took 19 days to walk 330 miles in the Camino de Santiago, a 1,200-year-old pilgrimage route. She loved the experience so much she wanted to create a similar one in California.



Stephanie Dodaro, shown outside the Santa Barbara Mission, is visiting all 21 of California's old Spanish Missions.
MIKE ELIASON/NEWS-PRESS



1. San Francisco Solano: Sonoma
2. San Rafael Arcángel: San Rafael
3. San Francisco de Asís: San Francisco
4. San José: Fremont
5. Santa Clara de Asís: Santa Clara
6. Santa Cruz: Santa Cruz
7. San Juan Bautista: San Juan Bautista
8. San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo: Carmel
9. Nuestra Señora de la Soledad: Soledad
10. San Antonio de Padua: Fort Hunter Liggett
11. San Miguel Arcángel: San Miguel
12. San Luis Obispo de Tolosa: San Luis Obispo
13. La Purísima Concepción: Lompoc
14. Santa Inés: Solvang
15. Santa Bárbara: Santa Barbara
16. San Buenaventura: Ventura
17. San Fernando Rey de España: Mission Hills
18. San Gabriel Arcángel: San Gabriel
19. San Juan Capistrano: San Juan Capistrano
20. San Luis Rey de Francia: Oceanside
21. San Diego de Alcalá: San Diego

"I love nature, art, history and thought, 'This is my thing,'" Ms. Dodaro said.

She decided to create a trail guide for a pilgrimage to the California Missions, which she plans to make available free to the public. With the help of Google maps, satellite maps and trail maps, Ms. Dodaro put together a route that would take her through beaches, military bases, farmland, across riverbeds, valleys and landmarks like the Golden Gate Bridge.

Her trail closely models the original El Camino Real, The Royal Road that connected the Missions to each other when they were founded by the Spanish crown in the 18th century.

"It is comforting to know that people have walked that road before for so many years and for so many reasons," Ms. Dodaro said.

Although she scouted the trip by car, nothing could prepare her for what she was getting into. The first three days of her journey, she admits, she questioned her ability to finish what she started.

"I thought, 'Why did I do this?' The fourth day, I walked 22 miles and my feet really hurt, but my friend took my backpack (which weighed about 26 pounds), and the next day that rejuvenated me."

There have been many moments when Ms. Dodaro has wanted to quit, but she has learned to keep pressing on.

"There are days when I don't want to walk up that hill. It's hot, I am scared, and there are mountain lions," Ms. Dodaro said.

There are lonely days, too.

"Mother's Day in Santa Maria, I was bummed," she said. "My family wasn't there. It was one of those moments."

There are physically challenging days, such as when she walked 24 miles between North Lake San Antonio to the San Miguel Mission in 90-degree heat.

Luckily, during her toughest moment, she was with her brother.

"We overheated," Ms. Dodaro said. "We didn't have enough water and had to knock on someone's door. Fortunately, a friendly man opened the door and said he had seen us and been waiting for us."

There have also been beautiful moments, as when she made it over Refugio Road and the San Marcos pass.

"It was deserted and hot, and I came over the pass and hadn't seen the ocean in awhile, and the sunset was so beautiful," Ms. Dodaro said.

It's an experience she would recommend to those with the desire and opportunity. "Anyone who wants perspective on your life, this is a great thing."

Even with all this time to herself Ms. Dodaro admits she hasn't had any major epiphanies. But then again, she is not expecting any.

"Then you set yourself up for disappointment, and by not expecting anything you open yourself up to see the little things."

For those who greeted Ms. Dodaro at the Santa Barbara Mission, what she is doing is a big thing.

"She is a trailblazer. Because of her experiences and routes, she is going to be able to give us great information," said Santa Barbara firefighter Olga Herrera.

Ms. Herrera is a member of a group that walked the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in Spain and wants to see an experience like it in California.

"In Spain, people give you food, wine, directions," Ms. Herrera said. "They treat you like family. In America you are much more insulated. You drive alone, work at a cubicle alone, and eat alone."

Grant Spangler of Ojai also is part of a local effort to put together a Missions pilgrimage using Ms. Dodaro's trail guide.

"A California Missions pilgrimage would bring the spirit of compassion, kindness and spirituality you see in Spain to California," Mr. Spangler said.

The group hopes to coordinate the pilgrimage in commemoration of the tricentennial of the founding of the Missions by Father Junipero Serra next year.

The next stop for Ms. Dodaro is the San Buenaventura Mission in Ventura. She hopes to finish her trip in San Diego on June 6, a day she dreams about.

"I am going to cry my eyes out," she predicts.

It has been a tough road to walk, but the people she has met along the way make it worth it. "It's a two-way street," Ms. Dodaro said. "I am inspiring people and they are inspiring me."

Ms. Dodaro's travel expenses and the cost to create the tour guide is about \$10,000. She still needs several thousand dollars to pay for her trip.

To donate or for more information, visit www.WalkingTheMissions.com.

Ms. Dodaro's progress can be followed on <http://Twitter.com/WalkTheMissions> and www.Facebook.com/WalkingTheMissions.

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