

ROAD TO Recovery

One awful moment 30 years ago changed Jo Anne Sylva's life completely, and, it seemed, forever. Then Pilates changed it again.

By Jo Anne Sylva, as told to Beth Johnson

The first time I ever entered a Pilates studio was 16 years ago, when I was in a wheelchair. I had a paralyzed right leg, a dropped right foot and a wrecked body. At my first lesson, my teacher, Barbara Hoon of Six Degrees Pilates in Boonton, NJ, had to help me from my wheelchair onto the Reformer. But after that first lesson, I couldn't wait to come back and do Pilates again.

Week after week, month after month, we practiced moving my legs back and forth. Over and over again, two to three times a week, Barbara worked with me despite all my limitations. I thought the Reformer was the most genius of inventions because I could work out while lying down!

It's no wonder my husband and children were so thrilled to see me take to Pilates. For more than a decade, they had seen me devastated by pain, anger and depression.



AT RIGHT: SYLVA SPENT MORE THAN A DECADE IN A WHEELCHAIR AFTER THE CAR ACCIDENT.

OPPOSITE PAGE: GUIDED BY HER TEACHER, BARBARA HOON, SYLVA DOES SHORT BOX ON THE LADDER BARREL.

THE CRASH

In 1986, I was on a wonderful family vacation in Rhode Island with my husband and three children—my sons were teens and my daughter was in graduate school. We were driving home from a birthday dinner for my husband when a drunk driver turned in front of us, and we smashed into him. A small piece of plastic broke underneath one side of my seat, causing the seat to break loose from the car. I flew forward, strapped in, as the seat twisted. Thank God, everyone else in the car was basically okay, but I broke my back (I had compression fractures of the lumbar vertebrae), herniated several cervical discs in my neck, broke a number of ribs and suffered an abdominal ileus (a blockage of the intestines).

YEARS OF RECOVERY

I ended up being in a full-body brace for almost a year. I missed my older son's college graduation. I had to give up the job I loved, teaching freshman and sophomore English and heading the English as a Second Language program at Caldwell College in New Jersey. And then I spent years in and out of the hospital, having surgeries and enduring terrible pain while trying to find a way to move forward, both literally and figuratively.

SURGERY AFTER SURGERY

I had three lower spinal surgeries. My neck was fused with cadaver bones. I developed a life-threatening staph infection. I had numerous blood transfusions because I was so weak. And then I developed central nervous system lupus, which made everything worse. Sometimes my brain would quickly swell, and I'd faint. My knees or ankles would balloon and be hot to the touch. My blood count became so low that I had to have a hysterectomy.

At the suggestion of my physiatrist [a doctor who specializes in rehabilitation], Henry Wroblewski, MD, at The Pain Institute in Livingston, NJ, in 1990, I went to the nearby

It was a long, slow process to build myself back up, but there is no question in my mind that years of pilates made it possible for me to walk again.





upper body. I fought against standing black belts and realized that I wasn't just a 100-pound weak little thing in a wheelchair.

Tae kwon do empowered me to be physical, but it did not teach me to walk, which was my ultimate goal. Despite the black belt, I was no closer to getting out of the wheelchair, and I was very frustrated. My acupuncturist, who had spent a year treating my cervical neck pain, was the first to recommend Pilates to me. She suggested I get in touch with Barbara Hoon, a Pilates teacher who was a Juilliard-trained dancer and had been in Twyla Tharp's dance company. My psychiatrist was

Kessler Institute to learn how to use double-arm crutches. The crutches gave me carpal tunnel (more surgery) and shoulder problems, and four years later, I ended up in a wheelchair.

Whenever I had a period of feeling better, I was able to do a bit of English tutoring at home, but then I'd have a lupus flare-up and have to stay in bed for two weeks. I had to have help with almost everything, from getting dressed to getting downstairs.

Each medical problem led to another. I must have been put on 100 different drugs over the years as doctors tried to treat me. It's hard to explain what it's like to feel pain, all day, every day. I was also seeing a psychologist for PTSD because I was angry at everyone. I was angry at the man who hit us. I was angry that my seat broke. I was angry we lost our lawsuit against the car company. I was angry I had lost my dream job.

GOING FROM WEAK TO WARRIOR

But no matter how low and angry I felt, something in me kept pushing forward. One day, when I was doing physical therapy at Kessler, a doctor walked up to me and said, "You seem smart and strong—do you want to join our tae kwon do program?" I think I surprised myself by saying, "Okay." I had never done any sports—growing up in northeastern New Jersey, I was a reading and knitting kind of girl. And now I was going to do martial arts in a wheelchair!

Tae kwon do ended up being a really good way to get out my aggravation and aggression. And clearly I had a lot of it, because in 1998, I earned a black belt. It also gave me a focus, a purpose and a strong

encouraging as well and felt that because of my complex physical ailments, Pilates was my best shot at bypassing some of the nerve pain I was experiencing.

PUSHING FORWARD

Still, as much as I wanted to walk, I was also really scared. I was still getting counseling for my PTSD, because the accident had turned me into a fearful person. I thought maybe I should just stay in the wheelchair forever. What if Barbara couldn't help me, and I'd just be disappointed again? What if she didn't want to deal with someone in my condition? But despite those negative thoughts, in 2000, I called Barbara and soon after found myself at her studio.

I remember at the first session, Barbara discussed the importance of working from my core; I couldn't imagine how I would do that. But there I was, day one, on the Reformer. Barbara helped me move my legs back and forth, back and forth, trying to teach me to engage my lower abs.

The change in me was solely mental at first, because I felt so disconnected from the lower half of my body. It was useless. I still had to put a strap on my right foot to keep it from dragging. So there were definitely days when my depression, or my anger, took over. But Barbara helped me stay focused no matter my mood or condition, and she never ever made me feel ashamed.

As the months went by, I could feel my abs getting stronger, the first step in helping me move my legs. I started to believe more and more that one day I would walk. And as I worked toward that goal, I felt like Pilates was pulling me out of a long nightmare. My dark moods were lifting, and I was able to start tutoring a bit more again.

My husband was so thrilled to see how much happier I was since starting Pilates, that in between working full time and doing all the household chores, he built me a gorgeous,

wooden Reformer. So a year into Pilates, I was able to start doing it every single day, either at home or with Barbara. Once I started on it daily, I even noticed my lupus flare-ups were happening a bit less frequently and weren't lasting for quite so long.

GETTING BACK ON MY FEET

After a year of seated Reformer work, Barbara thought I was ready to start "gait training," which focused on exercises specifically designed to help me get ready to walk. At that point, not only could I not walk, I didn't know how to walk anymore! With my dropped foot, I couldn't place my heel down, and I didn't know how to put my weight on my feet. Just as she had with the Reformer, she helped me onto the Wunda Chair, where we did movements with the pedal. I'd push down with my toes, and then with my heels, over and over again. I got a Chair for home, too, and added that to my daily routine. I'd also do Footwork on the Foot Corrector seated in my wheelchair. On the Reformer, we started working on Short and Long Spine, because that kind of flexing was fantastic for alleviating my back pain.

BABY STEPS

After three years of Pilates, Barbara started nudging me to begin walking again with double-arm crutches. I'll admit that I was initially terrified of falling or tripping and ending up in worse shape—it felt safe to be in a wheelchair. So I started by lifting myself out of the wheelchair and holding onto the arms. Then I progressed to standing, holding onto the Cadillac while working on the Foot Corrector. After another couple of years of using the crutches, Barbara said, "Let's move you to a cane." By that point, my core strength, leg mobility and balance had progressed to the point that that was all I needed to walk.

My progress was literally step by step, encouraged all the way by Barbara. It was a long, slow process to build myself back up, but there is no question in my mind that years of Pilates made it possible for me to walk again. And four years ago, I was strong enough to start on the Cadillac. Now I love putting my legs in the springs, and doing the Circles. It makes me feel that I'm flying like Peter Pan!

My body is still not perfect. I have only partial feeling in my right leg, and so I'm extra cautious and nervous when going up and down stairs. My right arm will always be much weaker than my left. I still have shoulder problems. I'll never be pain-free because of all the scar tissue. When I do Teaser, my right foot goes all over the place. And I'll never drive a car again because I'm still so traumatized by the accident; even when I'm a passenger, I flinch when I see a car coming from the same direction as the one in the crash. I would never want to hurt anyone else in the same way I was.

GETTING MY LIFE BACK

The courage I gained from Pilates extended well beyond the studio. In 2003, I went back to graduate school—in a wheelchair—and by the time I earned my doctorate in literature in 2006 from Drew University, I was walking with a cane. Eight years ago, I started teaching again, as an adjunct professor at a small liberal arts college in northern New Jersey.

I can now walk around Manhattan with only a cane for security. My lupus is in remission, and even if it can't be proven medically, I know that Pilates cured me of it. I can stand in front of my classroom without any assistance. I honestly believe I am a better and happier person since having the accident, and that's because of Pilates. Plus, I now have 10 grandchildren and can enjoy spending time with them. When we go to the beach together, I can stroll on the boardwalk.

I honestly believe I am a better and happier person since having the accident, and that's because of Pilates.

EXPLORING THE WORLD AGAIN

Pilates has also given me back my love of travel. Before the crash, we traveled as much as school schedules and finances would allow. We spent my daughter's 16th birthday in Paris. We took the family to Italy—my late father's birthplace—twice. I was always thinking about the next trip. But after the accident, that became almost impossible.

The one time I attempted it was about five years after my accident. My older son was studying to be a Roman Catholic priest in Belgium, and our family flew over to see him. (He couldn't leave the seminary for the first two years there.) That trip was just hell. In order to get me on one of the planes, they had to put me in a basket and hoist me up. I was mortified and completely, completely humiliated. And then I ended up in the hospital because of an awful lupus flare-up. After that, I never, ever wanted to travel again.

A FULL LIFE

Fast-forward to today, and thank God that I learned to walk, because my son works at the Vatican! We went to Europe three times last year to see him and explore. I've learned Italian, and I'm fairly fluent. This year, I've already been to Portugal, and in August, we're going to Scotland and then back to Rome in November!

I've done more since I started Pilates than in my previous life. It amazes me—I was so afraid of being out in the world, and now I can't wait for the next adventure. That's what Pilates has given me. **PS**