

My Introduction To Pilates and Kathy Grant

I was introduced to Kathy Grant in 1977 by a dancer in Alvin Ailey's second company named Coco. She encouraged me to come to Kathy's gym because my back was crooked. I was 17 years old. I followed her into the tiny gym located on the 6th floor of Henri Bendells. She walked toward a lean, light skinned black woman with an abundance of freckles and a short red afro wearing a satiny floral jumpsuit. Busy with paper work, she sat on a stool at a little desk tucked into the corner near the high barrel. Coco spoke quietly to the woman, then turned and motioned me to come forward. I smiled shyly, ready to say hello, but was cut off.

"Never mind that love," Kathy barked, "turn around, stand parallel, bend your knees slightly and roll down your spine." I did as I was told, and after a few moments she said, "Okay you can stand up now." As I stood again, Kathy turned back to her desk and asked, "What time do your classes start in the morning?"

"Normally 9:30," I said.

She studied her book. "Can you be here at 8 am on Tuesday?" she asked.

"Yes," I said without thinking.

"I'll see you then. Lessons are \$15 and for your condition. I'd recommend coming in twice a week", she looked up and stared at me over her glasses, "that is if I can fit you in."

"What is my condition?" I asked nervously.

"You have scoliosis. I'll tell you more after I start working with you." She looked back at her paperwork, dismissing us with a brusque, "now I'm busy, run along. Coco, get to work."

That day altered my life.

I knew nothing about Pilates, but like a good little dancer, I followed directions, though at first not as efficiently as Kathy would have liked. With her strong, knobby fingers Kathy poked my stomach trying to wake my weak abdominals. She quickly lost patience and snapped, "not like that little one, pull them in, scoop and hollow – no, not on the inhale on the exhale . . . gently, I said." It took time but gradually I began to grasp the notion that I could use my breath to help move small, intrinsic muscles. I was learning from Kathy the key to Pilates – working from the inside out.

Those first few weeks Kathy didn't even address the scoliosis, but as we continued to work together, she began to address the weakness and tightness of the curve. With subtle manipulation of the breath into certain areas of the body, I began to move with more ease and better alignment.

In due course I retired as a dancer and began to teach full time. Kathy had such a good eye and such a keen kinesthetic intuition about the body that those of us who had the good fortune of working with her also developed the potential to become good instructors. If it wasn't for Kathy's ultimate patience with me as I studied with her, I never would've had the opportunity to share the magic of Pilates in such a profound way.