THE POWER OF PILATES

Success Story

Making a Difference Around the World

What better way to celebrate Merrithew’s 30th anniversary than by spotlighting four of the Toronto-based company’s most inspiring Pilates success stories?

By Beth Johnson

JAVIER HUETE, 45, TOLEDO, SPAIN

After a devastating car accident, Javier Huete discovered Joseph Pilates’ promise of “return to life” with a devoted teacher.

TWO YEARS AGO, MY LIFE CHANGED IRREVOCABLY. After spending the weekend in the mountains with my wife and our two young sons—they were eight and six at the time—we were heading home to Toledo. Suddenly another car slid around a curve, crashed into our car and forced us off the road.

When I woke up in the hospital, I found out to my horror that my wife had been killed instantly, one son had lost his sight in one eye and the other had fractured his leg. I had broken both my femurs (thigh bones), cracked three ribs and had fractures in my left hand and ankle. I was in the hospital for three months, and underwent several surgeries.

A DARK TIME

After I was released, I did rehab, mostly in the hospital pool, for six months. I needed crutches to walk, and I couldn’t stay on my feet for very long. My right femur was now an inch and a half shorter than my left, and my hips, right knee and foot were very weak. I also had a lot of pain in my lumbar region. The doctors told me that I wouldn’t recover any further, and that I should accept my physical state and be grateful to be alive.

I was very depressed—grieving for my wife, worrying about my children, not sleeping well and experiencing post-traumatic flashbacks. I knew I needed more physical therapy if there was any chance of getting better. Then a year ago, I made an appointment at Akrostudio in Toledo.

REHABBING WITH PILATES

I assumed that more physical therapy meant more pain in order to improve. So I was surprised when my teacher, Marta Vuste Vaquerizo, a Merrithew instructor trainer specializing in STOTT PILATES® and Halo® Training, began rehabilitating me with Pilates. I’d never heard of it.

For the first month, I went four days a week. Within the first week, I knew that Pilates was going to help me. We’d do leg work on the Long Box and Footwork on the Chair. After class I felt so good! Marta was very encouraging and careful.

We’d do adductor stretches on the Reformer with the straps on my knees, the Midback Series on the Reformer and Knee Stretches. But doing Leg Springs on the Reformer and Cadillac was the real key to my recovery. Within two months, I had recovered so much mobility in my hips and foot that I could sit comfortably with my right knee semiflexed. The most important moment for me was when, after four months of doing Pilates, I could walk to the studio on my own. I realized then that I could continue living my life, and be self-sufficient.

A NEW LIFE

Now, after a year of Pilates, my whole perspective on my health has changed. I feel so much more optimistic! Pilates has helped me feel so much better physically, and sleep better as well. My PTSD has also really lessened. Sure, I still have discomfort, and some days are just hard—but I can walk. I can drive and have returned to work part-time. No one can truly understand what Pilates has meant for me and my children.

EVA MACLOWRY, 82, PORTLAND, OR

After two bouts with cancer, Eva MacLowry is in the best shape of her life—at 82. “Doing Pilates is my present to myself,” she says.

WHEN I WAS 44, I WAS DIAGNOSED WITH BREAST CANCER. Back then, in 1979, doctors removed a lot of muscle tissue when doing a mastectomy. It left me with a much weaker left arm. I did some physical therapy, but to be honest, I was never super athletic. So I pushed on with life, raising our four sons and working as an artist.

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Finding a Community

I loved Pilates and the supportive friendships that I developed through the studio. I also loved how Pilates helped me in my “real” life. If I’d been painting a lot or had a long plane flight, Melanie and my other instructor, Janet Nordlund, would help me work through my inevitable lower lumbar pain.

Five years ago, I was diagnosed with endometrial cancer. At such an upsetting time, it was amazing for me to see what a caring community I had developed through Pilates. After my surgery, my teachers put their heads together to figure out which exercises would help most to regain my abdominal strength. I was so touched by their thoughtfulness. Melanie helped me do gentle segmental rotation with my leg on a foam roller. We used the Arc Barrel to support my pelvis in an inverted position for Toe Taps and Leg Lifts. Thanks to Pilates, I rebounded very quickly.

Now I can even do Upside-Down Pull-Ups on the Cadillac! I’ll never do a perfect Teaser—I’m still too hard for me—but I’m really good at Planks!

READY FOR NEW ADVENTURES

What I also love about Pilates is that it keeps me prepped for new challenges. For my 80th
I’m amazed with what I can do with my body now—especially considering that I could barely move just three years ago. Without a doubt, the best advice I’ve ever been given is...try Pilates!

MOSES GO, JR., 42, MAKATI, PHILIPPINES

After injuring his back on the job, Moses Go thought he might always have a bad back. Then he discovered Pilates.

MY JOURNEY TO PILATES STARTED IN 2008

When I started experiencing lower-back pain, I work in the food industry, and part of my job then was carrying heavy loads of produce. When my back acted up, I’d just rub in some Bengay. I was 18 to lengthen my Achilles tendons.

The worst part of cerebral palsy for me has always been the incredibly uncomfortable tightness in my legs. Working with my feet in the straps on the Reformers has really helped to open up my hips and strengthen my legs, plus it gave me relief from muscle tightness and discomfort for the first time in my life.

HITTING MY STRIDE

It was a revelation that breathing into my abs would help me hold my balance. I noticed that on that day. Now my hips are also looser, and the muscles around them are stronger, so I have a longer, more stable stride—unlike the small, unbalanced steps I took before Pilates! I’m steadier, I’m also more confident getting around them are stronger, so I have a longer, more stable stride—unlike the small, unbalanced steps I took before Pilates! Recently I went on a trail walk, and there were some logs that had fallen across the path. Sure, I needed someone to hold my hand, but I could step over the logs much more easily than in the past.

RIE YAMAGISHI, 40, TORONTO

After a lifetime of discomfort, Pilates is giving Rie Yamagishi relief from cerebral palsy that she never thought possible.

I really hope someone with cerebral palsy can benefit from this article. I find myself benefiting from Pilates even at home. Now I can carry heavier dishes, whereas before I was shaky and would often spill things. My arms, shoulders and back are getting stronger, too, which helps me support myself on stair railings. Because I’m steadier, I’m also more confident getting around town, and getting on and off the subway. Even when the changes seem small, the cumulative effect is powerful. I really hope someone with cerebral palsy will read this and think, ‘I should try Pilates!’ I think it can help everyone with cerebral palsy experience improvements in their daily lives! People are noticing the changes in my strength and balance, which is very exciting!

A LIFE-CHANGER

I was intrigued after seeing an article on Pilates, but I worried it would be too hard. At the Merrithew Corporate Training Center in Toronto, Stott Pilates-certified instructor Lisa Kojola was very reassuring. She even read up on cerebral palsy before my first lesson—I was very impressed by that.

After my last surgery, I worked with a physical therapist and chiropractor for a bit, but then became quite sedentary once I graduated from college and starting working a desk job. I could get around okay unassisted, so I didn’t push myself further. But a few years ago, I decided I needed to be more proactive. I started doing yoga and tai chi, and they did help. But what really made a difference was starting Pilates in January 2016.

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At my first lesson with her, we did Spinal Twist on the Cadillac. I got a stretch and worked my shoulders and back are getting stronger, too, which helps me support myself on stair railings. Because I’m steadier, I’m also more confident getting around town, and getting on and off the subway.

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