

# The Seeker

Wendy Leblanc-Arbuckle, a veteran teacher of Pilates, yoga and somatic movement and the founder of the Pilates Center of Austin, has devoted her life to redefining core as a whole-being relationship with gravity, ourselves, others and the environment.

by Anne Marie O'Connor

**Pilates Style: Where did you grow up?**

**Wendy LeBlanc-Arbuckle:** My mom's Australian, and my dad's from New Orleans; I was born in Melbourne in 1947, but we moved to New Orleans when I was six. After high school, I attended the University of New Orleans, but left after a year—college just didn't resonate with me.

**PS: Before you became a Pilates teacher, you were a yoga teacher. How did you first get interested in yoga?**

**Wendy:** I was living in the French Quarter and became friends with Rudolph Ballentine, a colleague of the great yogi, Swami Rama of the Himalayan Institute in Honesdale, PA. I was hungry for a deeper understanding of whole-body awareness. I first went to Honesdale in 1974 and have continued to study there for many years, as well as with other inspiring teachers in several yoga traditions.

**PS: How did you get involved in macrobiotics?**

**Wendy:** Michio Kushi, a visionary macrobiotic teacher, came to give a lecture in New Orleans. At the end, they served a meal—a savory seaweed broth with carrot flowers. My mind went *boom!* I knew I had



to study the energetics of whole food, so I moved to Boston to study macrobiotics at the Kushi Institute.

A year and a half later, I moved back to New Orleans and opened the East/West Center, where I taught macrobiotics and private yoga sessions. My husband Michael and I then created the Macrobiotic Center of Louisiana, which had a whole-foods cooking school, a restaurant and a delivery service. (See sidebar on page 86 for more on Michael.)

**PS: How did you discover Pilates?**

**Wendy:** In 1989, we joined a group of partners to create NOVA Institute, an international health retreat center in Estes Park, CO. Shortly afterward, I met Amy Alpers at a Landmark Education seminar. Amy and her sister Rachel Segel had trained with Romana Kryzanowska and had just opened the Pilates Center of Boulder. I immediately knew I wanted to study Pilates, so three times a week, I drove an hour down the mountain to their studio. Romana was helping them start a certification program, so I had the opportunity to study with her and her protégé, Steve Giordano. Over the years, I went to New York for further studies with Romana. I received my certification in 1993.

**ABOVE:** "THIS IS A MOVEMENT THAT MY BODY CREATED, PLAYING WITH GRAVITY AND GROUND REACTION FORCE, USING JUST ENOUGH EFFORT TO SIT UP," WENDY EXPLAINS.

**PS:** What are your favorite memories of the five Pilates Elders—Romana, Kathy Grant, Ron Fletcher, Mary Bowen and Lolita San Miguel—you studied with?

**Wendy:** I deeply appreciate studying with Romana. She tended to be very dogmatic, but she was a great storyteller, a passionate teacher, so energetic, so inspiring to be around. She so loved being a Grand Dame... but also loved to show you that she could wiggle her ears.

Kathy was rigorous, yet so much fun, and had so much courage, teaching tirelessly even with the pain of osteoarthritis. She explained that Joseph Pilates wanted people to have more muscular bodies, because his body was muscular. She said, "Remember, Mr. Pilates created Contrology for the military—we don't have to do that his way." She respected Joe, but wasn't caught in doing an exercise only one way. For instance, she did Monkey on the Cadillac with no springs.

Kathy was also the Prop Queen. She would make her own props, using soup cans, old springs, large balls, small balls, straps. On the other hand, Romana was very anti-prop. "That's not Pilates!" she would say.

Ron and I became really good friends when he retired to Texas. In one of the first classes I took with him, he walked up to me and said, "You look like you know something." What a great compliment! We talked a lot over the years about life and Pilates.

Mary's contribution is so special because she's also a Jungian analyst. She brings a way of seeing the whole person, and to people seeing themselves newly. She's so willing to

Many teachers have a fear of not being **"Pilates perfect."** When they have permission to let go of that perfection and be guided by their body wisdom with an expanded perception of themselves and others, their personal practice and teaching become congruent with who they are as human beings.

explore movement through her body wisdom. She has contributed so much to my growth as a person and as a Pilates practitioner.

I've enjoyed Lolita's approach to teaching, too. She is so graceful and has been willing to stand up and express how important it is that we honor the many lineages in Pilates. We've had great experiences together.

I've been very honored to have Kathy, Ron, Mary and Lolita attend my workshops over the years.

**PS:** Have you gotten any deeper insight into Joe from working with people who knew him firsthand?

**Wendy:** There is a lot of mythology about what Joe taught. Romana never acknowledged that each of the Elders, including her, taught their own interpretation of Joe's work. But when you watch Joe's own workouts and the mat classes in the archival film Mary Bowen put together, you see that he just wanted to get people moving. He's not snapping

**BELOW:** WENDY HAS STUDIED WITH FIVE OF THE PILATES ELDERS, INCLUDING (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): LOLITA SAN MIGUEL; MARY BOWEN; KATHY GRANT; ROMANA KRYZANOWSKA; AND RON FLETCHER.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF WENDY LEBLANC-ARBUCKLE

# Partner in Pilates, Partner in Life: Michael Arbuckle

Like Joseph Pilates, Wendy LeBlanc-Arbuckle has worked side-by-side with her spouse Michael Arbuckle for much of her career. "Michael and I have been married and worked together for 30 years, and he has been my greatest teacher," she says.

The couple met in 1985 at a workshop with visionary teacher, Jean Houston, in New Orleans. "Michael was talking to a mutual friend, and when I went over and met him, there was this energy," Wendy recalls. "At the beginning of the workshop, Jean asked us to close our eyes and move to the music. Then when the music stopped, you opened your eyes and were supposed to do exchanges with whomever you were near. Michael was right there in front of me!

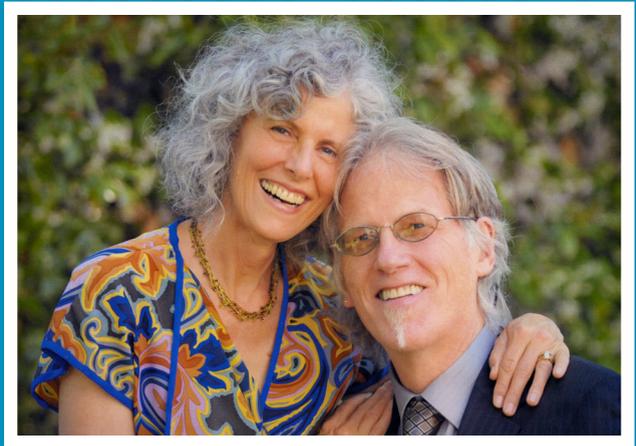
"He confessed later he had never closed his eyes! We fell in love that weekend." The two have been pretty much inseparable ever since, and got married six months later, in 1986.

At the time, Michael, a talented woodworker, was making toys and sculptures, and owned a successful gallery in New Orleans. But he soon also began helping co-manage Wendy's East/West Center, which they expanded to The Macrobiotic Center of Louisiana. The two were later co-partners in the NOVA Institute in Colorado, and until recently, Michael managed the Pilates Center of Austin.

His creative talents and woodworking skill also came in handy. "I first got my

equipment from Steve Giordano, who was working with Romana, but there were problems. So I asked Michael to make me something, and he began to research the specs. Around that time, I was studying with Romana in New York and mentioned to her that Michael was researching equipment. She said, 'He should just come up and measure everything.' So he did, and he made me a gorgeous Reformer and Chair. Then some other teachers asked, will he make me something? So with no advertisement, his business, Dynamic Fitness Systems, began building a clientele, mostly through word of mouth because it was so beautiful and functioned so well."

Michael eventually expanded from a workshop in their home to a larger warehouse, when one day in 1998, an employee sparked a massive fire that destroyed everything—including all his templates and all the equipment he had ready to ship. "It was devastating," Wendy says. "After we got over the shock of it, he contacted Julie Lobdell of Progressive Body Systems in Boulder and asked her for help replacing the lost equipment.



She did, and in the process, they both realized they would make great collaborators, and that's how Peak Pilates was born."

In 2003, when Julie decided to launch Peak's certification program, Michael decided he wanted to simplify his life and sold out to her. Today, Michael is retired, but is preparing to get back into his artistry and sculpture in the couple's new home in Asheville, NC.

"Michael has taught me that integrity is the soil that grows an authentic, loving being," Wendy says. "The way he has lived a fully alive, contributing life in spite of his own sometimes debilitating challenges with PTSD has inspired not only my life's work, but opened both our hearts to the wonder and mystery of being partners for life."

**ABOVE:** WENDY AND MICHAEL ARBUCKLE, HER HUSBAND OF 30 YEARS, WHOM SHE CALLS "HER GREATEST TEACHER."

his fingers and counting time, like Romana taught, because she was a dancer and he was a boxer!

I also discovered from talking to all of the Elders that Joe never taught the Pilates breath—"inhaling through your nose, exhaling through your mouth." All he said was "exhale completely, and squeeze every ounce of air out of your body." I discovered that "inhale nose/exhale mouth" actually came from Romana.

**PS: How did you end up in Austin?**

**Wendy:** When the Nova Institute closed in 1992, we were looking for a place to relocate. Our dear friend Mary Anderson suggested Austin, as no one was teaching Pilates there.

So in 1993, we moved to Austin. We rented a house with a large room for a studio and opened the Pilates Center of Austin. It was an immediate success...people were hungry for Pilates. We had the home studio for 10 years, and have been in our current space 15 years.

**PS: Why did you start a certification program?**

**Wendy:** There was no teacher training at the time in our area, and I had so many people saying, please do it. I directed the CoreConnections Pilates Teacher Training Program from 1996 to 2006. By then, there were so many certification programs that I decided there was more of a need for me to support teachers to develop themselves and their careers by becoming a mentor.



**PS: How does your mentoring program work?**

**Wendy:** For the past six years, I've been honored to be one of the second-generation Pilates practitioners invited to be part of Balanced Body's Passing the Torch Mentoring Program, which was inspired by Lolita San Miguel. Each Mentor creates their own program. My program's focus is to coach Pilates teachers/practitioners to be guided by the brilliance of their body wisdom (their bio-intelligence), along with the permission to discover their own voice and vision as a contribution to Pilates, which I see as an updated understanding of Joe's vision of whole-body health.

Many teachers have a fear of not being "Pilates perfect." When they have permission to let go of that perfection and be guided by their body wisdom with an expanded perception of themselves and others, their personal practice and teaching become congruent with who they are as human beings.

The year-long program gives us the time to plumb the depths of what each teacher wants and needs. Teachers come to Austin for three weeklong intensives, where they study and move with me and the CoreStaff practitioners in my studio to immerse themselves in an embodied approach to Pilates. They also take classes, teach one another with my guidance, watch special videos and so much more! The remainder of the year, I mentor them by phone or Skype, along with inspiring them with projects and special readings.

What I feel is often missing in Pilates is permission for Pilates teachers to look outside the box and realize that awareness, both of themselves and of their client, is the most important thing they can bring to Pilates—more important than a specific exercise. Their client is so much more than a torn meniscus or hip replacement, but often clients are thought of as a biomechanical problem.

In addition, I offer workshops around the country and the world, and film with Pilates Anytime. I have also had many requests for online mentoring, which I will be offering shortly, so I would love to hear from teachers who have requests for special topics!

**PS: What are some of the other somatic practices you have studied?**

**Wendy:** I made a decision to stop doing yoga for four years when I first studied Pilates. I

discovered over time that I was over-stabilizing in Pilates. I realized I was feeling too much tension. I wanted to know how partnering with gravity can stimulate the "relaxation response," rather than fight gravity and create tension, which requires stretching constantly.

This inquiry led me to studies with great somatic pioneers like Judith Aston, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen and Emilie Conrad, along with Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais, Buteyko and Carl Stough Breathwork. I also became a Structural Integration Practitioner, a body of work created by Ida Rolf.

So many teachers have studied a variety of methods, and yet they still feel they don't know enough. This is because they don't see the connections between these methods—they're often caught in their marketing differences, the "branding." Once you learn to be present to the wholeness of a person as you work with them, you're not torn between doing movement or rehab, you're addressing the person in the present moment.

**PS: Tell us about your personal Pilates practice.**

**Wendy:** Every day I do something...sometimes a full 45-minute Pilates or yoga practice. I also do a gentle Do-In (a precursor to Qigong), Continuum or Body Mind Centering practice and meditate on a regular basis.

My Pilates practice has become embodied through studying how our innate biointelligence knows how to move and self-heal when we learn to listen to its guidance. So my practice always begins with yielding to gravity's support, which allows internal lift to happen naturally, the way children move with no extra tension, effort with ease even in the most advanced exercises!

**PS: Any plans for the future?**

**Wendy:** Michael and I moved to Asheville, NC, at the end of June! The Pilates Center of Austin will continue to thrive, thanks to our talented and loyal staff. I will be doing online mentoring and also return to Austin every four months to mentor Passing the Torch Mentoring Program teachers and the PCA Staff! **PS**



**FROM TOP TO BOTTOM:**  
WENDY HAS FILMED MORE THAN 18 WORKOUTS FOR PILATES ANYTIME; WENDY TEACHING A MAT WORKSHOP IN NEW ORLEANS IN 2011.