

reverend heidi and the new underground railroad

by Anne Marie O'Connor



Left: Rev. Heidi McGinness. Right: McGinness, visiting a remote camp to negotiate the release of 12 slave boys, offers medical assistance to a Baggara Arab.

Pilates has helped people accomplish all sorts of life goals: dance *Swan Lake*, climb mountains, regain mobility after horrific accidents. But Reverend Heidi McGinness is probably the only one person who relies on Pilates to help liberate slaves. McGinness, 66, a retired Presbyterian minister, travels to the Sudan with Christian Solidarity International (CSI), a human-rights organization, to deliver humanitarian aid and free people who have been enslaved as part of the 21-year-old Sudanese civil war, which has pitted the mainly Arab north against the tribal south that is made up of Christians and traditional believers.

She credits Pilates with helping her get through grueling days in the heat, which can reach 124 degrees. "It's very rigorous in terms of temperatures, stress and there's no access to running water," she says. "I have to carry supplies, walk with a heavy backpack, climb in and out of cargo planes and live in a tent. It's demanding, physically, emotionally and spiritually, to see people who experience such mind-numbing suffering. I wouldn't have the stamina, the coordination, the balance, the strength or the confidence without Pilates!"

McGinness was first introduced to the method two years ago, when a friend gave her a gift certificate to Elixir Pilates in

Denver, where she currently lives. "I started out slowly, but quickly realized, this is non-negotiable! I need this!" she says. "Pilates is so critical to maintaining an active, healthy lifestyle, particularly as I was diagnosed with osteoporosis six years ago. I do a Reformer class twice a week for an hour unless I'm traveling. My teacher, Mary Jo Tyman, is wonderful."

She got involved with liberating slaves a number of years ago, after CSI's leaders were asked to assist in the freeing of southern Sudanese people who had been enslaved in the north during the civil war. "South Sudanese pastors, priests, elders and chiefs asked CSI to help bring their wives, children, brothers and sisters home," she explains. "Not only were these people robbed of their freedom, families, language and faith, but they have been subject to blindings, brandings, burnings and amputations."

CSI began assisting the Arab-Dinka Peace Committee, a grassroots organization, negotiate the release of slaves by providing \$50 in cattle vaccine in exchange for a person's freedom.

"I've gone to meet with slave owners to assist in the deliberations," she says. "I live for the reunions of families who've been separated, sometimes for decades. It's so incredibly wonderful to see the light return to the eyes of



McGinness interviews Nyibol, a recently liberated slave. While she was able to keep her baby, she was forced to leave her 6-year-old son with her former owner.



McGinness's Pilates practice allows her to climb in and out of cargo planes that are used to deliver humanitarian aid.



Recently free slaves like these women and children, are "still so traumatized," McGinness says. She interviews them so their stories can be documented and made known around the world.

mothers and fathers when they see their children again." While she abhors slavery, she emphasizes that she has compassion for both the slave and the slave owner.

A referendum establishes a new nation, South Sudan, on July 11. But there is as yet no program for freeing the 35,000 people still held in captivity. McGinness hopes the new government will negotiate through diplomatic channels for their release. Until then, she works tirelessly, fighting for the release of every last person.

"I love what the South Sudanese, whether

they're traditional believers or Christians, say to me every time I leave. Instead of asking for more medicine or grain, they tell me, "Remember us before the Lord! Remember us before our brothers and sisters in America! Remember to say thank you for coming to us in our great need!" Because the worst thing in life is not being remembered. And McGinness, in her turn, is thankful for Pilates. "For me, the stamina and injury prevention aspects of Pilates are such a boon for my life and my life's work."

To contribute to Reverend Heidi's work in Sudan, go to csi-int.org.



This young boy lost one hand and his other was maimed by Arab militiamen known as the Janjaweed.