

solid good

this 30-year pilates veteran has trained with the superstars—and now she's one of them

BY DEIRDRE SHEVLIN BELL

Phoebe Higgins has inspired thousands of students to embrace the work of Joseph Pilates and is highly respected throughout the Pilates world—but you'd never hear those words from her. Her modesty and understated demeanor make it easy to overlook her accomplishments, yet take a session with Higgins and you'll learn to experience the practice, and your body, in a profound and authentic way.

"There's so much pretension in Pilates, but Phoebe has none of it," comments Nicole Dooley Collet, who tested under Higgins and at whose Brooklyn studio, the Pilates Boutique, Higgins teaches continuing-education courses. "She makes you relaxed and comfortable and puts you at ease immediately. You know you're in good hands."

As a 10-year-old in the late '60s, Higgins studied ballet with Romana Kryzanowska at Manhattan's YWCA. So when, in 1976 as an undergraduate at SUNY Purchase, Higgins discovered that her beloved teacher was offering Pilates classes, she jumped at the chance to take them. That was the

Higgins with training partner and good pal Peter Roël



beginning of Higgins's 30-year Pilates career, during which she helped run the Pilates Studio, where Romana taught for years; took over the Pilates program at SUNY Purchase; worked with Howard Sichel, DC, to start up Power Pilates (an organization that now has teacher-training and continuing-education programs worldwide); and headed up the Pilates

classes at the School of American Ballet.

During her expansive career, Higgins has ridden through all of Pilates' ups and downs. Her focus on the core of Pilates, as she learned it from Romana, has steadied her and kept her passionate throughout it all. "Her greatest contributions to the work are history, longevity, integrity and tolerance," explains Peter

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Roël, owner of New York's Pilates Shop/Yoga Garage, who has worked with Higgins for more than two decades. "When you bring them together under one roof, it becomes very individual, very tolerant, but never swaying from how she knows that Pilates needs to be."

"Phoebe's humanity is one of her biggest assets," Roël continues. "It's how she teaches, how she comes across with clients and professionals—always with the underlying integrity of how she got to know Pilates. She stays very grounded, very real."

It's through her work that Higgins comes alive. "I had known Phoebe for years, and I always thought of her as being so unassuming and shy," Dooley Collet recalls. "But then I took this workshop with her and she was so vibrant, alive, goofy, silly—yet such a strong teacher—that I just wanted to do more with her. I've taken so many continuing-education workshops, and with Phoebe it's like a breath of fresh air."

Pilates Style: How did you become interested in Pilates?

Phoebe: Growing up in Manhattan, I studied at both the School of American Ballet and the American Ballet Theater School. I studied ballet with Romana at the age of 10 at the YWCA, as the one child in an adult beginner class. Then, in college, a ballet teacher suggested Pilates because of my spinal curvature, to help me get stronger. I wish I'd heard about it earlier, when I was told to repeat a year of ballet because my back was weak!

After you stopped studying ballet with Romana, did you stay in touch?

I hadn't been in touch with her, but when I got to SUNY Purchase, I saw her name on the class roster and signed up for her class—they didn't call it Pilates; they called it, Body Correctives. The day after taking my first mat class with her, I couldn't get out of bed—and I couldn't laugh, either. At 18 years old I thought that was the greatest thing. The

class met once a week. It was a requirement for the dance division, and although I was an art-history major, I got special permission to take it.

What was the space like?

There was one room with many gym mats and another room with two Reformers, a Cadillac, a High Chair, a Guillotine and two traditional Pilates mats, if I'm remembering correctly. We'd do a half-hour mat class and then go into the room with the equipment. You'd do one or two exercises if you were lucky, because there were so many students in there.

Do you note any similarities between how Romana taught ballet and Pilates?

Her energy is the same, of course. She does a very traditional Russian barre, and when we would come to center we'd do all kinds of mechanical stuff that seemed silly but would really help, like learning how to skip and hop and fall, and that's where the Pilates influence was—Joseph Pilates was a gymnast, and we learned all that crazy stuff. It was just such fun. Romana's energy is always contagious.

How did you stay involved in Pilates after graduating?

After graduating I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, so I wrote to Romana and asked if I could teach with her at the Pilates Studio. She had me volunteer for the first week—which was supposed to be indefinite—but after a week she said, "I have to pay you." I was very shy, and at first she let me do desk work. As I got more comfortable she'd say, "OK, teach that person the mat; teach that person the Reformer."

That sounds like a very different method of teacher training than we're used to now.

I think modern training programs are great, but for me it helped having Romana there with me as I was beginning to teach. It was much more nurtur-



Being goofy with her father, brother Bo, and sister Liz, circa 1966

ing, which is what I needed at the time. She gave me a very sweet first client, and she was great about not making it more uncomfortable than it needed to be. She kept an eye on me, but I felt she was watching me to help me.

You then went on to run the program at SUNY Purchase. How did that come about?

The Purchase program had shut down—I'm not sure why—but Steve Giordano, who was an undergraduate



With one of her favorite teachers, Kathy Grant

there and was also studying Pilates at Romana's studio in Manhattan, wanted Romana to start it up again. But she was really busy at the time, so she sent Steve and me to talk with Carol Walker, who was dean of dance. Carol was not really familiar with Pilates, but we explained it to her, and Steve said he'd fix the equipment himself, which would cut costs. After she checked more thoroughly into the method and talked to Romana, she was gung-ho. So we started the program with me going up there twice a week and working with all the dance majors. It quickly became popular, and soon faculty from the dance division and students from other divisions were coming to classes. I did that for three or four years, and then several of the other teachers from the Pilates Studio took over. During that time I was still teaching at the Pilates Studio. I stayed there until it closed, on April 1, 1989.

What was it like for you when the Pilates Studio closed?

I heard about it in the middle of the night. I'd been there Friday morning, and I got a call at 2 in the morning saying they were moving the studio due to some issues with the building management. I later found out that we owed months in back rent and the marshalls were coming to close the place. We were all kind of in limbo for a while. I

had helped Wee Tai Hom move one of the Reformers into the office of Howard Sichel, a chiropractor who had been a Pilates client and had an office in the next building. We also moved some pieces into an aerobics studio and some into Drago's, which is now True Pilates New York [on West 57th Street]. All the teachers waited a few weeks while Wee Tai was working everything out, and then fortunately Dr.

Sichel called me and said he wanted my help starting a program with his clients.

So you started teaching in a chiropractic office?

Yes. At first I taught in his 10-by-10 office. Once people found out I was teaching there, the program built up quickly and we had to move out of that room. It was a good experience because it showed me how much can be accomplished in a very small space. Nobody complained. I taught that way until we moved to a bigger studio on 57th Street, in '91 or '92. It worked really well, and I was lucky in that Romana was so close by that I could go over to her when I had questions—especially when I had just a Reformer, and Romana would say, "Here's how you can do the repertoire without the Cadillac." I really learned how to adapt exercises from one piece of equipment to another or even to no equipment.

How did you get into teacher training?

Simple: We needed qualified teachers. I found a few through Romana, and I had a few younger clients who were interested in learning how to teach, so I sent them to her. By that time Howard had opened another studio at 19th Street. We connected with PhysicalMind Institute and worked on getting a training program set up just out of necessity.

That was around 1992. We started doing curriculum through them, but Susan Moran (whom I had taught at SUNY Purchase and who worked with me at PhysicalMind) and I were very classically trained, and PhysicalMind was trying things that just weren't working with what we wanted. We started going back, using training-program guidelines that we had developed over the years, but putting exercises in the more classical vocabulary that we believed in. Then, too, we started actually adding in teaching components to help people teach, which is when Peter Roël became part of the teaching program, in maybe 1993. Then, a little later, maybe '94 or '95, Bob Liekens left the Pilates Studio, and I asked him to come work with us at Power Pilates to help make us even clearer and more classically based in our teaching.

Who was your typical teacher trainee?

It was a mixed bag—oftentimes clients ready for a career transition, a lot of dancers. As Pilates got more popular in gyms, the fitness instructors wanted to teach it. The first class was small—only five people. Susan and I were both a little nervous that it wouldn't take off. But the next one was 10 or 15, and then we had to start limiting it—if you get more than 15 people, they don't get enough one-on-one supervision.

How long were you affiliated with Power Pilates? How did the program grow?

What started as Dr. Sichel's small Pilates program, which I started solo in April 1989, eventually became Power Pilates. Before I left in September 2007, it had grown to include six large studios around New York, four in Equinox Fitness Centers, and a number of affiliate studios around the world. The growth was fueled by our enthusiasm for classical Pilates. We didn't necessarily want to make the program larger, but,

as was the case with Equinox, people would see our work and want to incorporate it. We developed our teacher-training program out of necessity: We needed classically trained teachers but couldn't find them.

Why did you move on?

Most of it was for me—my father has Alzheimer's, and at that time he was still living at home but becoming more forgetful. I wanted to be around him more. Also, Power Pilates got too large for me. I'm a little old-fashioned; I like a smaller, more intimate teaching environment.

What have you been doing since you left?

While working with Power Pilates I also started up a Pilates program at the School of American Ballet. I kept teaching there after leaving Power Pilates, working with boys and girls ages 12 to about 19. It's fun having a different clientele. I danced when I was younger, but it's very different working with children who are geared toward a professional career, because they have to keep increasing their range of motion while gaining strength.

It's great working with them, but I started missing my regular clients. Then Peter Roël decided he wanted his own studio, and he's up in my neighborhood. I started there, at Pilates Shop/Yoga Garage, about a year and a half ago. I'm at his studio two mornings a week, and the program at the School of American Ballet has broadened, so I'm there five days a week in the afternoon. Then last year I was asked by Romana and her daughter Sari Mejia Santo and granddaughter Daria Pace to reconnect with Romana's Pilates, which is an amazing honor. I'm teaching a couple of hours a week at True Pilates and hoping someday to be part of their teacher-training program.

How would you describe your teaching philosophy?

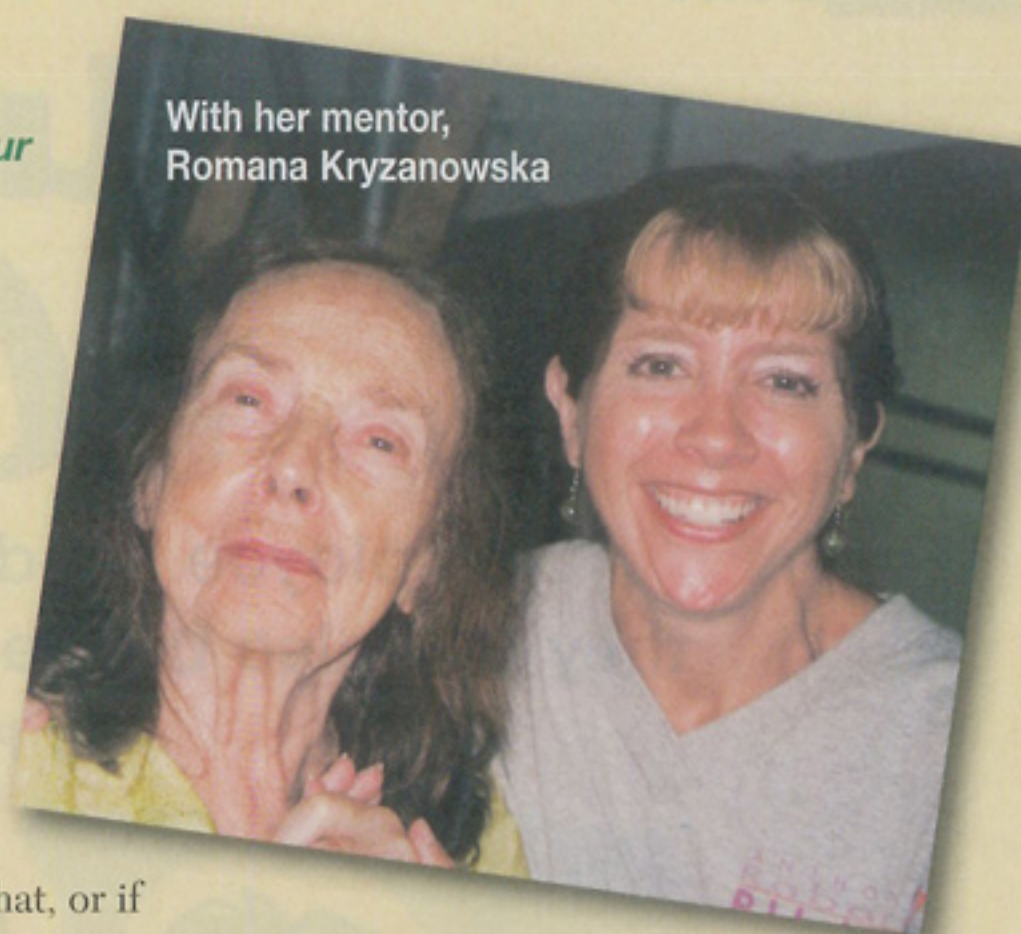
To me Pilates is about the individual. I have scoliosis, so the way I was able to do exercises was not the way everyone else does them, and some of them I couldn't even do when I started. So I look at each person's body and, using a traditional vocabulary, I determine how to maximize their desires. If they want a physical change, I'll help with that, or if it's an injury or pain, I'll try to get inside the body and find a way to help the client recover. That's the fun of teaching after all these years. Some people get bored with it, but that's just because they're not looking at what's in front of them. Every body is unique; just figuring out the puzzle—or trying to—is where the fun of teaching lies.

Where do you see yourself going from here?

Peter and I are talking about starting up teacher training, because what I find lacking is that although teachers know the exercises, they don't always look at the bodies in front of them, and they don't have an intent of what they want from the Pilates method. For now we're teaching workshops to teachers to help them start integrating this intention into their work. I'm also discovering what my place with Romana's Pilates is and/or will be. I feel like I've come home in a sense, as that's where my love of Pilates started. Plus, I'd love to expand the Pilates program at the School of American Ballet. The room we're currently in is small but much used, and I would love to have more space, as well as teach more mat classes each week to the students.

What do you think about the changes you've seen in Pilates?

I don't know. In the past few years I've



With her mentor,
Romana Kryzanowska

seen people coming back to traditional exercise, which is heartwarming. What I find in my own body and what students tell me is that after they finish a traditional class, they feel energized and good. But whenever I've tried a different order or different interpretations, they don't get that kind of feeling. Even after all this time I'm still discovering what a genius Pilates was—the way the body warms up and cools down, bent legs to straight, smaller range of movement to larger, never staying with one group of muscles but incorporating the entire body systematically. Joseph Pilates' work is absolutely inspiring! I still get sore—not the way I did with Romana's first class, but I still get sore.

Where do you find your inspiration?

All the older teachers are amazing—all the "elders," as they are called, but especially Romana. The core of their work is still very traditional for the most part. And you watch Romana or Kathy Grant teach and they still have such amazing energy and enthusiasm for their work. It's interesting to see that after 50 or more years, they're still inspired by it and discovering within it. I think it's really neat—we've all got hope.

Deirdre Shevlin Bell is a senior editor of 'Pilates Style.'