

“I feel very fortunate because sometimes stories that I share or things that I say have the effect of sometimes inspiring and motivating people, because, I’m just doing what I enjoy doing and it’s a huge privilege that that sometimes helps other people.” – Karen Darke.

Karen Darke is one of the UK’s top paraplegic adventurers. After a mountaineering accident left her paralysed at 21, she completed many trips that others believed impossible; from marathons and triathlons, to kayaking, sit-skiing and hand-cycling in some of the most inhospitable places on the planet. On 23rd January, she gave a motivational talk entitled "Disability?" at Shell Centre, London. It tackled preconceived ideas of disability, and whether the concept of disability results from individual or environmental conditions.

She talks to Shell World UK about being a fire hazard in the pub, mountaineering up escalators and her belief that there is always a creative solution to any problem life throws at you ...

Karen on ... Disability in the Workplace

Do you have any words of encouragement for the enABLE network at Shell?

K: The key messages I’d like to share with people were reflected in my talk today - the importance of having a goal in sight, of being creative and finding a solution to any problem - for example when a local man in Scotland invented my hand bike or ‘armchair on wheels’ as I like to call it. It’s about not letting negative thoughts or setbacks get in the way or stop you from working towards your goals.

Do you think that those fears come from you or people’s perceptions of you?

K: I think both. We all have our own insecurities – I have mine and they do perhaps degrade my confidence or set off the fears within me.

What advice can you give somebody who doesn’t have much experience of disability in the workplace?

K: I think in terms of advice, it would be, see the person and not the disability, and if you’ve got questions, ask, without being rude. Sometimes it irritates me if the first question people ask is ‘what happened to you then?’ But if you know the person, have a frank conversation and say ‘there’s a few things I want to hear about’, or questions I’ve got. Most people won’t mind at all, they will appreciate you being open and honest. So see the person and not the disability and don’t be afraid to ask.

Do you think there is enough being done to support disabled people in the workplace?

Both legislation and attitudes have changed a lot in the 14 years I’ve been disabled, and this brings about a change in possibilities, accessibility, attitudes and education. Events like this are great because more people get an idea of what disability is about. Hopefully more education will mean that people aren’t afraid to work with someone who is disabled and will have the right attitude. As more people understand, the easier it will be to develop the right recruitment campaign to attract disabled people to a company.

What should a company do if one of their employees becomes suddenly disabled through an accident?

I was a student at Aberdeen University when I had my accident and it really helped that the university contacted me within the first couple of weeks to let me know that they were concerned and wanted me back with them. The worst thing you could do is go silent. If one of your employees has an accident, make sure you let them know that they are still valued members of staff.

Karen on ... being an inspirational speaker

You're described as 'inspirational' by readers of your book (*IF you Fall: It's a new beginning* available from Amazon). Has your accident made you question your place in the world i.e. do you feel that fate intervened so you can help other people get the most out of life?

K: Whenever a life-changing event happens to any of us, it makes you question who you are and what you're doing. I was no different and my accident changed the course of my life - I never expected to write a book or be speaking to people but it's just emerged as something that I 'do'. I think that things often happen for a reason - that we can learn a lot about ourselves and share that learning with other people. I feel that's partly what's happened to me.

Karen on ... the everyday

You mentioned that everyday tasks can be a real challenge. Do you encounter problems when you are out socialising?

A: Generally not, although I once wasn't let into a pub because I was seen as a fire hazard!
I do find it hard when everyone is standing up, because I'm in my own little world down below. It's hard to hear everybody and you get a really sore neck - but then I get conscious that people get sore knees, squatting down So, I generally prefer to socialise in smaller groups or places where everyone is sat down chatting.

In terms of the everyday, escalators are the biggest challenge, but I don't let them phase me and take them on anyway!

In terms of your career, you're obviously a very successful businesswoman - how do you maintain your motivational drive?

K: I have the opposite problem - how do I contain my motivational drive? To be honest, I am very lucky that I'm so motivated, I'm constantly having ideas, I'm wanting to make everything happen now and I can't so really, I need to take everything easier!

The future ...

Any more projects?

Maybe skiing in Antarctica?

Karen, would you ever just go and lie on a beach?

I did go away with a friend just before Christmas and we'd sit around a lot and read a lot of books but we didn't do very much. It was really nice for about 10 days and then it got a bit boring ...