

HEALING PROPERTIES

Praxis offers classes to restore body and soul.

BY SARAH SHEMKUS

➤ **When P.J. O'Clair was nine years old,** she fell while playing with her sisters. She injured her spine but never realized how serious the damage was, even as she lived with lingering pain for years. Then one day when she was 22, she bent over and found herself unable to stand back up. She realized her right leg was partially paralyzed.

Unable to figure out what was causing O'Clair's pain and impaired movement, doctors finally decided to do exploratory surgery. What they discovered was that the childhood accident had ruptured a spinal disc, causing years of scar tissue build up. When O'Clair woke up from surgery, she was able to feel her leg again for the first time in a year. The hospital, however, sent her home without any rehabilitation plan, other than advising her to walk every day.

So O'Clair started looking for her own answers. What she found was Pilates, then a relatively unknown system. The exercises helped her find her way back to mobility and set her on a path that has become her life's work. As she grew stronger, she realized she wanted to help other people harness the power of fitness to heal and grow.

Since that time more than 35 years ago, O'Clair has run several studios, created programming for major fitness brands, and become internationally known as a lecturer and instructor. The most recent iteration of her mission is Praxis, a fitness training studio in Beverly that opened last June.

More intimate than a gym and more diverse than a yoga studio, Praxis offers clients a combination of individual attention and varied exercise options to keep their training engaging and effective. Personal training and group fitness classes are offered.

The new studio, in the North Shore Crossing development right off Route 128, is a calm and clean space, without the distractions



P.J. O'Clair (right) practices aerial yoga.

offered by a typical gym.

In the front part of the studio is a space outfitted with suspension straps, weighted balls, resistance bands, and other equipment. This area is dedicated to functional strength training—exercises that are about overall toning and strengthening for better movement. None of the equipment here is machine-driven; even the treadmills have a distinctive curved belt that is powered by the weight and stride of the user. “To be able to power movement with your own engine is both a strength and a skill,” O'Clair says.

Across the hall, a Pilates room holds an extensive collection of equipment for the strengthening and stretching system. For O'Clair, this room is the heart of her entire approach to fitness. Pilates, she says, builds core strength and helps the body learn to move together holistically, rather than simply isolating one muscle or area.

A cycling room holds 10 stationary bicycles for classes that go far beyond conventional notions of spinning. Technologically advanced bikes are designed to emulate the feel of

riding on the road and can track students' workout metrics, allowing them to target ways to improve their performance.

In the aerial yoga studio at the back of the space, soft, spacious fabric slings hang from a metal structure custom-fabricated for Praxis from parts of an old construction crane. Aerial yoga classes offer both fun and fitness, O'Clair says. Stretching and moving while floating aloft creates an almost childlike sense of play that is very appealing, she notes. At the same time, the support of the fabric decompresses the spine and unlocks unexpected abilities.

“You can stretch in unbelievable ways because you've got that support,” O'Clair says.

Praxis also incorporates rowing machines, barre classes, and even an innovative piece of equipment called a Cardio Tramp, which allows clients to experience the benefits of jumping while in a horizontal position. O'Clair does not latch on to every new fitness trend, but she is always keeping an eye out for innovations that can offer real benefits.

This dedication to innovation and diverse exercise is at the heart of her long-term success as a fitness professional, O'Clair says. With so many different approaches to choose from, she is confident she can create a rewarding fitness experience for anyone, regardless of experience, physical condition, or age. “It's never too late,” she says. ♦

➤ **CONTACT** praxisperformwell.com