

In the Art Deco lobby of a building on Manhattan's Upper West Side, my eyes adjust to the dim light as I check the time. I am early, and nervously ring for the elevator. It is March 2005, and has been seven years since I last studied with Allen, a Hatha yoga teacher. This is not a conventional class. I am here to see if Allen can offer me some additional postures in my seated yoga practice, and

that this is the way I function now. As he ushers me inside, I hear him say under his breath, "Not for long."

We began meeting once a week for what became intensive two-hour sessions. At first, the therapy consisted of Reiki (a Japanese technique for stress reduction and relaxation to promote healing), as well as massage and seated yoga. I stood

to elongate, and the CRPS numbness and pain diminished. For the first time in years, I felt hopeful.

Each week, we reviewed the lesson while Allen wrote a prescription of new poses. The program changed and became more demanding, whether by adding a repetition or increasing time in specific postures. It was all very gradual. Allen

A Step in the Right Direction

By Karen Marcus

find out what he has to say about my new, and limited, lifestyle.

A lifetime of physical activity, including a dance career in my younger years, led to arthroscopic surgery on my right knee to repair a torn meniscus in May 2000. After eight months and three orthopedists, I was diagnosed with complex regional pain syndrome (CRPS), affecting both knees. Although I was taking a variety of medications, the pain was relentless. After trying to work for two years, I applied for, and received, a disability retirement in 2002 from my job as a high school English teacher. I needed a wheelchair for any activity that required extensive walking or standing.

When the elevator arrives at the twelfth floor, I carefully place my cane ahead of me, and step out into the tiled hallway. Allen answers the door, a little balder than I remembered. There is no traditional welcome. "What's all this?" he asks, viewing my walking apparatus of two knee braces and a cane. I tell him

for certain postures, but Allen always produced a small folding chair, as his philosophy is that you cannot work with pain. "You must practice with patience. If you use force, the area remains

required me to do the work at least four times a week, or else he would not work with me. Luckily, I had a dancer's self-discipline and a desperate desire to get better, so each morning I woke up, rolled



inflamed," he said. Allen would have me stand for one posture and then sit or lie down for the next. This went on for weeks and, without my realizing it, I was building strength by standing a little longer each time. By stretching my legs in specific poses, my muscles were able

out my yoga mat and went to work. This practice became my morning meditation as well as a rigorous physical workout.

One day, Allen casually announced, "Today you are going to jump six times." He often challenged and terrified me

and this latest request was no exception. “What about a flare up? What if I am immobilized by the throbbing for two weeks?” I said, starting to cry. Allen reached for the tissue box and held it in front of my face. He looked at me calmly and said, “What will you lose by getting well? What do you have to gain by being sick?” He gave me no choice, put down the tissue box and waited with extended arms. I put my hands in his, bent my knees and unbelievably, jumped six times. After five years of sitting, I could move in the air and there were no repercussions!

Each June, the American Ballet Theater performs at the Metropolitan Opera House in Lincoln Center. I love the ballet, but CRPS had made it difficult for me to watch dancers kick, leap, and turn while my knees pulsed beneath their braces. After a morning appointment with Allen, I decided to try to walk the seven blocks from his studio to Lincoln

Center for a Wednesday matinee. As I prepared to leave with my braces in place under a long black dress, he suggested that I remove them and leave them in my bag. I had recently given up my cane at his urging. “No,” I told him. “I gave up my cane, but you can’t have my braces.”

I was able to stand in line for a ticket, in itself a cause for celebration, as just a short time ago this would have been unthinkable. I was going to be seated for two hours, so I went into the bathroom and slipped my braces off before Act I of *Swan Lake*. The performance was magnificent and, as the dancers took their curtain call, I realized that this day marked my return to the world of movement. As I left the theater and headed for the parking lot seven blocks away, an unexpected downpour made me fumble in my bag for an umbrella. My braces beckoned, but I was already walking down Broadway and would

have had to duck into someplace with an available bathroom to lift my skirt and put them on. Here I was on the one street in Manhattan with no Starbucks’ restroom to save me. For the first time in five years I was walking unaided, literally singing in the rain!

It has been three years since I began this “leg” of the journey. Between my yoga practice, yoga class, and visits to gym for weight training and swimming, I am physically active six days a week. Occasionally, I visit an acupuncturist. My knees are not perfect, but they work far better than they did. The braces are gone, I can walk 10 or even 15 blocks without sitting, and I am free of prescription drugs and treatments. Shopping and browsing have come back into my life, as long as I am mindful to stop and rest. I am not dancing yet, but there is a stride in my step and a grateful smile on my face. ■

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PEOPLE WHO JOIN RSDSA ARE NOT CONTENT to be victims, but take an active role in our goals of education, awareness, and research. Our members are people like you—patients, family and friends, healthcare professionals, attorneys, and business people who understand the devastating effects of CRPS and want to make a difference. Your RSDSA membership is important. There is power in numbers and we would like to see our membership, currently more than 7,000, double so that when we talk to the legislature, the pharmaceutical companies, and medical associations, our voice is strong and our message is clear.

As a member, you have a forum to communicate your concerns, share your experiences, and learn about the most recent advances in treatment and research. Fill out the membership application and join today!

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