

Beyond Pilates: The True Body Project

by Stacy Sims



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Stacy Sims is the owner of Pendleton Pilates and the author of the novel *Swimming Naked*. She is also the founder of the True Body Project, a non-profit organization that helps teen girls and women connect with their bodies and voices. For more information about Pendleton Pilates, visit www.pendletonpilates.com. For more information about the True Body Project, visit www.truebodyproject.org. *Swimming Naked* is available at booksellers nationwide.

When I started Pilates, I was as unhealthy and disconnected from my body as a person can be. I had ritually abused my body for more than a decade with alcohol and, eventually, anti-anxiety medication, not to mention too much caffeine and nicotine. During the heyday of my addictions, I certainly didn't exercise. No matter what I intended to do, my bad habits became so hardwired in my body that they won, every day, and I became a sedentary, paralyzed woman.

In my late 30s, I entered a 12-step program and walked into a Pilates studio within the same week. Over time, I became reacquainted with the body I had betrayed. The combination of the two practices enabled me to find freedom again. I got free from my addictions and discovered discipline, accountability and, ultimately, my voice.

In 2001, four years into my new life of sobriety and Pilates, I found great personal success, publishing a novel and opening Pendleton Pilates; my own, small Pilates studio in Cincinnati, Ohio.

On a book tour or in my studio, I began to speak of my challenges and how I came to break free of the paralysis I felt for years. I listened to their stories and realized that the women and teen girls I met seemed to have many of the same issues I had.

Pilates helped inspire me to take back control of my life and to reconnect with my body and my individuality. Now I wanted to use my Pilates and life experiences as a springboard to inspire the young girls I came into contact with to do the same thing.

Many young girls I observe can be so uncomfortable in their bodies that they truly disconnect from them. And then, when they still feel the uncomfortable feelings of youth - things they often don't have the chance to explore - they begin to further medicate themselves to block out the feelings of the body and self entirely. The behaviors are troubling - drinking, smoking, eating disorders, promiscuity and cutting their flesh.* Less obvious and perhaps more insidious is the silencing of the authentic, artistic voice.

"I had a revelation. I didn't deserve to think I was hideous. I found myself and I began to love my little breasts, my skinny thighs, my little booty, my dark skin, my gapped teeth, my body."

JaHe Woody, True Body Teen

I knew that it would take more than Pilates to reach these girls. But I didn't want to alter my core business and create a Pilates hybrid. I have too much respect for the method and had also learned that at Pendleton Pilates, our business and clients are best served when we focus on Pilates rather than yoga or other related movement practices.

"The True Body is the Body That Loves Itself"

Esther Freeman – True Body Teen

That's why I piloted the True Body Project. In the summer of 2005, I raised enough money from Cincinnati-based corporations and individuals to gather 13 teen girls together for an intensive six-week exploration of body, individuality and art.

In the True Body Project pilot, we met every day at a local YMCA. Each day, we connect to our bodies in some way, either via Pilates or yoga or salsa dancing or boxing. We also wrote and made art about the body. Finally, we began to be better observers of self and other by looking at how hard it is to "see" clearly. We looked at how the media portrays women and at the female body in art to get a wider view of body, gender and self. The teens created a 214 page literary journal and documentary film.



– Stacy Sims and True Body teens doing roll downs.

Since then, the True Body Project has incorporated as a non-profit organization and worked in after-school programs, in day-long programs for other non-profits and has done a second intensive summer program and has produced another book, a teen-created multi-media performance and a soon-to-be-launched website: www.mytruespace.org. Among other things, the website will serve as a place for teens to find teen-friendly Pilates and yoga studios. Additionally, the True Body Project is in the process of creating curricula for schools, studios and organizations who wish to do their own True Body Project.



– Clowning around with the True Body Project, 2006

A True Body Project parent, observed that "So much in our culture is estranged and out of balance with the natural world. The True Body Project is a vehicle to help bring women back to that which is most natural: our own skin, our very souls. The tools used are simple – movement and writing, accessible to all of us. Take these ingredients and put them in the hands of young women willing to go on a journey, and magic happens."

For more information about the True Body Project, visit www.truebodyproject.org or www.mytruespace.org.

Here are some of the young voices expressing themselves through the True Body Project.

morning/living/evening

By Kathryn Wendeln
Mt. Notre Dame High School

I imagine
learning to breathe
all over again each morning
sensing the security of the air with my lips
as the earth begins
rebirth--stretching, budding,
radiating.

I imagine
erasing mistakes with only
single line strikeouts,
keeping my eyes fixed on
what I can conquer rather
than what I fear.

I imagine
telling my body that
I am sorry,
singing myself gentle lullabies and
kissing each limb goodnight.



Every Woman is Secretly in Love

By Camillia North
Walnut Hills High School

I think every woman is secretly in love with her lips
A soft kiss upon the smooth skin of one's heart
Gracious and full.
I think every woman is secretly in love with her words
Rolling up her throat and dripping off the tip of her tongue
Like the last drop of honey in the jar
So sweet and promising.
I think every woman is secretly in love with her fingers
Never too thick or too slim
Dressed in diamonds or maybe just chipped pearl paint across the nails.
I think every woman is secretly in love with her legs
Coated in rich, dark fudge, caramel cream, or maybe something in the vanilla tint. . .
I think every woman is secretly in love with her feet
Floating across the midnight ocean, swaying in the tears of the sky.
I think every woman is secretly in love with herself
Secretly.

*In some schools, teen pregnancy is the major problem. In one Cincinnati-area eighth grade class, 38 girls are pregnant and it is considered "cool" to take your baby to day care. In other schools, the practice of "cutting" and anorexia are epidemic. One counselor reports that the cutters have resorted to cutting themselves in the groin to try to keep their dangerous habit a secret. Girls report that "everyone" has an eating disorder and that there is pressure to be sexually active as early as the sixth grade.