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# I DON'T LOOK LIKE A PILATES TEACHER

Though many people conjure an image of a petite, slim, (often) blonde woman, these method instructors have successfully defied the clichés.

Clients tend to expect professional instructors to embody the youthful, lean, strong body image thought to be synonymous with the method. But when a teacher doesn't look like the stereotype—like, say Joseph Pilates himself—misunderstandings can occur.

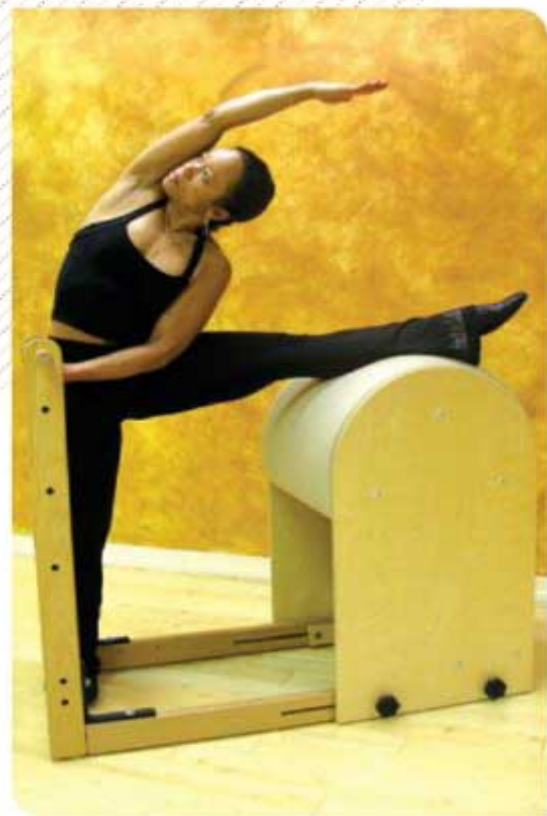
These four teachers prove that talented instructors come in all ages, shapes and sizes; from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds; and with or without tattoos and piercings. They also exemplify how a more diverse Pilates industry is beneficial for the future of the method.

## THE WOMAN OF COLOR

**GINA JACKSON**, owner and teacher at Pilates4Fitness Movement Space in Guttenberg, NJ

**HOW I CAME TO PILATES:** In 2001, I left a position as vice president of a media company after the dot.com bubble burst to build a business as a personal fitness trainer. I came to Pilates after winning first place in a bodybuilding competition in 2002, at age 45.

I knew throwing weights around would not be sustainable for the long term. I wanted an alternative training method, both for me personally and to complement my personal training business.



by Anne Marie O'Connor

**GETTING CERTIFIED:** Despite never having taken a Pilates class, I signed up for the Power Pilates mat certification program taught by Susan Moran and Juliet Harvey in November 2002. I couldn't do a Roll-Up or a Teaser, my body was as tight as a drum, and I tried to "muscle" through the moves. Susan flunked me and in that one act, she and Pilates had all my respect.

I couldn't back out because I had already paid for the program, so I started training privately with Juliet, who grounded me with her strong, classical teaching style. I finished the mat certification in 2003 and completed the Power Pilates' Systems Teaching Certification in 2006.

**CAREER:** I taught mat classes in a rented space for several years and privates in my apartment. In 2010, I signed a lease for a commercial space. I am extremely proud of the community I have built and that has followed me as I have expanded.

**WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING A "NON-TRADITIONAL" TEACHER:** Students generally come to the studio to learn Pilates, to heal or to strengthen their bodies. They see me as a teacher who happens to be a woman of color with a curvaceous body and curly, frizzy hair. I am not plus-size, but would never be characterized as



a “string bean.” I have a black woman’s derriere that is atypical of most “traditional” Pilates teachers, but I believe that is just because there are so few women of color in the industry.

I teach others with the same curvaceous bottoms how to find a much deeper abdominal scoop and pelvic “tucking under” than may be necessary for the “flat” bottoms in the room. My mat classes always have a giggle or two about the need to “get up and over the boobs” and to “scoop in and scoot under the butts.” One Asian-American client even asked, “If I sign up for 10 more sessions, will Pilates Side-Kicks help me shape my butt like yours?”

I am delighted with the depth of diversity at my studio, which like my community, includes many ethnic groups. I know as a woman of color that my presence as a teacher and studio owner may open the door to a wider audience. The people I work with remain open to the differences between each body. That’s the beauty of the Pilates methodology.

**ADVICE FOR OTHER TEACHERS:** Find a way to align yourself with the best classically trained teachers. I have been blessed to have studied with Brett Howard, Alycea Ungaro, Blossom Leilani-Crawford, Bob Liekens and Susan Moran. If that’s not possible, supplement your work with the videos on Pilates Anytime, in particular its Pilates Legacy Project, and Pilatesology.

## THE STOCKY GUY WITH TATTOOS AND PIERCINGS

**JAMES CRADER**, owner and teacher at Evolved Body in Sacramento, CA

**HOW I CAME TO PILATES:** I was teaching yoga and working as a Thai massage therapist, plus I was bartending to make a living. I kept hearing about this mat Pilates class at a local boxing gym that a lot of my (guy) friends were loving. I checked it out and loved the work.

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**GETTING CERTIFIED:** I took the Bender Method training in 2006 and enrolled in Balanced Body’s comprehensive training the next year. I’ve also studied with numerous contemporary and classical lineages, and completed Lolita San Miguel’s Mentorship Program in 2010.

**CAREER:** As soon as I finished training, I started working all over, driving 450 miles a week to various boxing gyms, dance and Pilates studios and even a chiropractic clinic. I opened my own studio in 2010 and have a variety of students. I remember one class when the five students ranged in age from late 20s to early 70s, one of whom had full body and face tattoos. At that moment, I was struck by the idea that “Pilates really is for everybody.”

**WHAT IT’S LIKE BEING A “NON-TRADITIONAL” TEACHER:** I’ve heard some funny comments from my peers more so than my clients. I have huge legs, so I’m often asked if I play rugby. (Nope.) Or they’ll assume I come from a physical therapy background because I don’t have a dancer’s physique. I guess it’s just hard to place a guy who has never been a professional dancer or physical therapist in the Pilates world. Then add in the tattoos and piercings.

I have heard from clients how refreshing it is to have a “real” person teaching a fitness class. I didn’t take it as derogatory, but rather that my students were seeing something familiar in me, which made me and my class more approachable.

My favorite story ever is from a number of years ago, when I was hired for a Pilates marketing campaign. But when the pictures came out, they had photoshopped out my arm tattoo, but had put my elbow on backward! The industry has vastly changed since then, though. This past year, the same company had me back for a shoot, along with other tattooed and pierced brothers and sisters. Progress!

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** GINA JACKSON, WHO FIRST TURNED TO PILATES TO LENGTHEN HER MUSCLES, DOES A STRETCH ON THE LADDER BARREL.

**THIS PAGE, TOP TO BOTTOM:** JAMES CRADER’S TATTOOS WERE ONCE PHOTOSHOPPED OUT OF AN IMAGE SHOT FOR A PILATES MARKETING CAMPAIGN; JACKSON SAYS SHE TEACHES CLIENTS WITH THE SAME CURVACEOUS BOTTOMS HOW TO DO A DEEPER PELVIC TUCK.







**ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT:** CRADER APPEARED IN A PILATES ANYTIME VIDEO WITH BLOSSOM LEILANI CRAWFORD, WITH WHOM HE HAS TAKEN CONTINUING-EDUCATION WORKSHOPS; BARBARA PLACE, WHO STUDIED WITH ROMANA KRYZANOWSKA, SAYS THAT "WHATEVER MY WEIGHT, AGE, LOOKS OR SIZES, I AM THE SAME DEDICATED, CARING PERSON INSIDE."

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** NAOMI RAYMAN JOKES THAT SHE HAD SPORTS BRAS OLDER THAN SOME OF THE PEOPLE IN HER TEACHER-TRAINING CLASS.

**ADVICE FOR OTHER TEACHERS:** We see industry models and celebrities who maybe don't look like us, and it's easy to assume other people are noticing the same differences about us. But if you're true to what you're doing and take the time to become good at it, your clients really could care less if yesterday you were a man and today you're a woman. (To be fair, they might notice that.) Your clients just want to feel and move better. To the peers who criticize us, that's cool; we'll just be over here racking up client hours.

## THE CURVY WOMAN

**BARBARA PLACE**, owner of Spirit Studios in Sparta, NJ

**HOW I CAME TO PILATES:** I was raising my two kids alone and working full time as a general manager of a fitness center. I was managing 60 people and wanted a change. Teaching was my passion—inspiring others and healing pain was my gift. I was determined to make a difference in my life and in others.

**GETTING CERTIFIED:** I studied under Romana Kryzanowska at Drago's Gym in New York City starting in 1997. I first took the requisite 70 private sessions and then did the teacher-training course. I got certified in 2003.

**CAREER:** Being a single mom, I have always worked at least two jobs. After I finished training, I took out an equity loan and purchased all the Gratz apparatus for a home studio, where I teach Pilates and give Reiki and restorative yoga therapy. For 10 years, starting in 2005, I was also the Pilates director at a high-end health club in New Jersey. Today, I also work part time at local studios, including Six Degrees Pilates in Boonton and Bodies in Balance in Madison.



**I OFFER MY CLIENTS A REALISTIC, HEALTHY, HAPPY MIND-SET. OUR CULTURE IS RIDICULOUS WITH THE IMAGES AND EXPECTATIONS PLACED ON WOMEN.**

**WHAT IT'S LIKE BEING A "NON-TRADITIONAL" TEACHER:**

I've been focused on body image since I was a little girl. My Aunt Agnes was a 6'3" spinster. I felt she was frowned upon, and it was an insult to look like her. When I was in my 20s, I was 5'8" and 125 pounds. Looking back, I realize I was far from fat. I was fat inside my head, though. At my heaviest, I was 184 pounds. (I just lost 30 pounds for my son's wedding.)

When I worked at a studio in a wealthy area, many of the skinny clients wouldn't train with me. Maybe they feared I would add girth to their butt by osmosis, or that I didn't know what I was doing because I was full figured. But age and the scale are just numbers. I have witnessed plenty of skinny-fat people. Whatever my weight or size, I am always the same dedicated, caring person inside. I would love if we did not judge others on their looks, especially our elders, veterans and the disabled. Kind hearts matter.

**ADVICE FOR OTHER TEACHERS:** If you don't think you fit the stereotypical appearance of an instructor, go for it anyway! Follow your heart and not the crowd. It's an extremely rewarding career choice, helping others to feel and look better. I offer my clients a realistic, healthy, happy mind-set. Our



culture is ridiculous with the images and expectations placed on women. I now focus on within, and have started the journey of self-love, self-forgiveness, self-respect and letting go of perfectionism.

And learn to love yourself the way you are. I never think I am a “big girl.” I’m really am just big boned, as my family is from Norway—we are Vikings, after all! I just want to feel good inside and out.

## THE OLDER WOMAN

**NAOMI RAYMAN**, owner of *Another Planet Pilates* in Kentfield, CA (now retired)

**HOW I CAME TO PILATES:** I began my career as a Pilates teacher in 2007 at the age of 56. I have a master’s degree in speech-language therapy and worked with stroke patients. As a hobby, I was a competitive ballroom dancer; someone recommended I take Pilates to improve my dancing. Then my Pilates teacher suggested that if I ever tired of my professional work, I might consider getting certified and teaching at her studio.

**GETTING CERTIFIED:** I signed up for Ellie Herman’s six-week intensive program in San Francisco. The class consisted of eight women, aged 20 to 32. At the time, I was 56—my sports bra was older than anyone else in the program. I was also very insecure about my physical abilities, and most of the class were former dancers and one was a stripper (actually, she showed me some great moves to help my developé). To compensate for my lack of confidence, I would denigrate myself and compliment others. At lunch, I ate alone, probably because of my age, but also because of economics—I realize now that most of the others probably couldn’t afford to eat out every day.

One Friday, Ellie told us we should wear a bathing suit so that we could do postural assessments on one another. When I heard this, I almost dropped out of the class! But then I realized these young women needed to see what spider veins and cellulite looked like.

**CAREER:** I had a home studio, so I only worked with women, who ranged in age from 19 to 82. I think young women liked having me as a positive aging role model. Older women felt that they would be challenged more. But two years ago, I fell off my bike and broke my hip; I never healed properly and had to retire.

**WHAT IT’S LIKE BEING A “NON-TRADITIONAL” TEACHER:** In many ways, it was positive: It was the first time in my life that I experienced people telling me they thought I was agile and energetic. And when you hear that about

yourself, you begin to believe it. I got over my own insecurities about not being young enough or athletic enough.

As an older teacher, I also had more time; my kids are grown so there’s no Little League game or sick child. I had the time to call or email clients after our session or to find out an answer for them.

The most negative incident actually happened with one of the Elders. I was taking a class of his and when I did a bad Teaser, he said to me “Sweetheart, why don’t you act your age?” That was brutal.

**ADVICE FOR OTHER TEACHERS:** Seek, seek, seek. There is no one way. I may get into trouble here, but so many of the Pilates leaders (especially in the past) were like the Jedi Council. Blending mind/body awareness with sound anatomical knowledge makes a competent and accomplished teacher. There is no substitute for watching how the body can respond to a repertoire of exercises that makes perfect sense. Also, try to find a mentor. For me, working with Wendy LeBlanc-Arbuckle was comparable to attending graduate school in Pilates. She saw beyond my age and my physical abilities. **PS**

