

PILATES POWER

Lesly Levy taught aerobics, Spinning and yoga before discovering that Pilates combined them all in one neat little package.

by Anne Marie O'Connor

PILATES STYLE Tell us about your childhood.

LESLY LEVY I was born in Chicago in 1960, then moved to the south suburbs in 1968. Right before my senior year in high school, my father was transferred to Boston. I went to the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where I studied English, communications and French. I met my future husband Alan during my first semester, and we were engaged by our last semester.

PS How did you get into fitness?

LESLY Soon after graduating college, I moved to New York City to be with my fiancé. I worked as a media buyer at Young and Rubicam advertising, where like me, everyone smoked. I quit smoking on my wedding day (after 10 long years) and gained 16 pounds within two months. That's when I joined the Brooklyn Queens Racquet Club.

In 1986, Alan and I decided we wanted to start a family, so we bought our first home in Westchester. Our daughter was born in 1987, and our son in 1990. I became a stay-at-home mom, and got more and more into fitness. Immediately after we moved, I joined the Briarcliff Racquet Club. A year after I had my second child, I was working out in the weight room when a woman came up to me for guidance. Because I was not a trained professional, I did not feel comfortable helping her and referred her to a personal trainer who was on the floor. She told me that she would prefer to be trained by a woman more her age and suggested that I think about becoming a personal trainer. So I thought, *Why not?*, and in November 1992, I acquired my personal

trainer certification with ACE.

Soon thereafter, my friend Connie Borho opened her own small facility and asked me if I would start a kids' program there. I told her I needed more education first and embarked on my group exercise certification with ACE with a specialty in youth fitness, perinatal fitness and mind/body integration. I started teaching a kids' program and eventually taught low-impact aerobics, step, weight training, Spinning, yoga-based stretch and prenatal yoga classes at Connie's fitness center and at Club Fit (formerly Briarcliff Racquet Club).

About two years later, Connie closed her facility and went to work at a women-only gym in Bedford Hills and took me along for the ride. By 1995, I was teaching 15 hours a week at three local gyms.

PS How did you happen to first try Pilates?

LESLY Connie had just acquired her mat certification from PhysicalMind and suggested that I do the same. I followed suit a few months later. I think Connie knew that I would love it and I did. It was the combination of everything I was doing in one neat little package. In 1998, I completed my mat and apparatus certification with Liz Gilles of PhysicalMind. I immediately started turning all of my clients at the gym onto Pilates.

I suggested to the owner of the women-only gym that she give me a room to teach Pilates; she was reluctant but eventually agreed. From that small space grew a huge business. I eventually moved into a larger room and started interviewing more instructors.

PS How did you get involved with Power Pilates?

LESLY I was always on a search to deepen my knowledge about Pilates. I had become fascinated with the method and learning how the muscles worked functionally in coordination with each other. I love that the practice of the Pilates method stimulates multiple muscles to contract while allowing the stretch of the opposing muscles through precise, balanced and flowing movement. It's like creating organic poetry in motion with movement that goes as far as your strength will take you, and your stretch will simultaneously allow.

In 2001, a colleague suggested I take a workshop with Dana Eisenstein at Power Pilates. Soon after, I took another, with Bob Liekens. I loved his compassionate and kind, yet commanding, way of teaching and knew I had to study with him. I started taking semiprivates, then private lessons with him weekly, which continued for the next 10 years. He fine-tuned my understanding of the work and my skills in the art of teaching.

PS How did you come to open your own studio?

LESLY By this time, I was spending most of my days teaching only Pilates. Instead of building a studio at the women-only gym, I decided to open my own classical Pilates studio.

After spending many months looking for just the right location, I found a space in a strip mall in Mount



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Kisco, which I could design from the studs. Mindful Moves Pilates Center was an instant success. I was even written up in *Westchester Magazine* as one of the top Pilates trainers in the county.

PS How did you end up becoming a teacher trainer for Power Pilates?

LESLY At the same time that I was opening Mindful

Moves, I took Power Pilates' 12-day bridge-training program with Bob Liekens and Susan Moran (another exceptional instructor and then co-owner of Power Pilates).

Roughly a year later and five years into my career as a Pilates instructor, Dr. Howard Sichel (founder of Power Pilates) and Bob asked me to come on board as a teacher trainer. Five years after that, I became a senior teacher trainer.

PS Why did you close your studio?

LESLY I honestly had no intention of closing it. I loved my studio—students and teachers. But in May 2009, Howard and Susan sold Power Pilates to Jon Prusmack.

Jon had built a Pilates studio in White Plains called Apogee, and also bought the women-only gym in Bedford Hills. He decided if he owned a certification program, he could ensure consistency in his studios, which would help build the Power/Apogee brand. Howard recommended that I become the Pilates director. I was intrigued and flattered by the offer.

ABOVE: LESLY ASSISTS A POWER PILATES CLIENT DAN STARER STRETCH HIS TIGHT HAMSTRINGS WITH SPINE STRETCH FORWARD.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: LESLY'S MURPHY-STYLE REFORMER CAN BE FOLDED INTO A CABINET; DOING TWISTED TEASER ON THE WUNDA CHAIR IN HER HOME STUDIO; DOING TEASER ON THE LONG BOX AT UPTOWN PILATES; TEACHER TRAINING IN SOUTH KOREA.

OPPOSITE PAGE: LESLY AND HER WHOLE FAMILY LOVE TO HIT THE SLOPES IN VERMONT.

My husband agreed that it was a good career opportunity, but did point out that if I kept my studio as well, there would be no time for us. (I was already working 60 hours a week.) I also didn't want to own a studio that competed with Apogee's two Westchester locations. So I closed Mindful Moves in November 2009 and became director of Pilates for Apogee in Westchester.

PS What were your responsibilities at Power Pilates?

LESLY Along with my administrative role (payroll, scheduling, etc.), I ran certifications in-house to retrain and continue to mentor the staff as well as helped create internships/apprenticeships to build our staff at both Westchester locations. I was also regional director of New England for Power Pilates and assumed the role of the group-exercise manager in White Plains when it began offering other types of fitness classes (TRX, rowing, etc.). I also presented twice at the PMA conference, represented Power Pilates at the ECA convention and taught certifications in South Korea.

PS How did you end up moving back to New York City?

LESLY By the time my three-year contract with Power Pilates ended, Howard and Bob were leaving

the company. Our children were grown, and I craved the energy of the city and wanted to live where I could walk to the store, ride my bike and frequent concerts and Broadway shows (another passion of mine). A year later, my husband finally agreed. In the summer of 2013, we sold our house and downsized to a lovely apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

PS Even though you live in a New York City apartment, you still manage to have a home Pilates' studio?

LESLY Yes! When we were moving, I told my husband, "All we're going to take is our living room furniture, our mattress and my Pilates studio." And he said, "We are not taking your Pilates studio to an apartment in Manhattan." Guess what we brought with us? All of the above.

PS How did you manage to fit a Pilates studio into your apartment?

LESLY Basil [Blecher, the late owner of Pilates by Basil] and a very good friend came to my apartment to figure out a way to make it happen. He worked with a cabinetmaker to create a closet that would house a Murphy-style Basil Reformer. Basil built a plate for one end of his full-size wooden Reformer, strapped down the carriage with bungee cords and

unhooked the springs. So when it's not in use, I'm able to tip the Reformer up on its wheels and put it in its closet. I also have a Basil Chair, and other Basil and Gratz apparatus, a Murphy bed and a desk. Our smallest room has become my office, guest bedroom and best of all, my Pilates haven.

PS Once you moved into the city, did you continue working at Apogee in Westchester?

LESLY No. I resigned, but the managing directors didn't want me to give up my managerial/leadership role. They offered me the role of studio manager at Power Pilates on Third Avenue in Manhattan. I did that while also maintaining my role as Pilates Director of the White Plains location. The lengthy commute to the East Side and the eventual closing of Apogee in White Plains forced me to again review why I had moved to Manhattan. So after 11 years of owning and managing, I went back to my roots and true passion—teaching full time!

PS What did you do next?

LESLY Right now, I'm a senior instructor at Uptown Pilates on West 72nd Street. I give them a set of hours during which I see Uptown clientele. The rest of the time, Uptown allows me to rent by the hour to teach my longstanding clientele from Westchester and Connecticut, other instructors, apprentices and direct referrals. It's a wonderful studio and very convenient—I can take the subway, walk or ride my bike there.

I am still a senior teacher trainer for Power Pilates (which has new owners and is no longer part of Apogee), and teach certifications and continuing education. I have written continuing education for them and starred in a dozen online videos; half are mat workouts for students of all levels (available at powerpilates.com) and the others are continuing education for instructors (available on leadersinfitness.com). I still travel to teach and am one of five members of the curriculum-development committee, which was selected by Power teacher trainers to develop and maintain the classical curriculum.

PS Tell us about your personal life.

LESLY My husband Alan is in the finance field, working for ICBC. He's also very active and practices Pilates—although on his own on our home Reformer (is anyone able to teach her spouse?). Our daughter Samantha, now 29, lives in Brooklyn and attends grad school at NYU. Our son Matthew is 26 and is the head brewer at Threes Brewery Pub, in Brooklyn. So we're all in the city, which is nice. My newest passion is my Maltese Gizmo.

We have been a skiing family since the kids were two and five. Nineteen years ago, we bought a beautiful townhouse across from Mount Snow, VT, which we use just about every weekend during the ski season. **PS**



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LESLY LEVY; DOG PHOTO BY AMY MILSTEIN



MY NEWEST PASSION IS MY MALTESE GIZMO.

FIVE MINUTES WITH LESLY LEVY

YOUR FAVORITE APPARATUS I like them all. Each piece is unique and brilliant. I work on the Reformer whenever I can. It stretches and strengthens you simultaneously like nothing else can.

HARDEST EXERCISE FOR YOU TO MASTER Swan Dive, because I have tight shoulders and tight chest muscles, and I don't have a lot of thoracic extension, so it makes it very challenging. I can do it, but it's not a huge "dive."

FAVORITE Teaser. I like it because I feel the challenge through my whole body.

WHO INSPIRES YOU AS TEACHER Bob Liekens. Even though I don't study with him anymore, in my heart, he's still my mentor. He masterfully teaches with kindness and understanding while still challenging his students to push their limits. Brett Howard and Cary Regan are also both amazing instructors who I hope to study with more in the future.

FAVORITE BRAND OF CLOTHING Lululemon and Juja. I like Juja's printed high-waisted pants—they don't roll down—and their netted tops.

MOST SATISFYING MOMENT AS A TEACHER When I taught my first beginner mat weekend and saw the progress the apprentices made in just three days. Knowing that I was part of their process literally brought me to tears! (It still does.)