

# dance fever

her doctors thought she'd stay paralyzed. but pilates gave dancer **shari berkowitz** the strength to get back onstage—and try some bold new moves

**M**ore than one doctor has told me that I'm one in a million for having survived the accident, much less for having made a complete recovery. Today, stronger than ever, I'm grateful that it's all a distant memory and that I have a phenomenal

story to share. Though great doctors and physical therapists got me through the initial healing, it was Pilates that strengthened me and turned my world upside down and right side up. Life would never be the same, but lucky for me, it got better.

acting lessons and transformed myself into musical theater's ultimate triple threat: the singer/dancer/actress who can do everything. I was 11 when I did my first full-length musical. By 13, I was doing local and regional theater. I continued to perform while attending the University of Michigan and even after graduation, when I moved back to New York to immerse myself completely in the theater scene.

## chorus lines

I was cast in show after show and was enjoying a beautiful career onstage, until one February evening. My entire world changed during a performance of *Grease* in Raleigh, NC. I was playing Cha Cha Di Gregorio, the Latina spitfire who wins the dance contest with Danny Zuko, a role that was performed by a handsome, burly Broadway star. One night "Danny" forcefully jerked my arm instead of gently guiding me into a turn during "The Hand Jive." I am a small person, and he was much larger, super-muscular, angry and, some say, drugged up. That violent yank wrenched my left arm and the rest of my body one way, while my head and neck snapped the other way. Instantly I felt sharp, shooting pains in my neck and left shoulder blade and knew that something was terribly wrong. Somehow I managed to finish the number, but when I got offstage, I called for a ride to the hospital. I was petrified

## tiny dancer

Growing up in New York, I always wanted to be a dancer.

When I was two, my cousin Gail convinced me that I needed a hobby. When she gave me her dance shoes, I decided it would be dance. By three-and-a-half, I was in tap class. Soon I added jazz, ballet, modern and ballroom to my repertoire. By four, I was certain my hobby would become a profession. I watched every Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly movie on TV and fell in love with all things dance.

A natural singer, I also took voice and



The author, today, wearing her a necklace she designed

because the pain was horrendous. Yet the ER doctor thought I just had a bad strain—even though my left shoulder blade was protruding out of my back. The local doctor I went to see the next morning didn't think it was serious either, though he put me on a muscle relaxer, an opiate

painkiller and an anti-inflammatory. This drug cocktail made me feel even sicker but did nothing for my extreme pain. Of course, I was out of the show for a few days. We all assumed I'd recover quickly.

Yet two days after the accident, things went from bad to worse. I realized I had *no* pain, which, ironically, turned out to be a bad sign. When I tried to pick up my backpack with my left arm, it dropped out of my hand. I tried again, and it dropped out again. *What was going on?!* I slowly came to discover that I had no strength whatsoever in my left hand. I could barely move my fingers and had very little use of my entire left arm.

As I flew home to New York that afternoon, I don't think it was fear that I was feeling—more like confusion. I think that the worse the situation, the less you indulge fear and the more you take action. My orthopedist in New York



Shari (left) in *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in Ukraine*

made me understand in no uncertain terms that I had to stop doing *everything*. He sent me in for an MRI and then referred me to a spine specialist.

The specialist told me I had three herniated discs in my neck that were protruding into my medial and ulnar nerves and cutting off the use of my left shoulder blade, arm and hand. One disc was bulging into my spinal column. The doctor warned me that if I sneezed too hard, coughed too roughly or got knocked on the head, I could become completely paralyzed. Okay, now fear—about what *could* happen—started to overwhelm me.

### way-off Broadway

So what's a lifelong performer to do when she can't do anything? Well, I went to physical therapy three times or more times a week. There, my spectacular therapists gave me gentle neck traction, ultrasound (to reduce inflammation), electrostimulation (to release the gripped muscles) and a lot of ice. My injury was so bad that they couldn't even give me exercises to do for quite some time. And within three weeks, my left arm and shoulder had completely atrophied. While the right side of my upper body was fit and strong, my left side looked like that of a starving child from a poor country. Aside from physical therapy, there wasn't much I could do except read and walk. I would take long strolls all around the city with my left hand tucked into my back pocket of my jeans. Every day I'd go to the gym,



Six-year-old Shari about to perform a tap routine in NYC.

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## SUCCESS story

where one of the guys at the front desk would tie my arm to my body so I could train on the elliptical machine.

Everyone asks the same questions: Was I scared, and did I feel sorry for myself? My answer: I allowed myself one minute every morning to feel bad for myself, and then I made myself charge through the rest of the day. I realized that while the situation was grim, there were worse things in the world. I would often think of Christopher Reeve, Superman, who was paralyzed from the chest down, fighting for his life yet living it boldly at the same time. He impressed me so much. I could never feel bad for myself knowing that Superman was still heroically fighting and living and striving. I believed that I could too.

### a slow road to recovery

After about three months of physical therapy, I started to regain a little use of my left shoulder, arm and hand. I could even hold a light weight in my hand. In physical therapy, we started doing some exercises to strengthen and stabilize my neck as well as to strengthen my shoulder, arm and hand. It was exciting! I was a good little patient and did my exercises at home, too, and iced. (It seemed that most of my days were spent icing.)

My physical therapist, Joe, was also a Pilates teacher at the Pilates Studio of New York, which was connected to my physical therapy center. As I got stronger, he and other therapists began talking about how great Pilates would be for me once my neck was stable enough. *Pilates? What the heck was that?* I had heard of it from a couple of ex-boyfriends who were dancers, but I really didn't know anything about it. When I went in for therapy, one of the Pilates instructors, Ton Voogt, would see me and call "Hi, Neck Girl!" (Later he would become my teacher.)

But finally, 11 months after the accident, my neck seemed stable enough for me to try Pilates. I got to the studio early. Everything was strange looking: the movements, the apparatus. Initially, it was awkward—and humbling. Here's me, an elite dancer, struggling to get through that first 30-minute session. Just doing the Half Rolldown was difficult. It felt odd to lead with my abdominals and



Shari, as a circus baton twirling dancing show girl in Barnum

work my spine Mr. Pilates' way.

I began with one 30-minute session a week, then added another, and eventually worked my way up to three hour-long sessions. But there were incredible struggles along the way. When I first did Pulling Straps I and II on the Long Box, my left arm was useless; my right arm had to do all of the work. When I had to lift my arms out to the side in the T for Pulling Straps II, it was nearly all I could take. I simply couldn't feel a muscular connection in my left shoulder blade. It felt like I had a big hole in there.

I had to train myself to imagine that I could do it, that those muscles were vital. I believed that if I *thought* it first, then it could happen. After all, it's neural impulses that make muscles contract. If those darned muscles weren't ready, then what if I got the nerves ready? I never told anyone what I was doing—thinking/imagining my muscles moving. I just thought and thought and put my mind to it and kept trying and trying until it happened—and sure enough, one day those muscles fired!

Though my progress in Pilates was often two steps forward, one step back, I persevered, and within six months I was doing Traditional Ending on the Trapeze Table. I remember lying there, in the Half-Hanging, in absolute amazement at what I just done: Pull-Ups and Hanging Pull-Ups. I was in awe! What is this Pilates? How could I have been paralyzed a year and a half ago and be strong enough to do Pull-Ups now?!

After a month of Pilates and exactly 12 months after the accident, I was allowed to work again. If you can believe it, I went directly back into another production of *Grease*, but this time in the role of Frenchy. Though I didn't have great strength in my left arm, my neck had stabilized, and I was itching to be back onstage.

I had changed, however. Performing didn't feel the same as it had before. My time away had forced me to discover different sides of myself. Now I valued being onstage far less than the opportunity to survive and perhaps help others do the same. Doing anything other than performing had never been in my sights before, but because the physical and emotional healing aspects of Pilates had been so profound for me, I was compelled to help others.

### a new direction

So two years after I went back to performing, I decided to become a Pilates teacher, studying with Romana Kryzanowska. At first I thought it would be something that I did during the day while I did a show at night, but ultimately, my passion for Pilates won out, and I realized I wanted it to be my full-time occupation and preoccupation.

Once I was certified, I taught in New York for a while, then moved to Los Angeles. Within two years, I had

enough clients to open my own studio, the Vertical Workshop in Beverly Hills. At the same time I took on the job of running Power Pilates' West Coast teacher-training program and began training new instructors and presenting at conferences on the West Coast and internationally.

I find remarkable satisfaction in being part of my clients' physical and emotional transformations. Since I know what it feels like to come from absolute zero physically and emotionally, to struggle and persevere, work hard and strengthen, I can sympathize and empathize with my clients. Nothing came easily to me. The physical prowess I had as a dancer didn't matter: I started Pilates from the lowest point but was able to achieve the highest results. Because of my experience, I believe in every person who comes to take a session, regardless of his or her physical or emotional ailment. After eight years in Los Angeles, I've just moved back home to New York and am more excited than ever to explore where Pilates and life will take me. I spend my time teaching as well as writing about and developing products for Pilates. But I've stretched beyond just that: These days I also have my own line of jewelry—and I'm writing novels. If there's one thing the accident taught me, it's that everything is available to me...and to all of us.

I still do my own Pilates workout at least five times a week. I need it to remind me that I am indeed vital and strong. I work to be my own best student in Pilates and attempt to put what I practice in the studio into the rest of my life. We face challenges at every turn, but we practice, overcome, modify and vary. To me, Pilates has become a metaphor for life. I'll never be grateful for that accident, but I will always be grateful for Pilates. ☺

You can check out Shari's jewelry at [sharibjewelry.com](http://sharibjewelry.com) and read her blog at [TheVerticalWorkshop.wordpress.com](http://TheVerticalWorkshop.wordpress.com)

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