

The Corps de Pilates

By Jennifer H. McInerney

THESE TWIN
SISTERS ARE
MAKING IT BIG
IN THE BIG APPLE

With their advanced degrees, dancing ability, and model-like good looks, Manhattanites Katherine and Kimberly Corp—identical, redheaded twin sisters—could have done virtually anything. They could, for instance, have worked for global companies or even performed with the world-famous Radio City Rockettes.

Oh, *wait*—they've already done all of that!

Together, the two earned undergraduate degrees in East Asian Studies from Duke University, in Durham, North Carolina, in just three years, and master's degrees in International Economic Policy from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs in New York City. Fluent in Japanese, they lived in Japan for four years, working for multinational corporations there. They then spent a year dancing in a famous magician's road-tour show and two seasons performing with the Radio City Rockettes. Last year, they appeared in the remake of *The Stepford Wives*.

They could easily have elected to pursue careers in high finance or entertainment, but, after considering all of the opportunities available to them, the Corp sisters, who are now in their early 30s, finally decided on fitness. What they wanted more than anything else was to open their own Pilates studio. The factors that prompted their choice included their own personal commitments to a healthy lifestyle, the growing stature of the health and fitness club industry, and the tantalizing upside of Pilates.



Photography: Bruno Versaci

Twin bill Katherine, L., and Kimberly Corp



It was a risky undertaking for the two, but it has paid handsome dividends, and provided them with a wonderful stage on which to share their many skills and talents. Take a long hard look at the Corps sisters—they're what the future of fitness looks like.

Pilates premiere

Pilates on Fifth, the 3,700-square-foot studio they opened in 2000 on the well-known avenue at the busy intersection of 42nd Street, in New York City, represents the realization of a dream they'd entertained since they'd toured as dancers. When they weren't performing, they spent

nearly every day at Symmetry in Motion, a studio in Las Vegas where they discovered the many benefits of Pilates: e.g., fluidity of movement, improved range of motion, flattering elongation of muscles, etc. Their daily sessions kept them in top form and free of injuries while on tour and, later, at Radio City Music Hall.

"Pilates is a very pleasant, relaxing, way to get in shape—to get strong in a safe way; there's no stress on the joints," Katherine points out. "It allows you to go *inward* and focus on what your body's doing. We absolutely love it."

The Corps had saved enough money to open a studio, but hadn't lined up a sin-

gle client, and that was just one of the obstacles they had to overcome. Five years ago, Pilates wasn't the familiar phenomenon it is today, which made it difficult for the sisters to pitch their business plan to, among others, prospective landlords. "People didn't understand what it was," Kimberly recalls. "We'd mention Pilates, and people would think we were starting a cult."

Compounding the challenge was the fact that neither had ever operated a business or leased commercial space, which made hard-bitten landlords leery. After meeting with, and being turned down by, a score of building owners, the Corps finally found the perfect space and ►

Pilates *continued*

ideal landlord: Alan Abramson, the head of Abramson Brothers Inc., was not only acquainted with Pilates, but promptly became one of their first clients. "If he hadn't given us that chance, I don't know what we would have done," Katherine muses.

It took an investment of about \$50,000 and lots of effort and initiative, but, after six challenging months, the twins unveiled the first incarnation of Pilates on Fifth—then a 1,200-square-foot studio on the 18th floor, outfitted with Cadillacs, Reformers, and the other toning and body-stretching equipment unique to Pilates. The facility offers the STOTT brand of Pilates developed by Moira Merrithew. In 2003, the Corps relocated their business to larger quarters on the 22nd floor, and have since been expanding into additional space as it becomes available. By the end of next year, they expect the studio to grow to 7,000 square feet.



Photography: Bruno Versaci

Perfect touch Instructors work one-on-one with clients to ensure correct form

During its first year, the company generated \$148,000 in revenues, recording a slight loss, but, by last year, it was producing a profit margin of nearly

20% on \$1.07 million in sales. The Corps project revenues of \$1.4 million (a 31% increase) for 2005, and hope to push their profit margin to 25% (a 25% increase). According to STOTT Pilates, the Toronto-based firm that markets a line of Pilates instruction, equipment, and videos, those figures place Pilates on Fifth among the top 10% of its 40 licensed studios worldwide. (For a complete list of Pilates providers, log on to www.ihrsa.org/buyersmart.)

Now showing

"We're perfectionists, and, I'm sure, we're never going to be satisfied, but the good thing about that is we're always striving to do better," notes Kimberly. "However, we have achieved our main goal, which was to create a warm, friendly, comfortable, and nonintimidating environment for our members."

A visit to Pilates on Fifth confirms her claim. The studio is reminiscent of a cozy, eclectically decorated home, with accents provided by warm colors, comfy pillows, and large mirrors. The instructors greet their clients as though they were old friends. The equipment in the main studio area—10 Reformers, four Cadillacs, seven Chairs, and three Ladder Barrels—is positioned so that members have ample elbowroom, but not so much that they feel isolated. While the studio's overall configuration is somewhat narrow and maze-like, it seems an ideal setting for the substantial machines, which are lined up side by side.

NOW ON STAGE: PILATES

The Radio City Music Hall Rockettes are renowned for their statuesque figures, glamorous costumes, and amazing, high-legged kicks. Katherine and Kimberly Corpaced their auditions at an open call for new dancers, learned the show over just five days of rehearsals, and then—it was on to the "Great Stage." The Radio City Music Hall stage is considered one of the most technologically advanced in the world—e.g., portions of it are mounted on hydraulically powered elevators—but it's hard on performers. The stage is made of steel, which isn't particularly kind to dancers.

"Since steel doesn't absorb shock, when forces are driven down, they simply ricochet back up into the dancer's body and are absorbed by the joints, such as the ankle, knee, hip, or lower back," explains Kimberly. "Usually the dancer feels the impact wherever they have a physical weakness."

The twins credit their two-year, injury-free tenure with the Rockettes to their daily practice of Pilates, as well as to four months of GYROTONIC training prior to their initial audition. "I think Pilates' effect on the deep muscles of the abdomen and spine helped strengthen our abs and lower backs; as a result, the shock from the steel stage didn't cause us to miss any shows," says Kimberly. "If muscles, rather than bones, are absorbing the shock, then the body, as a whole, reacts better."

Today, many current Rockettes are clients of Pilates on Fifth, and work at strengthening their knees, lower backs, and other problem areas for performances, which can involve as many as five shows a day. The Corp sisters have also trained dancers from *The Producers*, *Movin' Out*, and other Broadway shows. "Dancing," the two attest, "can be far more stressful to the body than it looks!"





Growing room Pilates on Fifth plans to double in size by the end of next year

Upstairs, in the studio's penthouse, group mat classes are offered for beginning, intermediate, and advanced students, and there are cardiovascular units and two GYROTONIC Pulley Towers. The GYROTONIC machine, a bizarre-looking configuration of weights and pulleys that allow muscles to be worked interdependently, is among the newest additions to the Pilates on Fifth inventory, and one that's proven incredibly popular. In all, more than 800 different exercises can be performed on the studio's equipment—which can be an

To be certified, teachers have to have completed 40 hours of instruction to conduct mat courses (six additional hours for advanced mat); 50 hours, for the Reformer (18 additional hours for advanced); 50 hours, for the Cadillac, Chair, and Barrel (12 additional hours for advanced certification); and 24 hours, for the injury and special-population courses. The twins are also certified to teach instructor-certification courses at Pilates on Fifth, and conduct some of them in Japanese.

TAKE A LONG HARD LOOK AT THE CORP SISTERS—THEY'RE WHAT THE FUTURE OF FITNESS LOOKS LIKE.

overwhelming prospect, even for the owners, who work out every day. "We try to deliberately schedule time to work out together," says Kimberly, "but, if we can't, what we sometimes do, for fun, is to design workouts for one another. That spices things up a bit."

Pilates on Fifth currently employs 28 STOTT-certified instructors, who meet with more than 320 clients, by appointment, each week. About 85% of them are women, many are dancers, and approximately 10% make use of Pilates for rehabilitation. Equipment sessions for privates, duets, and trios are offered, and range in price from \$42 (as part of a trio) per session to \$1,380 (single) for a package of 20 visits.

Coming attractions

The Corp sisters' entrepreneurial production has received rave reviews from clients and the ever-demanding Manhattan marketplace, as well as the founders of STOTT. "Katherine and Kimberly are two remarkable women who have built an impressive company, based on their unique combination of talent, passion, and business acumen," notes Lindsay Merrithew, the president and CEO of STOTT Pilates. "We're *very* proud to have them as part of our organization."

What's next for this ambitious and talented pair? A better question might be: What *isn't*!

STARS IN JAPAN

Katherine and Kimberly Corp may turn in each night in Manhattan, but, even then, they continue to do their part for Pilates—on the other side of the globe, in Japan. There, the twins are quickly becoming the poster girls for Pilates, thanks to a series of 24 five-minute promos for a workout show called *Easy Pilates* that have been broadcast on NHK, the country's public broadcast network.

"The way they introduce new programs in Japan—to get people interested—is with five-minute teasers before a regular program," Katherine explains. NHK has picked up the show and will be launching a 30-minute series in the fall. Japanese television viewers will then be able to enjoy at-home, step-by-step, Pilates lessons taught by the show's stars—the Corp sisters.

In the meantime, the pair is helping to bring Pilates to the Land of the Rising Sun by offering certification courses, in Japanese, at Pilates on Fifth. Thus far, about 25 aspiring Pilates instructors have come to New York for the express purpose of taking the courses in their native language.

They'll be appearing in a dance sequence in an upcoming film, *Little Manhattan*. They'll be returning to Columbia University this fall to begin work on a second master's degree, in applied physiology... And, in terms of Pilates on Fifth, they're exploring the possibility of adding a nutritionist and spa amenities, and, soon, will be taking over the entire 22nd floor of their building. As far as they're concerned, the show has just begun! ■

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