

Finding my Balance

After doctors removed a large tumor near her brain, Risa Sheppard was unable to walk or talk. Today, she's back running her teacher-training business, thanks in part to Pilates.

by Risa Sheppard

It was a sunny Saturday in March of 2006. I was meeting my longtime friend and client, Katherine, for lunch. As I stood outside the restaurant, my head was spinning. I was seeing stars and had difficulty standing up. I made it through part of lunch but then had to excuse myself, explaining, "I need to go home as I think I have food poisoning." (The fact that I had these symptoms before lunch should have been a clue!)

In fact, for the past three months, I had been feeling dizzy, had a pounding headache and had been throwing up almost daily.

I had been to my ear, nose and throat doctor with complaints of losing hearing in my right ear. "Oh, you just don't want to listen to your husband," he said. I went to my internist. "It's all in your head. Your mother complained of the same thing," he added.

As I drove down the Ventura Freeway after lunch, I started vomiting into a bag. Enough was enough. I needed an answer.

DEMAND FOR A DIAGNOSIS

I went back to the ENT doctor. "I want a picture," I insisted. I knew something was wrong and three months had already passed. Reluctantly the doctor sent me for an X-ray and an MRI that afternoon.

The following morning, he had an answer for me. "Risa, you have a benign tumor in your right ear. It's called an acoustic neuroma—it's a growth in your right inner ear that is pressing against your brain. You have to have it taken out or it will be fatal."

Acoustic neuroma is a noncancerous growth that develops on the eighth cranial nerve, which connects the inner ear with the brain. The nerve had two tasks: one is involved in transmitting sound; the other helps send balance information from the inner ear to the brain. When they get large enough to press on the brain stem or cerebellum, they can be deadly. Although the acoustic neuroma I had was large, the prognosis was good, but I would have loss of hearing in my right ear and loss of the balance nerve.

Despite the dire diagnosis, I actually felt better. An answer! We can fix it! A week later, I had surgery at St. Vincent's Hospital. I was told I would be up and about in five days.

UNEXPECTED COMPLICATIONS

After my initial surgery, I did not wake up. It turned out the area of the surgery was not draining. The surgeon explained to my husband and father, "If we don't put a drain in she may die." So I had to have a second surgery to put in a shunt.



Although the second operation, which took about four hours, was successful, I did not wake up for another day. It was touch and go for several days and I was in intensive care for two weeks. During this time, I was later told I had a tremendous headache and kept screaming, "I want to cut my head off!"

When I finally did awake, my head was bandaged, I had IVs coming out of my arms, and I didn't recognize anyone around me. I could barely talk or eat and needed assistance even drinking a glass of water.

LOST WEEKS

I do not recall a moment of this time. I do remember waking up one night and seeing my father sleeping on the floor next to me! He slept on the floor each night to make sure I had somebody I knew there in the mornings when I awoke. Having him there was a great comfort and somehow helped me feel safe.

My husband tells me he performed simple Pilates moves on my body, such as stretching my hamstrings, back, neck and shoulders. He knew how important it was since my body was so used to it. He made sure my back "stayed in alignment" by adjusting my hips so they lined up properly!

I don't remember seeing my staff at the hospital, but I know they came. My assistant at the time visited me daily and played Scrabble with me to help my brain synapses.

Eventually, I was moved out of the ICU and could start walking, but I had to have a belt around my waist to help hold me up. I was dizzy at first; however, as days went by, I became more stable. My five-day hospital stay ended up lasting for three and a half weeks! Worse yet, I had little control over my body, and for an active Pilates teacher, that was very hard to accept.

ALWAYS IN MOTION

I was born and raised in Los Angeles; my father was an editor at the *Los Angeles Examiner* and my mother was a "Donna Reed" type who was overprotective and nurturing. My mother always told me I could achieve anything I set my mind to and taught me to be honest, loving and forgiving of myself and others. Most importantly, she taught me to "rise above all things," words I would remember as I recovered.

Even as a child, I was very active—bike riding, tree climbing and swimming were my favorites. I also had the acting bug from a young age; I attended Hollywood High and then UCLA, graduating with a degree in Theatre Arts. At UCLA, I taught creative dramatics to autistic children. I

discovered I loved teaching and figured I could always be a therapeutic movement teacher if acting did not work out.

INTRODUCTION TO CONTROLOGY

A few years later, in the mid-1970s, I was "divinely" guided to a little-known movement teacher named Ron Fletcher, who ran the Ron Fletcher School of Body Contrology in Beverly Hills. Ron had studied with Joseph Pilates and Martha Graham in New York. After Joe died, Clara Pilates gave Ron her blessing to take the work of her late husband "out west." I fell in love with the work. I loved the feeling of "being a dancer without being a dancer." It answered my longing to use my body correctly.

I taught at Ron's studio for five years before embarking on my own. I took the work of the machine to the floor, combined it with Ron's floorwork and Joe's matwork and what I had learned from Jack LaLanne, dance masters and several physical therapists I knew. From that conglomerate of learning, I created The Sheppard Method, which I call "classic Pilates with a personal touch." For the next 20 years, I taught it to clients in their homes.

When Pilates started to get popular, a physical therapist/chiropractor named Fred Lerner at the Beverly Hills Orthopedic Back Institute hired me to teach his therapists this "brand new" way to exercise. They [the therapists] were not happy that a non-therapist was showing them another way to exercise. But soon, after I transferred my home clients to the orthopedic studio, we all started to learn from each other and we are friends and colleagues to this day.

My dream was to have my own studio; however, finances always kept me from "taking the plunge." When the Orthopedic Back Institute closed in 2003, I remember saying, "If not now, when?" So I opened my studio in West Los Angeles, CA.

NO TIME TO BE SICK

The studio was an instant success. I had to hire extra trainers to accommodate all the new clientele. I established a successful teacher-



training program. The summer of 2006 was going to be especially busy. A friend's wedding was coming up and there was another Sheppard Method certification in August. A lot of clients depended on me. I had no time to be sick.

But, as the saying goes, life happens when you're busy making other plans. So I scheduled the operation, thinking I'd be back in six weeks max.

But I wasn't even released from the hospital until five and a half weeks later, and was in no condition to even consider returning to the studio. I could barely sit up. I couldn't even bathe myself. I had no appetite and had lost so much weight I looked anorexic.

MIND POWER

Some people thought I would never work or be active again, but I refused to believe them. I was determined. My years of spiritual and mental practice gave me the skills to use my mind in a positive and healthy way to achieve the healing my body now craved. As Joseph Pilates said, "It is the mind which shapes the body."

A physical therapist and an occupational therapist helped me to learn to walk and talk again and to perform simple household chores. A speech therapist helped me regain my speech ability and word pronunciation.

My dear friend and 25-year Sheppard Method teacher Anne Grimaldo would also come to the house twice a week to perform Pilates moves with me. She had me do the Hundreds, modified Roll-Ups and simple Leg Lifts and stretched my lower back. I remember looking up at her one day and saying, "Gosh, we're great!"

Those simple moves and the care with which Anne instructed helped me feel psychologically and physically like there was a light at the end of the tunnel. Anne and my other teachers realized it would take discipline, gentleness and time to see me through. But see me through they did. I credit Pilates for my physical and mental recovery, knowing it accelerated the healing process and allowed me to get back to work full time faster than the doctors had anticipated.

After about three months, I was able to stand up in the shower without my husband holding me up, stay up past 6 p.m. and perform everyday tasks with greater ease. But it was slow. And I missed work, missed the studio and missed my clients and teachers.



BACK TO WORK

One day, a long-term client of mine called and said, "I miss you and Pilates. I don't care what you do, just sit there and tell me what to do." So I did. I went to the studio and sat next to her, telling her to "use the blue spring, take off the red spring" and watched as she performed the leg and footwork and other moves. I was back. Sort of.

A week later, I decided to try the Reformer for the first time since my surgery, using one spring only. The next time I graduated to two. At first I could only work for five minutes, then 10. Soon I got it up to a half hour. I would start with just the leg and footwork on the Reformer, then move to modified abdominals. I remember how good the Short Spine felt to me, how good it was to stretch. Whenever I was able to perform a new move, I felt as though I had won a million dollars.

AN UNEXPECTED SETBACK

The challenge came when I went back to teaching, about four months after surgery. I started with one client a day, though I was used to teaching up to 10 in a day. Then I decided to do two. Unfortunately, I couldn't make it through the second session. I started to cry. Irv, my wonderful client, couldn't have been more understanding. Gradually, though, over the next three months, I was able to increase my clientele from one or two a day, up to four and five by the next month. It wasn't until January 2007, six months later, that I felt able to take on a full schedule of clients.

I would say it took me a good two years to fully regain my strength. I am so grateful to my wonderful teachers, my fabulous family and



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SHEPPARD PICTURED HERE WITH PILATES INSTRUCTOR RINI STARKEY (LEFT) AND JANINE DEZARN, CO-DIRECTOR OF THE SHEPPARD METHOD CERTIFICATION PILATES PROGRAM (RIGHT); SHEPPARD HAS REGAINED HER ABILITY TO WORK ON ALL APPARATUSES; STRETCHING OUT THE TEACHER IS STARKEY.

FROM TOP: SHEPPARD WITH HER STROKE PATIENT KATHERINE WOLF; SHEPPARD GETTING BACK TO WORK IN THE STUDIO.

