

# THE PILATES POWERHOUSES

Flex Studio Co-Founders, Heather Thomas Shalabi and Anna Serafinas Luk chat to *Kate Farr* about the inspiration behind their successful business.

Heather Thomas Shalabi

Anna Serafinas Luk

## Tell me about your families

**HTS:** My husband and I moved here in 2001 after three years in Tokyo. We have three Hong Kong-born children – 13 year-old daughter, Noor and our 10-year-old twin boys, Rafi and Sami. I'm originally from the States and my husband was born in Beirut.

**ASL:** I have lived in Hong Kong for almost 25 years now, originally following my husband when he came to work at Chek Lap Kok airport back in 1991. We have three children – 22 year-old Isabella who is studying at The University of Sydney, 20 year-old Sophia who's at the University of Glasgow, and 17 year-old Joe, who is in his final year of high school here in Hong Kong.

## How did you meet?

**HTS:** We met through Anna's husband, Tony. When I first moved here, I was furniture shopping, and happened to wander into Tony's store. We started chatting, and I subsequently began working for him as a marketing consultant, at which point I was introduced to Anna. I'd already had the idea to open a Pilates studio on Hong Kong's Southside, so when I learned that Anna had been a professional dancer, I asked if she would be interested in joining me. The rest is history!

## What did you both do before launching Flex Studio?

**HTS:** I had actually studied ballet quite seriously from a young age, however academics took precedence and I ended up putting dancing aside in order to pursue university and graduate school. However, movement was always in my bones, and after working as a marketing manager for Disney, then in PR and fundraising, I decided to go back to my roots and pursue Pilates when we relocated to Hong Kong.

**ASL:** I also danced from an early age, becoming a professional ballet dancer. On arrival in Hong Kong, I worked with the Hong Kong Ballet as the company's Ballet Mistress, but found the hours difficult to manage once my children came along. Once my youngest child was at primary school, I completed my Pilates teacher training.

## Where did the idea come from to go it alone?

**HTS:** Deciding to open a Pilates studio on the Southside was very simple, as there was nothing comparable back in January 2004 when we first opened Flex. We didn't over-analyse the decision; we saw a gap in the marketplace and went for it.

## How did you translate your initial business idea from concept to reality?

**HTS:** We signed a lease! I already had a client

base from teaching Pilates for two years before opening Flex, so we were confident that we would draw people through the door from day one. We spent a lot of time working out the best group class schedule – both in terms of times and also class mix – and recruiting great teachers. As our first studio in Stanley was only 1,300 square feet, we had to be super-organised and thorough about everything from storage space to the reception – even the layout of the washrooms.



## Do you have specific individual strengths and weaknesses that you bring to the business?

**HTS:** I deal largely with the business side of things – for example IT, retail, HR management and business development – while Anna overseas the Xtend Barre programme, which is well matched to her dance background. I seek out talent through international recruiting and auditioning, while Anna is very good at working with new instructors to help refine that talent.

## What do you love most about what you do?

**HTS:** Teaching! I can honestly say I've never plateaued in my love of learning more about Pilates and yoga with every class I teach, every book I read and every body I see on the mat. I see the beauty in every client; it's always my goal to help them see that beauty within themselves.

**ASL:** I love that no two days are ever the same. I really enjoy teaching and being able to impart

my knowledge and love of movement to my clients, helping them to realise their potential. I'm especially enjoying teaching the Xtend Barre program.

## How do you juggle your business with your respective family lives? What's the biggest challenge in maintaining a good balance?

**HTS:** I now believe that I sacrificed too much time away from my children when they were young. Flex needed as much nurturing as the children did in order to evolve, and time with my husband suffered, as I devoted all my energy to my "children." When you own your own business it's very difficult to maintain boundaries – saying no to extra teaching hours, and closing the laptop at night. Life has settled into a better equilibrium now that both kids and the business are older.

**ASL:** I was fortunate that when we first started Flex, my youngest had just begun primary school, so I was able to manage my time to work within school hours. As the business has grown, my clientele base has expanded and due to my Xtend Barre commitments, I find it increasingly challenging to find personal time for my own practice. That said, I still find that I am getting quite a good daily workout from teaching group classes.

## What advice would you give to other working parents? Any specific pros and cons?

**HST:** Don't underestimate the importance of being present for your children as they grow older – their intellectual needs become more intense. I thought that once the nappies were off I'd have more freedom. In actual fact, not only do my kids now want to discuss a far more diverse array of topics than ever before, they're also very interesting people and I wouldn't miss out on them for the world. Try to structure work around this understanding.

**ASL:** I couldn't agree more. Family has always been my number one priority, and being present while the children were growing up was essential for me. If you can, make use of the drive to and from school – this was my favourite time for chatting and learning about their day. It's good for the kids to see that Mum has to work too, and I feel that my job and enthusiasm for it has inspired and motivated them to have their own goals and aspirations in life.

## What's next for your business?

### What are your plans and aspirations?

**HTS:** My number one aspiration is to make Pilates as fundamental in everyone's daily life as brushing their teeth. Then Flex will have done its job to educate people to live healthier, happier lives. ☑