

# Pilates Saved My Life

When JoAnn Smith, 65, suffered an unimaginable loss, Pilates provided a lifeline.

by JoAnn Smith, as told to Beth Johnson

I GREW UP IN PATERSON, NJ, BUT AFTER COLLEGE I MOVED TO OMAHA, NE, FOR A TEACHING JOB. I've been here ever since. I taught special ed, married my husband John, gained two stepchildren and raised our two kids, Brian and Molly. After 15 years of teaching, I decided to switch careers and started working for a large hotel chain, first as a sales rep, and later in its group commissions department, where I still work.

One constant in my life has been that, in addition to whatever job I've had, I've always taught fitness. Right out of college, I taught at Elaine Powers. Then it was water aerobics for the Arthritis Foundation, and later I taught folks with muscular dystrophy at the College of St. Mary. Exercise has always been how I centered myself and cleared my mind. I'd go stir-crazy if I couldn't move.

## DISCOVERING PILATES

In 2002, I did something to my back, and it just kept getting worse and worse. I felt enormous pain down the side of my leg. I was finally sent for an MRI, and the doctor told me I had the spine of an 80-year-old—even though I was only 45! I remember he said that some people just age differently and that I may never walk normally again. There was no way I was going to accept that!

Within a week, both my physical therapist and my physician's assistant recommended Pilates to relieve my back pain. Clearly it was something I had to try. After one mat class at the local Y, I was hooked. I was intrigued by the deliberate

movements instead of my usual flailing about trying to burn calories. I started going twice a week, and my back pain improved with every class. Within a year, after taking a weekend certification class, I became a mat teacher at the Y. It was the perfect balance to work and family, and it even helped get me through the empty-nest sadness when the kids headed off to college.

## AN EVENING TO REMEMBER

About 10 years ago, in March 2008, our son Brian came home for the weekend from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where he was a junior studying wildlife management. He was about to take an ecology trip to Puerto Rico with some classmates. I remember it was a Saturday night, and before he went out for the evening, he asked me to show him some Pilates moves for his abs.

He and his girlfriend had taken some Pilates classes at school, and he was surprised at how hard they were. I had a mat and a few accessories in the basement, so I showed him a whole bunch of core exercises. He then showed me some of the crazy things that he liked doing with dumbbells while jumping on and off the mat. It was so much fun to share our fitness routines and impress each other.

## A CALL AT NIGHT

A few days later, he headed off on his trip. On his first day there, I missed a call from him by a minute. When I tried to call him back, his phone was busy because he was talking to his sister. She told me he was going to call me back at 10:30 that



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night. I kept waiting, but never heard from him. I figured, "He's with friends on a Saturday night in Puerto Rico. Why would he call his mom?" So I went to bed.

Two hours later the phone rang. "Are you Brian Smith's mother?" "Yes." "Is he in Puerto Rico with the University of Nebraska-Lincoln?" "Yes! Yes!"—by this time I'm yelling—"What's wrong?? What happened??" "I'm so sorry to tell you this—your son collapsed and he didn't make it." Brian had died of cardiac arrest at 20 years old. We had no idea that he had a lifelong heart condition.

## TRYING TO OUTPACE GRIEF

To say we were devastated barely scratches the surface. In

the midst of our unbearable heartbreak, we had to deal with the many rules and regulations that delayed the return of his body. On the night he finally came home, on Holy Thursday, I headed out the door. I had to move. I walked a mile super-fast, without stopping.

*This is how I'm going to get through this, I thought. Movement. Action.* I knew that if things were reversed, my son would be out jogging to get over his grief. But initially, John and I were so overwhelmed that we just cried all the time. It was about getting through the next hour.

## BREATHE IN, BREATHE OUT

Everyone is different when it comes to dealing with grief. It

LEFT TO RIGHT: TK TK TK  
TK TK TK TK TK







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## WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO WHOLE HOG

**MEAT MAY BE BACK ON THE MENU, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU SHOULD ESCHEW YOUR SALADS AND GRAIN BOWLS FOR BURGERS, BACON AND STEAK.** For one thing, studies have shown that vegetarians generally eat fewer calories, weigh less and have a lower risk of cardiovascular disease than carnivores. Even if you don't go cold turkey on meat, eating less of it is associated with a reduced risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes and some types of cancer, according to the U.S. government's Dietary Guidelines for Americans.

While paleo fans and barbecue buffs may disagree, the mainstream American Heart Association recommends consuming no more than six ounces of lean meat, poultry and seafood per day. The Dietary Guidelines for Americans suggests shifting from eating meat, poultry and eggs (which men and teen boys in particular consume in excess), to adding more seafood and plant sources like the ones here. Note: Quinoa, soy and hemp are complete proteins, containing all the essential amino acids.

**EDAMAME** One cup contains 17 grams of protein—about the same as  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup cottage cheese.

**TOFU** One-half cup of this bean-curd food contains 10 grams of protein—about the same as a serving of Greek yogurt.

**QUINOA** One cup contains 8.14 grams of protein—about the same as a large piece of beef jerky.

**BEANS** One cup contains 16 grams of protein—about the same as two slices of Swiss cheese. But note: Green beans have far less protein than other legumes—just 1.8 grams per cup.

**GREEN PEAS** One cup contains 7.9 grams of protein—about the same as a cup of milk.

**HEMP SEEDS** Two tablespoons contain about 7 grams of protein—about the same as two pieces of smoked salmon. Tip: Sprinkle hemp hearts on cereal, salad or smoothies.

**NUTS** One ounce (24 almonds, 18 cashews or 14 walnut halves) contains 4 to 9 grams of protein—about the same as an extra-large egg.

**NUT BUTTER** Two tablespoons contain 8 grams of protein—about the same as a shrimp.

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So I contacted the owners of the Pilates Center of Omaha, Wendy Andersen and Ashlee Richardson, and they were so welcoming. As I progressed through the classes and certifications, they were always offering me opportunities with various instructors and encouraging me. I don't think anyone knew how damaged I felt. Working hard at learning Pilates in a new way fueled me and helped soothe my near-constant anxiety. In 2011, I finished the Stott Pilates Comprehensive training program.

When Wendy and Ashlee asked me to teach classes at the Pilates Center of Omaha, I was thrilled to make the transition from student to teacher. It was life-affirming for me to see clients coming in stressed and then see them leaving relaxed.

### A ROOM OF MY OWN

Then three years ago (and five after Brian's death), my husband John and I crossed another hurdle. There was a room in the basement that had been Brian's high-school-band practice space, where he practiced drums. After years of not being able to face it, we finally cleared it out and turned it into a Pilates studio for me. So now I have a Tower wall unit, a Reformer, weights and my various Pilates props all in one place. I can work out whenever I want. It keeps me sane.

As the years pass, John and I are better able to remember our many happy times with Brian. We also started kayaking together again—something John and Brian loved doing together. Pilates has even helped me with that: Before I had a consistent Pilates Reformer practice, I needed a helping hand to stand up and get out of the boat. Now that I have strong glutes and hamstrings, I can get back on land all by myself! I also have the muscle strength and endurance to paddle a lot longer without getting tired.

### LEARNING FROM MY GRIEF

I firmly believe that engaging in purposeful movement, such as Pilates, can provide a way through grief. I believe in this so strongly that last year at the Pilates Center, we offered a six-week class for mothers and grandmothers who are living with the loss of a child. Currently I'm teaching a Reformer class for moms who have a child affected by autism. I think my life journey makes me a good fit to teach this special group of women as well. It means so much to me that I can help others in some small way.

I want people to take inspiration from me if they can, because we will all experience the loss of a loved one at some point. It's taken 10 years, and some days it's still brutal. But I know that Pilates enables me to be present and joyful with our children and four grandchildren. Every time I teach a Pilates class, my life is brightened and I know that Brian is proud of me. That is an incredible gift. **PS**