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Making Kathy's Legacy Her Own

Blossom Leilani Crawford was first-generation teacher Kathy Grant's last protégée. Today, the Brooklyn-based Crawford is keeping Grant's work alive while making her own mark on the method.

by Anne Marie O'Connor

THIS PAGE:
CRAWFORD HAS
CLEARLY MASTERED
THE JACKKNIFE.
OPPOSITE PAGE:
BALANCING IN OPEN-
LEG ROCKER.

Pilates Style: Where did you grow up?

Blossom Leilani Crawford: I grew up in Kona on the Big Island of Hawaii. Back then, it was a small town. I had a tumultuous childhood, and I couldn't wait to get the heck out. I always knew the price of a ticket to California.

PS: What did you do after high school?

Blossom: I got out of Hawaii! I was an aspiring dancer, and so when I got accepted to New York University in 1993, I decided to go there. It was my first time in New York. I thought it was going to be like *Crocodile Dundee*... I was disappointed.

PS: How did you first get introduced to Pilates?

Blossom: Kathy Grant, who had been a student of Joseph and Clara Pilates, had been teaching Pilates at NYU since 1988, and all dance students had to take two weeks of Kathy's class. At that time, in the 1990s, you didn't do the traditional repertoire. Instead, you did a warm-up that Kathy had devised, which could be five different preliminary exercises, like simply sitting up straight, or 10 slow sit-ups—the slowest sit-ups ever. Kathy was being more creative and playful in those years.

"I can't tell you how many of my former classmates have said to me over the years, 'I can't believe I didn't keep going to Kathy's class!'"

PS: Did that approach have validity?

Blossom: Absolutely. Kathy wanted you to master these simple moves so you could then go on to do the Hundred, etc. She really wanted to make us think about working from the inside out. That was the first time someone said to me, "Notice how you're breathing more on one side during this move," or "Notice which of your legs feels tight," versus "Bring this leg to this position," which is how dancers work.

PS: Did all the dance students appreciate this?

Blossom: Most people dropped it after the requisite two weeks. I went at least twice a week for the whole three years. (NYU's dance program was three school years and two summers.) I can't tell you how many of my former classmates have said to me over the years, "I can't believe I didn't keep going to Kathy's class!" But we were 18, and no one wanted to get up at 8:30 in the morning.

PS: How did you become her assistant?

Blossom: I graduated in 1996 and had a terrible summer. I was unhappy, I gained weight, I had this wretched bartending job. I was like, how can I get Kathy to let me take her morning class, because then I'd get back in shape. I checked my voicemail that day, and there was a message from her: "I'm having this procedure done, and I need someone to demonstrate for me for about a month." I leaped at the chance. After about two weeks, she said, just keep coming. So I became her demonstrator, then her assistant. After three years, NYU turned it into a paid position. I didn't know where it was going, but I knew I was going to learn a lot from her.

PS: What was your relationship like?

Blossom: She was my friend, mentor

and teacher. I had a very old-fashioned apprenticeship with her that extended beyond the studio and into each other's lives. There was an intimacy because I spent hours a day with her over 10 years. We loved each other.

At the same time, it could get complicated. Kathy was getting older and less able at exactly the time Pilates was getting more popular. People would say to her, can you come teach a workshop, and, oh, if you can't make it, can Blossom do it? That really hurt her. So I had to sort of hang back a lot.

PS: How did you end up going to Romana to get certified?

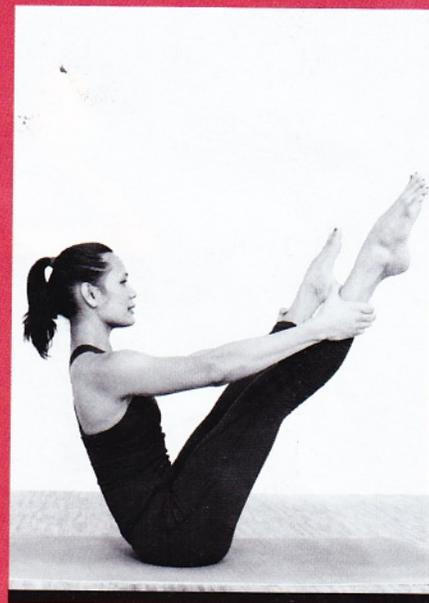
Blossom: I wanted to get certified because that was what people were doing at the time. Kathy specifically said she never certified anyone and felt strongly about that. She suggested I go to Romana, and I am really glad I did. It formalized and helped me organize what I had learned from Kathy. Together, the training from Romana and Kathy gave me a unique perspective on Pilates that not many people have.

PS: Was working with Romana different than Kathy?

Blossom: With Kathy, you warmed up, then got on the Reformer, but at Romana's, you got right on the Reformer. At that time, in my mind, the way Romana did it was very wrong.

I actually told this story at the PMA memorial for Kathy: After I started training with Romana, Kathy asked me how it was going. I was like, it's terrible, they do this instead of that, it's not like you, Kathy. Kathy got really mad at me. She said, no, we're the same. She said, 'The goal is to move. I use a fork, they use chopsticks. But we're all moving bodies and trying to make them feel better.' That was a huge learning moment for me.

So even though it was difficult



IN THE STUDIO WITH BLOSSOM LEILANI CRAWFORD

FAVORITE APPARATUS: It's a toss-up between the Cadillac—I love all the fun, acrobatic stuff and the stretchy fun stuff you can do on it—and the Wunda Chair, because it's the hardest to do right.

HARDEST MOVE TO MASTER:

Push-up moves on the Chair, anything that requires upper-body strength. And it was even harder the way Kathy would make you do it, pumping the pedal without shifting your weight.

MAT MOVE YOU LOVE THE MOST:

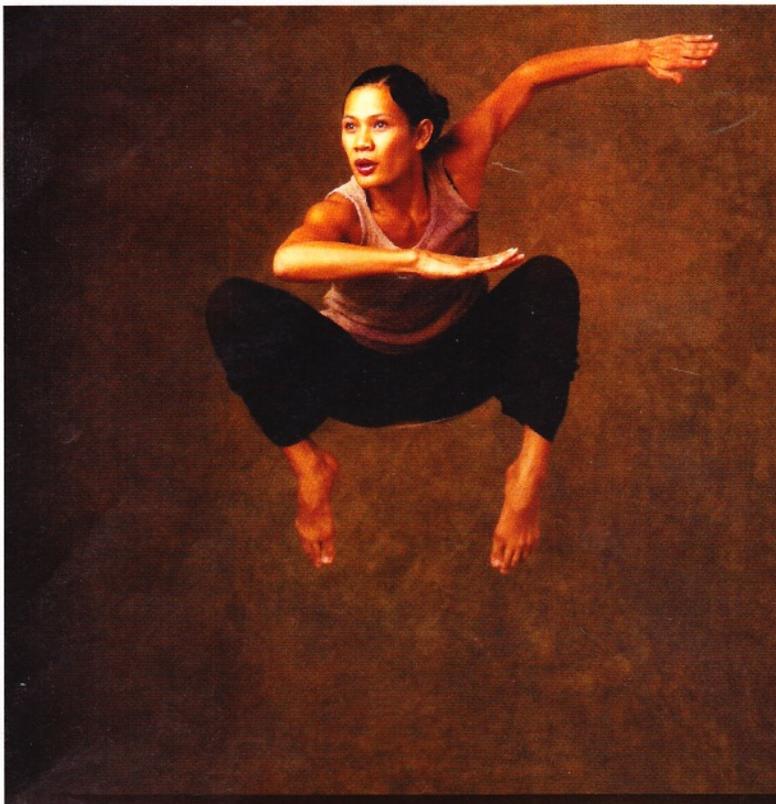
The Roll-Up. It's the most basic and difficult.

WHAT INSPIRES YOU AS A

TEACHER: I am inspired by the clients and teachers I work with every single day. Each person's body is different, creating unique challenges, and the way they mentally connect to the work brings a whole other level of changes.

FAVORITE PILATES APPAREL:

Lululemon. It lasts.



ABOVE: CRAWFORD IN CYNTHIA OLIVER'S AFRO SOCIALITE LIFE DIVA.

OPPOSITE PAGE: CRAWFORD GUIDES A STUDENT ON THE WUNDA CHAIR IN A PILATES ANYTIME VIDEO.

in the beginning to assist Kathy at NYU in the morning, then do teacher training with Romana in the afternoon, I learned that there are many different ways within the Pilates method to get people moving intelligently. I carry this on in the philosophy of my studio, the workshops I teach and in my everyday teaching.

PS: You also started teaching Pilates at Mark Morris Dance Center? How did that come about?

Blossom: Twelve years ago, a colleague told me he was giving up teaching the Pilates class at the dance center. He asked me if I want to take it over, and I jumped at the chance. It was the first time I had my own mat class. It was a good time for me to do something on my own, separate from Kathy, so I could discover what I liked to do without her in the room.

That class is my lab, because the students aren't all dancers, they're people from the community. It's actually much more interesting than teaching just dancers. I like seeing all the different bodies. To have to teach them all in one room is a lot of work, but teaching a large group is a great skill to have; once you have it, you can go out and teach anywhere. Last year, I taught a 200-person mat class in Australia.

Kathy didn't give me too much professional advice, but she did tell me to never give up teaching the class at Mark Morris.

PS: When did you start seeing private clients?

Blossom: After I got certified, I kept bartending because I made more money. But when I finally

"I learned that there are many different ways within the Pilates method to get people moving intelligently. I carry this on in the philosophy of my studio, the workshops I teach and in my everyday teaching."

got fired from the last of my bartending jobs in 2001, I said, I guess I'll teach Pilates.

PS: Why did you decide to open your studio?

Blossom: After I stopped bartending, I started teaching at studios all over Manhattan and Brooklyn, but I was spending as much time commuting as teaching. In 2006, my now-husband said, you should open a studio. And he was right, it was sort of time—I really wanted my own Pilates home, a place that reflected my diverse training and philosophy, a place where you could get a sweaty workout or rehabilitate after an injury or surgery.

Dumbo—an area in Brooklyn just under the Manhattan Bridge—was just beginning to happen at that time. I found this tiny space that I love and opened the first Pilates studio in the neighborhood. My studio now has movie stars, executives, dancers, moms, older people—I love the diversity of people that we teach.

Kathy was very supportive. She even gave me original equipment from the Henri Bendel department store, where she had had a studio before moving to NYU. I stopped working with Kathy the year after I opened my studio, in 2007, but I continued to be her assistant at workshops and seminars.

PS: How do you come up with ideas for your continuing-education workshops?

Blossom: I only teach things I'm excited about. My latest workshop is called Accessible Advanced Mat Work. So many of the advanced mat exercises are really great, but we skip them

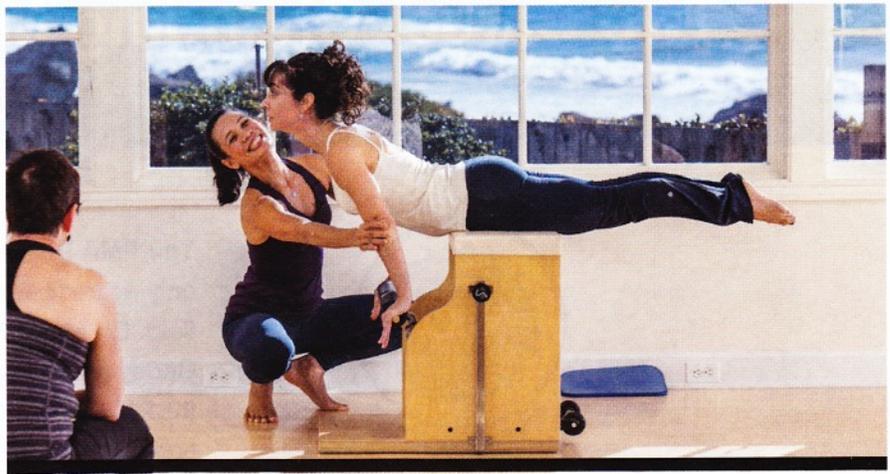
because they are too hard for most people. But there are ways to break them down, so most people can do parts of them.

I also teach some Kathy Grant repertory-based workshops. Kathy created all of these Cat moves in her class at NYU, so I started teaching what I call Kathy's Cats. It's 10 different Cat movements—there's Sexy Cat, Hissing Cat, Restless Cat, Blossom Cat—basically it's 10 different versions of Cat and Cow—in other words, all different ways to move the spine. I teach the skills from the Cats on the mat and then bring them onto the apparatus.

PS: Tell us about your personal life.

Blossom: I live with my husband, Adam, in Brooklyn. One other piece of advice Kathy gave me was, don't teach your husband. So Adam does Pilates once a week with another teacher at my studio. He says I make this terrible face when I teach him, as if to say, "that's all you can do?"

My daughter, Sabine, is five, and my son, Augustus, is six. My daughter



recently said to me, "Mom, do I have to teach Pilates when I grow up?" I said, "No, of course not." She said, "Oh, good, it's too boring!" But sometimes she does teach me Pilates, though she doesn't like it when I get chatty. She'll say, "There's no talking in Pilates!"

My son recently learned that I am the boss at my studio. He was shocked because my husband has a boss. That was a proud feminist moment for me!

I like to craft—I'm a knitter and a

wannabe quilter. I have made sweaters, scarves—I even crocheted a backpack once. I also love to eat, cook and travel. Food is one of my greatest joys and one of my reasons to exercise, so I can eat more!

I grew up on an island, and I always dreamed of seeing the world. Sometimes, I have to pinch myself because of the good fortune I have had, to be able to see the world while doing what I love. **PS**

CRAWFORD REMINISCES ABOUT LIFE WITH KATHY GRANT

Having Kathy Grant as a teacher wasn't for the thin-skinned. "Kathy was mean!" recalls Blossom Leilani Crawford. "In class, she'd grab crotches, she'd grab butts. She'd say, 'I don't know what you are going to do with those big breasts,' or to me she'd say, 'I don't know what you're going to do with those big feet!' She didn't mean it in a mean way, she was just extremely honest."

In addition to the NYU dance students, Grant also saw private clients at her small studio at the school. "She taught semi-privates, and she'd see 11 or 12 clients a day. She didn't charge a lot because she knew a lot of times, she just didn't have a lot of energy—she was in her 80s by then."



Crawford says that Grant regretted that she was getting older just as Pilates was getting more popular. "Terrible timing was kind of the story of her whole friggin' life! She was a classically trained ballet dancer who was in her prime in the 1940s," when there were zero opportunities for a black ballerina. "Then, Pilates finally gets popular, and she's like, great, I'm 80 years old!"

But these challenges were what made Kathy so tough, Crawford believes. "She performed at these 'Negro' nightclubs in the '40s. She was the dance captain and had to tell the dancers when it was time to go onstage, but they wouldn't listen to her. Finally one night, Louis Armstrong, who saw her struggling to corral the dancers, called her aside and said, 'Do something for Pops. Next time, don't be nice, tell them, 'Motherf*****s, let's go.' That night, Kathy did her usual, 'Ladies, it's time to go onstage. Ladies....' And no one budged. So she took Louis' advice and said, 'Bitches, let's go!' And when they heard that, they went!

"Sometimes you have to do that, you have to be really strict and mean when you're trying to change bodies. For one thing, she knew she would not always be there to tell you what to do.

"I have a few clients who were also Kathy's," Crawford says. "Once in a while, I kind of smack them lightly the way Kathy would. We giggle fondly and say, 'Oh, that was Kathy! But we know what it means: 'Pull your s*** together!'"