

finding her center

years of cutting, coloring and blow-drying—in high heels—exacerbated this hairstylist’s scoliosis, causing relentless back and neck pain. but when she opened a salon next to a pilates studio, she found a lot more than professional success

by Sydney Craig

I vaguely remember being told I had scoliosis—an abnormal curvature in the spine—in junior high, during a screening by the school nurse. But no one made a very big deal about it. Instead, I was given a lift to wear in my left shoe and a few floor exercises to practice. I think I briefly wore the lift, did the exercises for maybe a few weeks and then completely forgot about them. I loved fashion, and who wears a lift in stylish shoes? Really!

When I finished high school in Memphis, I decided to pursue my passion and go into hairstyling. After cosmetology school in Chicago, I moved to New York in January, 1997, where I landed a job at Bumble and bumble as an assistant. My goal was to do hair for runway shows and magazines and, at that time, Bumble and bumble was the “it” salon for that. Pretty much any magazine I opened credited a Bb stylist with doing the models’ hair. After assisting at Bb for 10 months, I left to work with two amazing hair stylists: Nick Arrojo (who now owns Arrojo Studio and was on TLC’s *What Not to Wear*) and Rodney Cutler (owner of Cutler Salons in Manhattan and Miami) who were opening their first salon, Arrojo-Cutler. After

The top X-ray, taken in 2006, shows how crooked Sydney’s spine was from the scoliosis. In the bottom X-ray, taken after doing two and a half years of Pilates that specifically focused on aligning her spine, is almost completely straight.

14 months of assisting them, I was promoted to full-fledged stylist. A total dream come true!

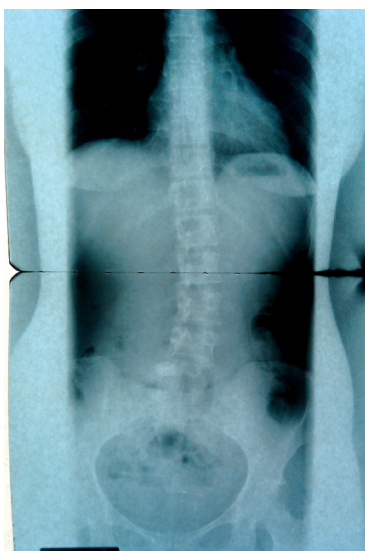
I loved my job and was getting the best education any hairstylist could dream of. But it was grueling work, and I began to have pain in my back and neck. Granted, I had always had horrible posture, but hairdressing was also taking its toll. Imagine holding a full sack of sugar in one hand and a small water bottle in the other, with both elbows out as if ballroom dancing and pulling taffy. Now hold that position, with your pelvis kicked “out of gear” thanks to high heels and a swayback, on a cement floor, with a blow dryer in one hand and a round brush in the other, while bending over a client because the chair won’t go low enough for my height. Add a crooked spine and repeat this scenario for ten hours a day, five or six days a week and what do you get? You get the beginning of years and years of neck, back and shoulder pain. The kind of pain that won’t go away with a couple ibuprofen, tubes of arnica cream and a friendly shoulder rub and just got progressively worse over the years.

By early 2001, I had accomplished what I wanted to in New York: I had worked on many fashion shoots, runway shows and even an album cover, but I was ready to move on.

I took a position with Bumble and bumble as an educator for their product company. I moved to North Carolina, but traveled all over the country teaching haircutting and styling techniques as well as product information at their network of salons.

But with the constant travel and long days of standing at work, my back and neck pain just got worse. I made appointments with different doctors hoping for help, and I even went to the emergency room a couple times when my neck locked up. The doctors would prescribe muscle relaxers that would help temporarily, but it was never long before the pain came back.

In July 2001, my husband and I moved to Steamboat Springs, CO, where he had found a new job. I opened my own salon, Comb Goddess, in a space that happened to be next door to Steamboat Pilates, a studio that was owned by Wendy Puckett, one of my hair clients. I knew Pilates was a buzzword at that



time, but really had no idea what it was. My husband thought the studio looked more like a gallery for instruments of torture than a place for exercise.

Wendy has lots and lots of hair, and one day when I was doing her highlights, she had plenty of time to observe my posture. She pointed out the way I was standing (pelvis tucked under, shoulders rounded forward, head way out there). She thought Pilates might help with my pain. I figured, why not? The first exercise I remember her teaching me was a pelvic lift, or bridge, on the mat. I really had no idea what I was doing, but I liked it. I still had the pain afterward, but it had definitely lessened. Just moving felt good. I started doing private apparatus sessions and mat classes with Wendy and her sister Kristin Stevenson whenever I could.

In April 2004, my daughter was born, and one day when she was a few months old, my husband and I were out walking our dogs. I had on a tight tank top. He was walking behind me and says "Hey, do you know you have a giant hump on the left side of your back?" Of course I didn't know, but once it was brought to my attention, I felt like Quasimodo!

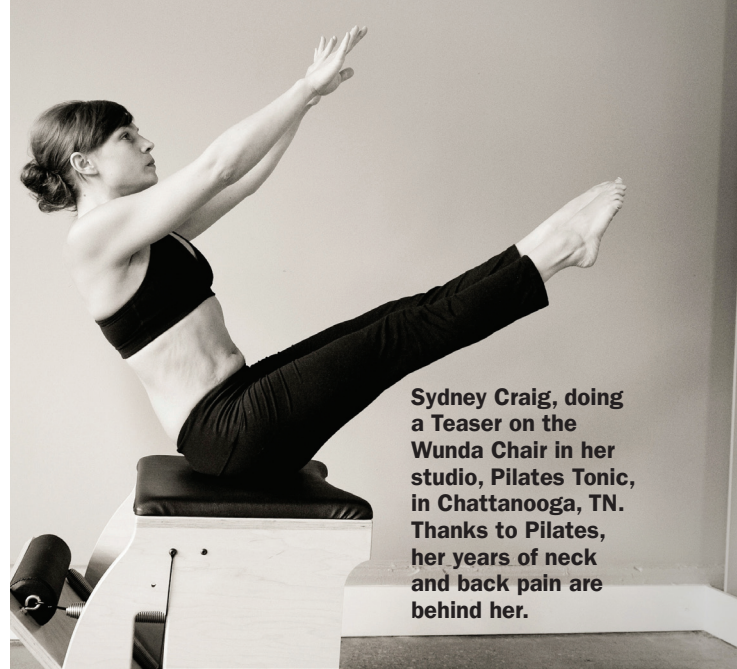
Though I'd gotten through pregnancy without any major problems, my scoliosis was now rearing its ugly head again thanks to all the muscle imbalances that can so easily happen to new mothers—with the way we hold and nurse the baby and lug those heavy car seats around. But I hadn't yet remembered the junior-high scoliosis episode, so I didn't realize that was what was causing the left side of my back to grow so much larger than the right.

When my daughter was eight weeks old, my husband and I decided to move to Chattanooga, TN, where my parents live, to be closer to family. I started to get really nervous about losing Pilates.

I loved Steamboat Pilates and knew there weren't any studios in Chattanooga with that same energy. At that time, Steamboat Pilates was offering a 450-hour comprehensive teacher training program through the PhysicalMind Institute. I was still doing hair, but I knew this program was something I had to do. I was in love with the idea of teaching Pilates and helping others, but also hoped it would continue to help with my pain. I was able to complete the program and internship in six months, before our move to Tennessee in June 2005.

In Chattanooga, I hoped to find a Pilates studio there where I could teach, observe and continue to learn. But no

studios would even return my phone calls, so I took matters into my own hands: In Steamboat Springs, the Pilates studio was right next to the hair salon, so why not put the two under the same roof? My vision was a gradual, yet complete crossover from hairdressing to Pilates. A big part of my motivation to make the transition was



Sydney Craig, doing a Teaser on the Wunda Chair in her studio, Pilates Tonic, in Chattanooga, TN. Thanks to Pilates, her years of neck and back pain are behind her.



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Top photo: Sydney (left) and a friend strike a pose in the mid-1990s in New York City. Bottom photo: Sydney and her hairstyling mentors, Nick Arrojo (left) and Rodney Cutler, in 1999.

that the pain in my back and neck was getting worse from doing hair, even though I was trying to work fewer hours in the salon.

Comb Goddess Workshop/Signal Mountain Pilates opened in January, 2006. It was in Signal Mountain, TN, a 10-minute drive from Chattanooga, and had space for a small two-chair salon, a room for a massage therapist, a small space for mat classes and another small space for a Reformer and Wunda Chair. For the next two years, I did hair full time while teaching twelve mat classes a week.

Unfortunately, I still had back pain and my passion for doing hair was waning. I began seeing a chiropractor early in 2006 in an effort to help the back pain. He took an X-ray that revealed my scoliosis in absolutely black and white terms. *Ohhhh*, I thought, *so this is part of what is causing all this pain and the giant hump in my back!* I decided to give chiropractic a shot. I stuck with it for just under a year before I would consider

other solutions, but it didn't help.

I gave birth to my son in January 2008. In the early weeks after his birth, I was reading *Pilates-Pro* online. I came across an article by Rebecca Leone, *Pilates 101 for New Clients*. At the bottom of the article, there was a link to Rebecca's Pilates Excel program, a "finishing school" for Pilates teachers who have already been through a comprehensive program. As soon as I read about Pilates Excel, I knew this was exactly what I needed to enhance my confidence and career as a Pilates teacher. But it was only being taught in Geneva, Switzerland and Seattle and, at the time, I had a beautiful, newborn challenge to getting to any of the sessions.

Then one day in November of 2008, I was inspired to send Rebecca an email to find out what it would take to bring her to Chattanooga. I heard back from her

Pilates is so great for scoliosis
because it is all about
developing and maintaining a
healthy spine!

within an hour and, soon after, we had a plan: Rebecca agreed to teach her full five-day Pilates Excel program at my studio.

Rebecca helped me truly grasp for the first time what was going on with my scoliosis as well as learn specific things to do about it. With my spine and muscle imbalances, I needed to work my back and hold myself in a certain way throughout my Pilates practice in order to begin correcting my imbalances. What I had been doing essentially was living with my muscle imbalances and movement patterns while practicing Pilates "in them." Of course, this only made the strong side stronger while the weaker side stayed weak.

Rebecca showed me simple exercises I could practice during my everyday activities: engaging the muscles in the weaker side of my back, essentially waking them up. I would just think about the muscle and try to send more energy there. I practiced this while brushing my teeth, standing in line at the store or sitting at a stoplight.

She also taught me the Elevator Shaft Visualization technique, in which you envision your body as a 26-story building. The pelvic floor is the basement, the 24 vertebrae are individual floors and the top of the head is the penthouse. The spine is surrounded by an elevator shaft. The idea is to lift the elevator car out of the basement and up each floor of the building using the deepest muscles in the back. It is something I do before I start a session to get as balanced as I can before I begin. That way it is easier to work the weaker side and not let the stronger muscles do all of the work.

When I first began to learn how to do this, it was so hard and required so much focus. As time has gone on and I've practiced it regularly on my own, I've built strength to hold it and it doesn't require nearly the effort it once did.

This technique actually allowed me to make my spine straighter. Six months after I learned the elevator shaft technique, I had another X-ray. My back was almost completely straight and the pain had gone away. I had finally gotten relief; something I had been searching for 11 years!

Pilates is so great for scoliosis because it is all about



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developing and maintaining a healthy spine! It's very helpful because of the body awareness it creates. And awareness is half the battle. Once you realize your typical movement patterns, it is easier to work within yourself with specific exercises to help prevent the scoliosis from getting worse.

After the Pilates Excel seminar, I had the confidence to teach Pilates full time and leave my hair career behind. My current studio, Pilates Tonic, opened its doors in June 2009 in the heart of Chattanooga's North Shore, the most vibrant area of Chattanooga. Pilates Tonic is a 2,500-square-foot space with five Reformers, a Cadillac, two Wunda Chairs and five Spine Correctors. I have a staff of four teachers and three apprentices.

Rebecca has returned many times since her first visit. Michele Larsson also accepted my invitation to teach three days of workshops in February, 2010; one of the seminars she taught was on scoliosis. When I showed her my before-and-after X-rays, she said I was in danger of being kicked out of the scoliosis club!

Pilates has changed my life in more ways than one. I quit smoking seven years ago. It was through the breathing in Pilates, moving my ribs while inhaling and expanding my lungs, that finally helped me kick the habit for good. I have more energy for sure. I have also taken up running, something I could have never imagined doing before with the neck and back pain.

I do a little Pilates everyday, sometimes for just five minutes but I take at least one class a week. Thankfully, Pilates has translated into everything I do. In a way, I am doing Pilates all the time.

Many of my clients have scoliosis and other back problems, and it is so rewarding to be able to help them get out of pain. Teaching Pilates is my passion and my calling. It has been an amazing ride. I can't wait to see what is around the next corner. 

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