

SHARE and LOVE U PRESENT: PILATES, HOW TO MOVE GRACEFULLY AND FUNCTIONALLY THROUGH YOUR LIFE GAINING STRENGTH, FLEXIBILITY and TONE. Thursday, June 21st, 7-9 p.m., at Unity Church in Charlottesville (UCIC), with DIANA BOWER, R.N.

story by Steve VeGodsky, D.C.

I breathe like Buddha and move like Frankenstein: the first assessment was not exactly glowing. Breathing like Buddha has a kind of New Age/spiritual ring to it, but as Pilates instructor Diana Bower pointed out, we don't have lungs in our abdomen. As apparently many other people were, I was taught in Yoga classes a long time ago to breathe fully and deeply, expanding both the chest and abdomen on the inhale and letting both fall on the exhale. Wrong, according to Joseph Pilates, the German-born founder of the Pilates technique that bears his name (which he had originally dubbed "Controlology").

"We don't want the belly to pooch out like Buddha when we breathe," Diana said. Patiently guiding me into "functional breathing", she explained that we should focus our attention on expanding the ribcage to its capacity in the chest, back and sides on the inhale, then using an "active" exhalation -- engaging the abdominal muscles and compressing the belly -- to force the air up and out of the lungs. Spinal stability is strengthened by maintaining this abdominal engagement throughout the breath, both inhale and exhale. Think about doing a mini-Kegel throughout the breath and you've got it.

After about a half hour of instruction, my brain and body finally clicked together and I experienced that "eureka" moment. It's an amazing sensation to learn a new way to breathe after all these years and I do feel like I'm getting more oxygen to my lungs... either that, or I'm getting just a little high from hyperventilating.

Frankenstein showed up when I tried to do the simplest of the Pilates exercises, basically a crunch. Let's see... Functionally breathing? Check. Pelvis in neutral position? Check. Shoulders back? Check. Scapulae down? Check. Engaging abdominal muscles? Check. Ready for lift off? Now put it all together in a flowing motion. Yeah, right. I really did feel like the newly-created monster first attempting to rise off the table. Diana worked with me for about 20 minutes while Frankenstein slowly evolved into Captain Crunch. My experience of Pilates is that the exercises and breathing are subtle and difficult to master, but the "eureka" moments eventually come and the results can be profound.

Pilates, the man, lived from 1880-1967. He was a skinny, sickly child who suffered from asthma, rickets and rheumatic fever. Motivated by wanting to overcome these conditions and inspired by his naturopath mother and his prize-winning gymnast father, he began a life journey toward fitness and health crowned by the development of the philosophy, principles and practice we now call Pilates. Pilates did overcome his health challenges and went on to lead a fascinating, action-packed life. In early adulthood he had stints as a professional

boxer, gymnast, skier and diver. Later he became a performing artist and devised a Greek statue act. Known as something of an eccentric health guru, Pilates was renowned for liking cigars, whiskey and women. Despite his excesses, photographs of this amazingly vital man depict a person who, well into his 80's, looked like a sculpted Greek statue with six-pack abs, running the streets of Manhattan in the dead of winter wearing nothing but his favorite bikini bottom training attire.

Ever inventive, Pilates devised ingenious equipment to assist in doing an exercise or making it more productive. Resembling medieval torture devices, with titles sounding like circus acts or therapy for wayward muscles, the "Trapeze", the "Ladder Barrel", the "Stability Chair" and the "Reformer" were glimpsed by me in Diana's studio, where she also employs small equipment such as foam rollers, flexbands, stability balls, small weights and wobble boards. "The body is the instrument and the equipment assists the body", she explained.

Diana's clients range in age from teenagers to people in their mid-80's. Because it's gentle and works the body as an integrated whole, Pilates is a generally safe and beneficial way to help restore musculoskeletal balance with very few contraindications. Additionally, since it tones the abdomen as well as most other muscles, it does make people more fit. That said, Pilates is not fully weight-bearing or aerobic, and individuals need to tailor their exercise programs accordingly.

Pilates is an excellent complement to chiropractic care or other forms of manipulative therapy in that it helps maintain and strengthen the balance restored by these techniques. Diana considers it an integral part of the sports medicine team approach, wherewith individuals utilize various medical and paramedical professionals to help manage physical problems. Conditions that do not respond favorably to care must be reassessed, and a thorough evaluation must be performed before undertaking any exercise rehabilitation program.

In her class on June 21st, Diana hopes to share fundamental principles of core stabilization -- control of the deep muscles of the abdomen and back -- with basic Pilates exercises that can, with practice, encourage better posture, relieve pain and improve flexibility, balance and muscle tone. Diana believes that movement and exercise are integral parts of healing and maintaining physical and emotional health and should be a fun and safe part of everyday life.

This class, as are all offerings of SHARE (Steve's Health Awareness Resource Exchange) and Love U, is open to the public and given on a donation basis. UCIC is located on Hydraulic Road, just north of Albemarle High School.