



PJ O'Clair and student's from Mrs. Pilkanis' PE/Health class Hamilton-Wenham Regional High School

Core Classes by Ally Tobin

Published in Sound-off section for Hamilton-Wenham Chronicle – June 3, 2011

Wellness class at Hamilton Wenham Regional High School isn't your average gym class. Sure, there are games of badminton and knock-out, and daily laps around the track. But what makes Mrs. Pilkanis' wellness class special is its focus on, well, *health*. Instead of simply forcing a bunch of teenagers to play kickball, Mrs. Pilkanis uses real life experiences to promote healthy living.

For the past two months, Mrs. Pilkanis' H Block class has been doing Pilates every Thursday afternoon. While the exercises are challenging, the all-girl class soon began to feel the benefits. "I'd tried Pilates a few times before on my own", says Jacquelyn Roy, a junior in the class, "And I'd never really enjoyed them. They're still difficult with Mrs. Pilkanis, but this time I feel like they're benefiting me in a new way."



This class-wide enthusiasm prompted Mrs. Pilkanis to take her Pilates lessons to the next level: she brought in professional Pilates instructor PJ O'Clair, of ClubXcel and Northeast Pilates. PJ has been teaching Pilates for years, but she discovered the exercises after an injury left her with nerve damage. "When I was 23 I had lost the control of my right leg due to nerve damage in my spine and had to learn to walk again", she says, "Pilates is what I used to rehab myself. And now I am in the best shape of my life at 50!"

PJ led the class through an hour-long Pilates routine, complete with complementary rubber resistor bands for the students. “We did some exercises that we’d done before with Mrs. Pilkanis’, says Kellie Kerrigan, “But we worked on them in different ways, which was helpful. Using the resistor bands cool, and we learned some new exercises that I liked a lot.” Even Mrs. Pilkanis received help on her plank positioning, as did most of the students. “Pilates is the perfect type of conditioning for teenagers because it works the core, which is the foundation for an overall strong body”, says PJ. The students were feeling the result of that by the end of the hour. “My abs were hurting by the end”, says another student, “But in a good way! You could tell right away that this was helping your body.” Which is exactly the point of Pilates. The exercises use the movement patterns that the body goes through in sports and in daily activities, instead of simply isolating muscles. “We never isolate our muscles in life or sports so conditioning that is designed for the entire body is extremely functional,” says PJ.



Pilates are also rewarding to do at any age. As PJ said, she’s in the best shape of her life at age 50. And unlike dodgeball, it’s an exercise that kids actually enjoy doing, and can continue to do outside of school. “Having PJ come in was really fun!” says Kellie Kerrigan, “I really liked it.” PJ enjoyed it, as well. “I had so much fun teaching the high schoolers, I just wish I could see them more often – I was so impressed at how interested they were in moving correctly and getting their core strong.”

As a thank-you gift, Mrs. Pilkanis presented PJ with a loaf of homemade banana bread. At the end of class, the students posed for a picture with the bread fore and center. “I’d love to have PJ come again!” says Haylie Petre, “I felt like I learned a lot.”

For more information on PJ’s Pilates classes, visit her website: www.northeastpilates.com

