

Working with Joe and Clara

Four “regular” people reminisce about life as clients at the Pilates’ original studio

by Shari Berkowitz
illustration by Diana McGroary



Many Pilates devotees often wonder what it would have been like to meet Joseph and Clara Pilates and take lessons at their iconic studio on Eighth Avenue in New York City. While many of us have heard stories from the first-generation teachers of the Pilates community, I also find it intriguing to hear anecdotes from “regular” people who trained with the Pilates but never became pros. For this story, I talked to four of Joe and Clara’s former students—my client and friend, John Steel; my colleague Jill Shapiro’s clients, Ilana Adler and Diane Cohen; and Adler’s sister Aviva Rahmani—about their days working with Joe and Clara.

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THE YOUNG MOTHER: Ilana Adler, who was at the time living in North Tarrytown (a train ride away from Manhattan), started training with Mr. Pilates in 1962 after giving birth to her second child. She had never heard of Pilates until a friend of hers, a dancer, told her that it was “a wonderful regime and wonderful discipline” and encouraged her to go. After trying it for the first time, “I connected with it. It worked for me!” she says. She recalls her days training with the Pilates—and the regime that she continues even today.

An unpretentious space: “The studio itself was small and not very bright. It was functional and simple. There was an amazing amount of equipment for the space. It was a wonderful place to exercise and learn! It was always called a studio, never a gym. It even had a shower. There was always a serious, quiet atmosphere. You were not supposed to talk. Even the teachers didn’t talk a lot.”

A fixed routine: “I always started on the Reformer, then would do some mat and Cadillac. Once in a while I would do the Barrel. Hannah [Sakmirda, the Pilates’ assistant] would remind you of what to do. You had to move everything and do the springs yourself and you always had to get on the Reformers from the left side to keep order. Sometimes Clara would come over to offer a correction. She would point her bony finger [at a specific body part] and say ‘I do not see this working.’ She was absolutely right!”

Star struck: “Mr. Pilates had his favorites. One day, I saw someone’s back and asked, ‘Who is that?’ It was [legendary dancer and choreographer] Martha Graham. She had a back like an ironing board. It suited her frame.”

90 proof: “If Joseph was having a bad morning, he would be drinking at 10:30 a.m. He would never drink in the studio. He would just go away for a while [into the next room].”

A ladies man: “Joe was a bit of a lecher. I always thought that Joe’s favorite position for the women was Jackknife.”

A lifelong habit: Adler, who turned 75 last summer, still studies Pilates with Jill Shapiro at Pilates Connection in Pleasantville, NY. While she no longer wears the leotards and tights she wore to the Pilates’ studio (“I looked good in them,” she says. “There were no lumps and bumps!”), she appreciates the way the method has evolved. “There has been an evolution. I loved the work then and I love the work now. It’s no less than the real deal. It’s just developed.”

THE SURROGATE GRANDSON: Pilates was a family affair for John Steel, who began working with Mr. Pilates in the early 1960s. Steel followed in the footsteps of his mother, who started when a friend, a dancer-choreographer, suggested she try it. "Mom was not athletic," Steel recalls. "But she had a gorgeous, fabulous body and was very flexible—Joe must have paid extra attention to her as he did with all attractive women." Steel's father, a tennis player, also started taking lessons. (Steel's father is pictured in the well-known photo of a man stretched over a Ladder Barrel.) Steel himself had a chronic stiff neck: his parents

The quiet one: "Clara was easy, quiet and shy. She had no sense of frustration like Joe did. She'd 'yell' at you in the studio [but it was just] her abrupt way of speaking. You always felt her sincerity, her concern for you."

Lust for life: "We all used to joke about [Joe's eye for women]. How did Clara tolerate it?"

Hidden talent: "Besides making the equipment, Joe also made the shoes the clients wore. Everyone had two pairs of practice shoes, one that you'd buy at Freed's (a maker of dance shoes) and the other that Joe would make. He would cut out the shape of your foot and make you canvas shoes that you'd put steel plates into. You wore the shoes with steel plates to do the matwork."

A unique relationship: "To me, he was a grandfather. I loved him. He was completely different than other men. He would say to me, 'Come back for a beer later in the afternoon.' Sometimes we'd have a beer or sometimes he'd say, 'Let's go for a walk' and we'd walk down Eighth Avenue. Other times we'd have lunch in Central Park in front of the zoo, usually bratwurst or sometimes liverwurst and mustard. He'd talk about exercises constantly."

Joe's darker side: "For years, he had been ferociously angry at the medical world and at hospitals, anyone who didn't 'get it.' By the time we became close, around 1963, he was at the end of anger and the beginning of frustration... he had given up.

"But one day, when I came in for my session, Joe explained that Bob Seed [a former professional hockey player who had worked with Joe and Clara for a number of years] had opened a studio 10 blocks away and had taken a number of their clients with him. 'Not much you can do,' I responded.

"'You'd be surprised!' he said, leaving the room in his turtleneck and shorts.

"When he came back, he told me, 'It's taken care of. I took my gun over to Bob Seed's and said, 'If you take one more of my morning people, I'll be back here and will shoot you in the head.'

"I thought to myself, *he took care of it!*"

Half a century of Pilates: Steel, who helped Clara maintain the studio after Mr. Pilates died, still practices the method to this day. I've been training Steel on and off for about seven years, first in my former studio, The Vertical Workshop in Beverly Hills, CA, and now whenever he's in New York. And whether he's home in Telluride, CO, or traveling the world, he finds time to take a session or give himself one.

continually urged him, "Go to Pilates, for Christ's sake!" Though he threw up from the intensity of the workout on the first day, he ended up staying for a lifetime. "I realized there was something phenomenal happening!" he says.

A home "office": "You'd walk into the studio and there must have been a string that rang a bell in the apartment (which was next door). Joe would always come in two minutes afterward. The studio was so small, the minute you opened the door you were in there! It had high ceilings and was dimly lit with worn, oriental carpet. It was jammed full of machinery made of old wood and black, leathery upholstery. Every inch of the walls was covered. There was no music, no voices, no talking, nothing but lying down on machines doing your stuff. There were also two shower rooms with plastic shower curtains."

Early birds: "I had a private session at 7 a.m.; by 7:15 or 7:30, more people would come in to exercise and attention was paid to all."

Only the self-sufficient need apply: "It was the exact same routine all the time for everyone. There were charts on rolling stands that had almost all the exercises.

A man of few words: "Joe didn't use a lot of words. It was just, 'Put your head there. Put your feet there. Push.' There was never a negative word out of Joe, though; you never did anything wrong. He would just say, 'gut, gut.'"

"Joe would never say, 'You can't do it? Okay, well, try it this way.' You did it [the way he said] because that was the way it had to be done!"

THE FAVORITE: Aviva Rahmani, a singer and artist, started working with Mr. Pilates when she was 18 years old. She would go with her sister, Ilana Adler, twice a week at first, then once a week later on.

A drill sergeant: "I remember Joe barking orders at me like a military man, pushing my body around into the precise position. At the first session, Joe yelled at me that I was too loose. I was completely astonished! He wanted me to manage my whole body as one system that I had complete control over and was conscious of at all times. He didn't want us to be loose. He wanted us to lengthen our muscles. We had to learn the exercises immediately. I was fairly intimidated, but I was young, so I took the direction."

Words of wisdom: "He was precise about rhythm and breathing. But rhythm was primary, even before breathing."

No modifications: "Joe would never say, 'You can't do it? Okay, well, try it this way.' You did it [the way he said] because that was the way it had to be done!"

Melting pot: "There were always a lot of people in the studio. There were dancers, housewives, various men."

Extra credit: "At the time, I was attending Parsons [The New School of Design in NYC] and so I asked

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if I could spend time at the studio sketching as part of my studies. I'd spend about an hour at a time sketching figures. Their movements were so beautiful and extremely sculptural."

Joe's funeral: "It was very strange when Joe died. I had never had an experience of death at that point. I went to the funeral home at 57th and Fifth. It was an empty room with an open casket. I couldn't stay. I couldn't cope, though I had a lot of affection for him."

Fifty years of the Hundred: "When I left New York after Joe died, I taught Pilates and had a movement group for a while. Of course, every day I still do my basic Pilates: Teaser, Hundred, etc. I do all my workouts on my bed (bad, I know!). I integrate my practice with other routines, including yoga, ballet and walking. The benefits are that for my age, I think I'm in pretty good shape."

THE FULL MAKEOVER: In 1962, Diane Cohen was overweight, a smoker and a new mother when her then-neighbor, Ilana Adler, said to her, "You're in

terrible condition. I have to bring you to Pilates!" Though Cohen had no idea what Pilates was, she agreed to go.

An inauspicious start: "At my first session, Joe, bare-chested and wearing a bathing suit, made me lie down on the mat. Then he straddled me and said, 'Alright, sit up!' but I couldn't do it! He screamed at me, 'You made garbage of your body!' I started to cry. I was mortified!"

Persistence pays off: "Even after Joe yelled at me, I stuck with it and went twice a week. I stopped smoking because it was too hard to do all of that inhaling and exhaling [when I smoked]. I really started to love it!"

The beautiful people: "There were such beautiful people there: dancers, Candice Bergen. Joe and Clara were lovely people to work with. Clara was very quiet. There was a real strength in her. She didn't hesitate to correct you, but she was not outgoing like Joe. She was more like a steel hand in a velvet glove."

The profit motive: "They wanted you to do it for your benefit, not just go through the motions. There was so much focus—you forgot what was bothering you! I would walk out exhilarated both emotionally and physically."

Comedy central: "Joseph was very funny! Do you know why he gave the Elephant its name? Because as we women age, he said our thighs look like elephant skin!"

Left to his own vices: "I can still see Joe in his tiny bathing suit smoking. He often smelled of bourbon even early in the morning."

Before his time: "Joe was an absolute genius, who unfortunately was unrecognized while he was still alive. His equipment was so inventive and so different than what other people used. He knew about the connective-ness of the body at a time when people in this country were hardly aware of the importance of fitness."

A major inspiration: "He was one of my great teachers. I grew, matured and got myself together at the studio."

Still in practice: "I still do Pilates in Florida and in New York. It feels so great. You come out feeling like you're walking on air!" **PS**

Shari Berkowitz is a Pilates Teacher of Teachers living in NYC and teaching all over the world. Her company, The Vertical Workshop, is dedicated to sharing information and teaching skills to help continue the education of other Pilates teachers. Shari writes the very popular Pilates Teacher Blog, which can be found at www.TheVerticalWorkshop.wordpress.com