

BY CINDY FRIEDMAN

frozen to the bone

a pilates devotee
credits core strength
and mental fitness for
keeping her alive
in icy rapids

In the sweltering summer of August 2003, my family and I were vacationing in Alaska's Denali National Park. Like many visitors, we thought it would be fun to try whitewater rafting. It was an overcast day, a cool but pleasant 65 degrees. The recent warm weather had caused glacier runoff, so the icy waters were running higher and faster than usual. After a brief safety talk by our twenty-something male guide, we donned mandatory dry suits, climbed into our rubber raft and headed downstream, easily negotiating the first two rapids. We were getting splashed and jostled but thought all was fun. But in the middle of the third rapid, our raft flipped over, dumping all eight passengers and our guide into 34-degree glacial water.

My husband and I surfaced underneath the overturned raft still holding on, but in the darkness we couldn't find our 18-year-old daughter or 15-year-old son. From the shore, we heard the guide, who'd already made it out of the water, shout at us to let go of the boat. It was more dangerous to be a bobbing appendage of a raft in the fast-moving river than to go it alone, he shouted. We

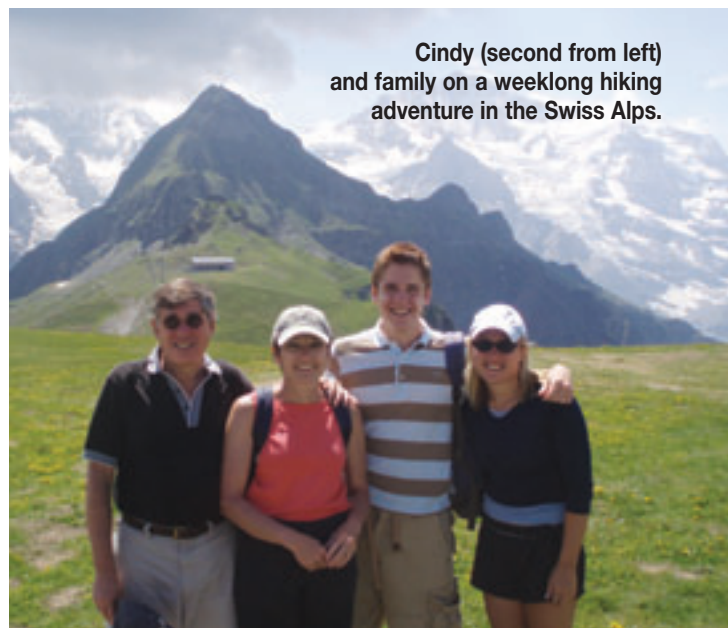
couldn't even help each other because the current was too strong for my husband to tow me or even for us to hold on to each other. He turned to me and said, "Let go and swim as hard as you can." And then, swimming to near exhaustion, he made it to shore an eighth of a mile downstream.

I let go. Suddenly I was alone, careening down the rapids, totally unprotected. The next several minutes were terrifying. During the briefing we'd been told that if we somehow ended up in the water to stay on our backs with our knees up, feet facing downstream so our feet could fend off any objects. At 5'3", 115 pounds and with a Pilates-strengthened core, I was able to keep my knees up, but huge icy waves still smashed me in the face and flipped me around like a rag doll.

I kept trying to use my Pilates breathing to stay calm and to focus. But the roaring river was choked with fine gray silt that filled my nose and mouth and raked at my eyes when I tried to see where I was going. Worse, I could hear bubbling around my neck; the protective dry suit was filling with water. I was

getting colder and colder and time was running out. I knew enough about the water to understand that I had to grab onto something soon or I would either drown or die of hypothermia.

After about a mile, and 10 minutes of riding the torrent, a "washing machine" suddenly pulled me under. These horizontal whirlpools exert a tremendous downward pull. If you get caught in one, I later learned, your chances of getting out are very slim. Sucked under the water in the violent spin, I couldn't tell which way was up. Terrified, I thrashed about and tried to escape the whirlpool's death grip. At least 10 seconds passed before my feet finally hit something



Cindy (second from left) and family on a weeklong hiking adventure in the Swiss Alps.

hard. I pushed against it with all my strength and shot out of the washing machine like a cork.

Once again at the mercy of the rapids, I realized I had to position myself face-first and try to swim if I was going to get out of there alive. I made a desperate last-ditch effort to move toward the edge of the current. Because of the extreme cold, I could manage only two strokes with one arm before the muscles stopped firing and I'd have to switch to the other arm. I set my sights on a rock jutting out at the edge of the current. The second I was within reach, I flung myself at it face-first and, mercifully, managed to get my arms around it. I clung hard, coughing out water and silt, and dragged myself onto it. I'm not dead, I remember thinking, and I actually kissed the rock in gratitude. I knew I was dangerously cold and wanted to curl up in a ball to try and get warm, but now I had to look for my husband and my kids. Shivering hard, I sat on the rock and scanned the waters. After 15 interminable minutes, rescuers appeared, shouting that my husband and kids were ok. My son had followed our guide out, my husband had escaped after an eighth of a mile, and my daughter had been picked up a half-mile downstream in the boat that eventually rescued me.

My husband, who is a physician, determined that I would likely have lost consciousness had I stayed in the water just one minute more. In total, I had been in the river for 15 to 17 minutes, fighting for my life for more than two miles through four sets of icy rapids. Doctors later told me that loss of consciousness occurs when body temperature drops to between 89 and 90 degrees; mine was 91 degrees an hour after I crawled out of the water. The guide admitted that that far downstream, he'd expected to find a corpse. One bright spot was that all the relationship crap that usually happens between mothers and teenage daughters disap-



This picture of happy, excited rafters was taken three minutes before the boat overturned.

ALASKA WILDWATER IMAGES

peared that day—she was overjoyed to see me sitting up, still breathing.

I'm convinced my Pilates training saved my life. At the time of the trip, I was taking one-hour intermediate Allegro group classes, with instructors trained in classic Romana-style Pilates, twice a week. I started the work in 2001 because of chronic neck and back muscle spasms. Even at the very end of my whitewater ordeal, my muscles kept firing and I could still kick. Were it not for Pilates, I would not have had the strength to keep swimming and kicking and fighting and reaching to get myself out. Because I had more muscle mass than fat, I was in better shape to adjust to the very low body temperature. Having a strong core was a factor in another way too. When you become hypothermic, the brain diverts blood from your extremities to warm your core, where your vital organs are. Since I still had muscles firing in my core, I had better blood flow due to muscle mass; it wasn't as difficult to keep my knees up in that raging current as it might have been for other people.

Thanks to the Reformer, I have muscles everywhere. It's dramatically changed the shape of my body. I used to have a deep C-curve in my lower back, and I used to have to tailor the back of my skirts shorter to accommodate that.

After years of devoted Pilates work, my low back has completely straightened out. I came home from Alaska so grateful to my training that I bought my own Reformer with an inheritance from a dear aunt who I'm sure would have been happy that I spent the money that way. I do workouts at home now, plus one group class at the gym and one private training session a week. In my gym class, there are three of us who are really hardcore and show up all the time so, if it's just us, we do an intermediate-advanced class. I can do nearly all the advanced exercises, but there are a couple I won't do myself at home without a spotter, such as Snake, in case I slip.

Every woman probably has a part of her body she doesn't like. But when I came out of that river and they peeled off my wet clothes and I got a good look at my freezing, exhausted body that had turned dead white and gray from a lack of blood, all I could think was, *This is a damn good body*. It was three days before my birthday and that was a message to me to celebrate each and every moment that I live in this body!

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