

LA PLATA FITNESS FACILITY PIVOTS QUICKLY TO SURVIVE COVID-19

Fitness facilities like Breathe Pilates Place of La Plata were among the first businesses forced to close in early March due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the bulk of their income suddenly gone, owner Christine Heckel knew she needed to lean on formats other than on-site fitness programs and figure out how to develop them—quickly.

“For us, the reason we’re still here,” says Christine, “is we made a decision very early to pivot, and we did it very fast. We didn’t try to hold out and keep the doors open as long as we could.” Christine is both a STOTT PILATES® Certified Instructor and Merrithew™ Instructor Trainer, and she had used Skype and other virtual training tools as a master instructor. This time she and staff turned to Zoom and had virtual classes up and running about a week later.

The Pivot to Virtual

Prior to the pandemic, Breathe’s business model was essentially boutique fitness, offering a wide variety of training types. Primarily a Pilates studio, they also offered yoga, strength training, stretch and fascia movement, and barre classes. The studio was a place where clients could work out in small groups but not be limited to just one specialty. Using the new virtual format via Zoom, Christine says they had to cut about half their offerings. Some of the classes required quite a bit of equipment, so they started a prop lending program. “We handed out

equipment to those who needed it, and we were able to keep those going,” says Christine. “Apparatus classes continued for only those who had equipment at home.”

Adding Semi-Virtual

Once they were able to look at reopening, they took what they had been doing virtually and came up with semi-virtual classes. Due to the nature of their space, which includes many small rooms, they were able to divide their equipment into individual rooms. Each room is now equipped with a tv screen or monitor and a camera (most often a repurposed iPhone). “We can bring each client into their space with a closed door, participating virtually but in the studio,” says Christine, “For now, that is our in-person model, though we’re looking at some outdoor options.” With an internal Zoom meeting running, the instructor can teach from their own space on site or even from a remote location.

“The semi-virtual is very different than anything else I know others are offering,” says Christine. “This format means you can get out of the house and take a class, and you have space that you’re not sharing with everyone else.” The studio’s very detailed cleaning regimen makes this a safer option.

The Future of Virtual Fitness

After COVID-19, will the virtual and semi-virtual classes stay? “Absolutely,” says Christine. “I don’t think virtual is going anywhere.” This actually opens up many opportunities, including a wider reach. Christine has a few Virginia clients who take classes from Breathe in La Plata. People who don’t have access to those classes, whether it be too far away or an issue with finding childcare, will be able to do it virtually. Instructors can even teach from their homes.

What will the business’s future look like after COVID-19? Christine predicts there will be a hybrid format for at least 50% of their classes. That would include the option to take a class in-studio, virtually, or receive a recording of the class to do on your own. “Those are all things we didn’t do before,” says Christine, “and there’s no reason why we would stop doing them now. They’re just an addition to what we offer.”

