

THE POWERHOUSE FROM DOWN UNDER



One of the pioneers of the method in Australia, Sally Anderson founded Pilates International, the country's first government-certified teacher-training program.

by Anne Marie O'Connor

Pilates Style: Tell us about your childhood.

Sally Anderson: I was born in Sydney, but grew up in rural Australia. My father had an agricultural degree and would manage properties, so we would move whenever he'd go on to manage another property.

He suffered from complications from type 1 diabetes, and when I was 10 or 11, he was given a poor prognosis. My parents sold the house, packed up the family and we traveled around Australia in a double cabin truck with three kids' bunks and towing a caravan, which was great. We were homeschooled, but I always went to dance school or participated in amateur musical theater societies. I did a lot of Scottish dancing as well as jazz, tap and a little ballet. I was really interested in singing and dancing and musical theater.

My father died quite young, when he was 46, at which time we had settled in Central Queensland, which is where I completed high school.

PS: What did you do after high school?

Sally: I worked in theater, ending up in Sydney, where I did a combination of performing and production in commercial theater. While I was working on a show called *Lend me a Tenor*, I ruptured my ankle. In order to avoid surgery, the physiotherapist suggested I try Pilates. At the time (the late '80s) Pilates was like space travel—no one had heard of it. One of the two people teaching at that time was [BASI founder] Rael Isacowitz. He had a little studio on the campus of McDonald College, a performing arts college in Sydney. I was sent there to rehabilitate my ankle. And the rest, as they say, is history.

My first session with Rael lasted two hours. When I went back to the train station afterward, I could barely walk my legs were shaking so much.

PS: So you were hooked?

Sally: Yes! My ankle was healed in record time, and I was soon back to work. But I kept doing as many sessions with Rael as I could, and I never stopped. I feel incredibly blessed that I found Rael and did my foundation training with him. His training and influence gave me so much.

PS: How did you segue into becoming a teacher?

Sally: I was still doing theater part time and moved back to Melbourne for a show. I started working for a physiotherapist down there who didn't have a lot of training, but who had opened a studio. I started teaching there because I knew all this work from Rael. God knows what I taught in those early years! It was before there was formal training—I don't think Rael even had BASI at that point.

Then in the early '90s, Rael led a weeklong immersion in his work on an island called Couran Cove, and I assisted him. At the same time, we were formalizing the BASI modules, and training all these wonderful Pilates devotees. It was a great time and produced many of our leading teachers in Australia to this day! BASI has a strong history in Australia.

At this time, I was still working in theater as well as teaching in Sydney for Megan Williams, whom I had met when we both started training with Rael. She ran a number of Pilates studios over the years in Australia; we worked together for many years, and she was one of my closest colleagues and friends. She passed very young from cancer, but I still have some clients who started with her, and she is strongly remembered.

PS: And you continued to be involved with BASI, even after Rael moved to the States?

Sally: Yes, Rael rang me one day and said, will you come over here and teach? I said yes—I think I left the next week to work at Rael's studio in Costa Mesa, CA. [Pilates Anytime founder] Kristi Cooper arrived at the same time. We were both training with BASI, and teaching in the studio as well. I worked for BASI for many years, delivering training all around the world as well as teaching.



PS: When did you return to Australia?

Sally: I came back to Australia in the very late '90s, because I had a boyfriend and family here. There were also logistical issues to obtain a Green Card, so I decided it was time to head home.

Back in Sydney, I worked for BASI for a while. But in Australia, we have a vocational training system whereby you have to have an Australian company to be able to get accreditation. Having decided to go through that process, I parted from BASI and established my own company, Pilates International, which developed the first government-accredited Pilates courses.

OPPOSITE PAGE:

ANDERSON ASSISTS A PILATES INTERNATIONAL STAFF MEMBER, LIZ STRIDE, AS SHE DOES SHOULDER BRIDGE ON THE CADILLAC.

BELOW: ANDERSON (SECOND FROM LEFT) WITH (FROM LEFT) KAREN BEATTIE, RAE ISACOWITZ AND MEGAN WILLIAMS IN WILLIAM'S SYDNEY STUDIO DURING THE EARLY DAYS OF BASI PILATES. ALL FOUR WERE INSTRUMENTAL IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF PILATES IN AUSTRALIA.

FIVE MINUTES WITH SALLY ANDERSON

FAVORITE APPARATUS: This is so hard, but if I had to nail it down, I'd probably say the Reformer. It's like coming home. It suits my body. I love the work on it.

MOVE HARDEST TO MASTER: Reformer Pilates Headstands. It was a loooong work in progress!

FAVORITE MAT MOVE: The Pelvic Curl or Bridge. It solves a multitude of challenges in my body. I think the Pelvic Curl is one of the best exercises ever. It gets the hip extensors fired up, opens the front of the body and articulates the spine. I do a set of Pelvic Curls every day. With clients, I can see what's happening in their bodies in this exercise.

WHO INSPIRES YOU AS TEACHER: So many people! I really love teachers who have a combination of personality, ethics and depth of work. Julian Littleford was one. He was really dear to me. He was one of the most aware people I've ever met, he had a wicked sense of humor and he was amazing with movement.

Deborah Lessen is another. She has an incredible history and overall picture of the industry that I think no one else could possibly have. She has been through so much on behalf of the industry. She also has a fantastic personality, but doesn't take herself too seriously, yet she also makes you move in ways that are really beautiful.

I couldn't narrow it down to these people, but that's the combination for me—a wonderful person as well as a wonderful Pilates person, and you've got me for life.

BIGGEST CAREER HIGH: Getting our courses accredited that first time was an enormous moment for me. It has set the way forward for our industry in Australia.

experts, physical therapists, anatomists, osteopaths, general practitioners and educational specialists. They evaluate your courses for meeting the standards of the government. If you pass, your courses are then government accredited.

PS: What are the upsides of going through the government accreditation?

Sally: It sets a standard that every educational program must meet, yet you're

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PS: How does government accreditation work in Australia?

Sally: There are two aspects to it. Your organization needs to be registered; this is called an RTO, a government Registered Training Organization. The courses also need government accreditation, which is a separate process.

PS: Can you take us through the process?

Sally: There are cross-industry guidelines and standards that are issued by the government for how courses have to be developed; you create your curriculum based on all the government's standards and guidelines, then it goes through a third-party review and audit process.

The audit is conducted by an independent panel, including Pilates

also able to layer your own approach onto that. Polestar just accredited their courses in Australia this year, and Romana's Pilates is in the process of doing so.

Setting standards that everybody has to meet has really raised the quality of Pilates and has given us formal structures so that we can get health-care provider numbers, which allow clients to claim rebates. It also allows us to be part of the allied health therapeutic network of Australia.

It has given the industry a lot more recognition here, and therefore our public can assess who they're going to more effectively. When guest presenters come to Australia, they always make the comment that we have a really high quality of graduates.

PS: How long did the accreditation process take?

Sally: Initially, about three years. We finally got ours in May 2004, which was the first recognition for the Pilates industry in Australia. I didn't know what I was getting into when I did it, but it does teach you an enormous amount about education and really current ways of training people, and helps improve the quality of training.

PS: Where are your facilities?

Sally: We have our headquarters and one of our studios in a suburb of Sydney called Pymble. We have three other studios as well, two in Sydney and one in Melbourne. We run student work placements through our studios.

Our accredited courses are delivered online now for the most part, although we still do face-to-face training as well. All our repertoire is filmed and available online. Throughout our courses, students can go home, and at the end of the day, watch the exercises and review them. They can choose to do everything online, though everyone comes to in-person training weekends to get more out of it. Then everyone does work placement in our studios or a studio that is part of our network.

PS: Has the online content been popular?

Sally: More than I had even anticipated. We developed it years ago, and students love it.

Particularly because Australia is a really big country, and it's very hard for people in small towns to find studios or afford travel on top of everything else. One of the reasons we wanted to do it is we had so many people wanting to train in regional areas.

PS: Are there academic degrees in Pilates in Australia yet?

Sally: Not yet, but that's where we're headed. Right now, they can take our courses right to the end of Advanced Diploma, which is kind of like a post-graduate-level Pilates course. They can also apply their credits toward a health-sciences degree at the University of Canberra.

We're working toward offering a Pilates degree now, and to facilitate that, we're doing a lot of research in conjunction with the universities. We have a team that's led by our director of curriculum, Lanette Gavran. She'll be presenting some of our initial research at the PMA [meeting] this year. We did a preliminary meta-analysis that she led, and we have completed the first research study. We've got two more running in conjunction with the university at the moment.

PS: Tell us about your involvement with Cirque du Soleil.

Sally: I toured with them nationally as their Pilates trainer in 2011 with *Saltimbanco*. Backstage was a minimal Pilates studio with a Reformer, Spine Corrector and Wunda Chair. The performers come in every half hour until show time, so it really challenges you as an instructor to nail exactly which exercises each performer needs the most in that 30 minutes. I loved it because it combined my passions— theater and Pilates. The music was so fantastic, and I had very compliant bodies—I was happy as a cat in cream!

This year I have been training the cast of Cirque's *Totem* on its national Australian tour. We are excited to have just had the show's lead performance medicine therapist choose our Pilates course to complete her own training.

PS: How is your time divided?

Sally: Three days a week, I still see clients I've worked with for a long time. I also direct the training organization and work on progressing projects we're doing for the training, keeping the programs up to date and running the team that works on everything.

I also do a number of continuing-education workshops around Australia.

PS: What's your favorite?

Sally: I love any workshop that has to do with changing people's posture. Seeing how much people's health and wellness can be helped by posture and internal health is a big focus for me. I probably assign this in part to watching



ABOVE: ANDERSON'S COMPANY, PILATES INTERNATIONAL, PUT ON THE FIRST PMA PILATES DAY.



LEFT: ANDERSON LEADING A MAT CLASS AS PART OF THE INAUGURAL AUSTRALIAN PMA PILATES DAY EVENT ON THE SHORES OF SYDNEY HARBOUR IN 2011.

my father suffer from diabetic renal failure and die quite young.

PS: I know you've done a lot of writing.

Sally: Yes, I've written a lot of articles and was the Pilates expert contributor for the *Sunday Telegraph*, one of our biggest papers in Australia, for a few years. I've written one Pilates matwork book, and I have others that are in progress.

PS: Tell us about your personal life.

Sally: For 20 years, I've been with my wonderful partner, Lorry. In America, that's a girl's name, but it's actually short for Lorian. (He's a handsome Italian). We live in Sydney, though we travel a fair bit. Lorry is a performer and producer of entertainment. I love animals, but am still getting over losing my beautiful cat Lulu, whom I had for 18 years, a few years ago. So at the moment, I only have the neighbors' pets to play with. **PS**