

July Student Spotlight



Fiona Firine

I am so happy to reveal the special July Student Spotlight, Fiona Firine! She has touched my life as a good friend and is a breath of sunshine in all the ways our paths have crossed through the years. I admire her positivity, genuine compassion for others, and open mind to move forward with any obstacle she faces. I watched her over the years enthusiastically participate in many different fitness class formats from Pilates, Cardio Dance, and the 5K class as a novice. She excels because of her motivation, positivity, and knowing she could change her body to reach her personal goals. I saw

her rise after health obstacles, persevering to overcome the nervousness of her ability to finish the class with many modifications.

Every class was a gift to her for the reason of being a part of a team of empowering individuals who were all there for a purpose to become healthy and strong! She was good friends with Bob Hirata, one of my first Pilates students-- a wonderful man who was one of my most flexible, strong, and supportive students. Celebrating his memory of how flawless his technique and strength was in Pilates and how he therapeutically kept his severe scoliosis with no repercussions transformed him into a "superhero." I am sure he is applauding Fiona's successes from above.

Recently, I am elated by Fiona's progress in 2020 in Spring Boot Camp working with her friend/ teammate Shelly (Ms. June Student Spotlight) during a pandemic. She managed to shine with consistency, preparing nutritious meals and pushing herself to new heights in improving her stamina and strength as well as feeling leaner with her loss of body fat and inches. I am sure she will keep on reinventing herself with her fitness journey in the years to come and she is one amazing woman who is an inspiration to all!

♥ *Melissa*

"I have been on a beautiful journey with Melissa, whom I met 18 years ago at the New Haven Ballet School. We were both working Ballet Mom's, trying to keep balance as we juggled our ballerina daughter's dance classes, our careers and the needs and activities of our other children. We spoke of the difficulty in finding balance. I think of this now as a metaphor for where our journey would take us.

At the time I met Melissa I was in poor health and not sure why. I just knew I felt older than my years and was out of breath all of the time. I grew up with parents who embraced being fit and as physically active as possible. My mother took us on long walks daily and as a small child, I had to run to keep up with her brisk pace. My Dad was a coach for soccer leagues. Weekend family activities consisted of 10+ miles steep hikes or bike rides, after our ballet and Irish dancing classes or for me, long rides on my horse. When you are brought up being physically active with your entire family living that way, you don't even think about it. It is just your lifestyle and you don't know what it feels like to not have cardiovascular strength or not embrace outdoor activity. I was truly fortunate to have such parents.

In my mid-teens this ground to a halt for me when I contracted Legionnaire's disease. My lungs collapsed leaving permanent scarring. But my lungs had become too reactive to allow me to ride my beloved horse anymore or participate in ballet or Irish dancing. It felt crushing to me as those were the things which brought me joy. And, once again, as when I was a child, I could no longer keep up with my Mum on walks. Craving to still be active, I walked every day gradually getting stronger. I had lost all muscle but through perseverance, I became a strong walker and continued this routine after having my own children. I had been diagnosed with an underactive thyroid in my late teens but then taken off thyroid supplementation when I was pregnant with my first child as my levels were within the normal range. After the birth of our youngest, I gained weight and could not lose it. Weighing what I had weighed when I gave birth. I found myself breathless and started having vertigo attacks. Months after meeting Melissa I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer. While it was the most common and treatable form, it had spread to lymph nodes and there were fresh lesions on my lungs. Despite a long surgery to remove the thyroid and radiation treatment, I felt better than I had in years immediately after surgery. Lesson I learned, always listen to your body and when something isn't right, push for answers. My surgeon explained in endocrine cancers keeping body weight down lessens the chance of a reoccurrence or other form of endocrine cancer. But that it would be difficult to keep weight down lacking my own thyroid. Her advice begins exercising as soon as possible and push myself. Push though feeling as if you can't breathe, she said to me and stay as lean as you can.

I had a wonderful friend at New Haven Ballet who persuaded me to take adult ballet lessons with him. He was in his mid-70's and in incredible physical shape. When I told him, I needed to know get physically fit, he said to me "you must go to Melissa, if anyone can help you, it will be her". Still recovering from neck surgery, he and I began taking Melissa's Pilates classes. I was so self-conscious, but Bob was my sweet, but firm, cheerleader. Melissa put me at ease with her gentle and kind demeanor. I didn't have anybody strength at all. I have never forgotten how she would quietly lie on the floor next to me during a class and show me how to position my body. And how to make a hammock for my weak neck with my mat.

Within a couple of weeks, I was so engrossed in our classes, I had lost my self-consciousness. I would look forward to her class all day and began feeling better quickly. Soon I was taking her Pilates class twice a week. I was so inspired by Bob in her classes, and by Melissa herself, we added a dance cardio class which incorporated weights. Bob didn't love the cardio as much as I did, but he still took it every week with me, cheering me on. I loved that class so much that sometimes my daughters would take it with me.

A year after my thyroid cancer I was down 29lbs. and feeling the healthiest I had since before I got sick in my teens. I finally had muscular strength again and felt as if I had gained an important part of my life back. When people would ask me what I did I would tell them, "you have to go to Melissa."

I participated in Melissa's 5K class with a few of my friends. We couldn't even make it an 1/8 of a mile without stopping, winded. But we laughed and pushed through. Melissa never stopped encouraging us and working on our conditioning. After 12 weeks we did indeed run that 5K. It was one of those occasions in life you never forgot. My friends, who I think only said they would do it to support me initially, were just as excited as I was that day. Melissa ran the race herself but then as we neared the finish line there, she was cheering us on with a beautiful smile. I crossed the finish line with tears of happiness in my eyes.

Bob and I were consistent in taking Melissa's classes together for 2.5 years. But then Bob became sick. I visited my dear friend at the hospital almost every day. Three years after I had taken my first class with Melissa, Bob died.

I was so heartbroken; I couldn't bear to continue our routine without him. So, I stopped taking classes with Melissa. I missed her and I missed the classes, but my exercise routine was so entwined with my friendship and now the loss of Bob, I had lost all motivation. I ran and joined a gym, but it wasn't the same. I knew I needed to go back to Melissa but then I was in an accident which put me in a cast for months and we had a tragedy in our family and the timing wasn't right. My mindset wasn't right.

This past Winter my dear friend Shelly who has always supported me during my difficult times shared with me she was struggling with her weight despite exercising and was worried as she didn't want to experience the medical issues other family members had. I didn't even need to think about it. I said you must go to Melissa. Shelly was feeling self-conscious about taking a class in front of other people. I said to her, you will forget all that as soon as you meet her and her instruction is so good, so precise and so targeted towards your need, you will exercise in an entirely new way and not forget what she teaches you. As I got the information on classes for Shelly, it hit me. I was really missing Melissa's classes, and Melissa myself! And so Shelly and I signed up for classes together. As I stepped back in to the studio, my first time being there without Bob, and saw Melissa, it felt like coming home.

A week into our classes the pandemic became serious, quickly. By nature of Shelly's job, I thought she might want to take a step back from her fitness goals for now. But we talked and realized the pandemic was a wake-up call for us to put our health first and take personal responsibility to become as healthy as we could. Melissa always looks out for her clients, first she moved classes outdoors and then as the situation in CT became more dire, she moved our classes to a Zoom forum. I wondered how I would fare exercising virtually. Would I allow myself to slack off? Instead, her precise instruction carried through and her classes

became the thing I looked forward to after long and stressful days working from home and being sat for hours. I smile all the way through Melissa's classes. I realize that when I stopped going to her, I fell back on what I always did without instruction and also, I lost muscle tone.

Since April I have lost 8lbs and with Melissa's guidance I have incorporated more protein into my diet. But most importantly, I have gained visible muscle back and I know I have lost inches. I no longer have achy joints. The biggest gain has been my mindset. I have regained my balance mentally and physically. I feel strong. I feel happy. I am exercising in the way my body needs. I think back to my first meeting Melissa and I smile because she is my mentor and one of the most influential women in my life. Thank you, Melissa, for this journey and always encouraging me and helping me balance this life.”

-Fiona

**Sometimes the smallest
step in the right direction
ends up being the biggest
step of your life.**

**Tip toe if you must, but
take the step.**