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# Design *for life*

Kent garden designer and TV presenter, Mark Lane tells us how his passion for plants helped him turn the car crash, that meant he became a full-time wheelchair user, into a positive spin, launching a whole new career and way of life that feeds his creativity

 Louise Tomlin

 Mark Lane Designs

**Y**ou can never know what life has in store; events that can seemingly spell disaster can sometimes have a silver lining that isn't obvious at the time.

Seventeen years ago Mark Lane was enjoying a successful career in publishing in London, until a car crash which led to him needing spinal surgery, which was unfortunately complicated by being born with spina bifida, resulted in him being unable to get around without the use of a wheelchair. This meant Mark couldn't commute to work anymore. "It was devastating," he recalls. "I really loved my work in arts and architecture publishing, I didn't know what I was going to do. I don't mind admitting I found myself in a very dark place."

After a long period of rehabilitation, throughout which his

partner Jasen, and family and friends were incredibly supportive, an idea for a totally new career sprang to life from a chance conversation in the garden one day. "Jasen commented on what he called my encyclopedic knowledge of plants and casually said: 'I don't know why you don't do something with it on a professional level, it's a shame to waste it.'

"He had sowed the seed of an idea, if you will excuse the gardening pun. As a little boy I had grown up pottering with my grandparents in their garden, I learned so much about plants and gardens from them, it was a passion that developed as I grew up," says Mark.

## Inspirational idea

"Using Jasen's comment as a springboard, I started to investigate



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the possibilities of getting horticultural qualifications and considering careers in the garden design industry. I have to admit this was a very frustrating period, one that tested my resolve. It seemed impossible to find a college that would allow me to study with them because I was in a wheelchair; the inference was that I would not be physically able to do certain things, so I should just give up on the idea. Instead of finding positive ways of making it work, I came up against negatives. Eventually I found an online open learning course and I've never looked back."

## Where there's a will, there's a way!

Mark set up Mark Lane Designs 10 years ago. At first he designed gardens for friends for free, building up his experience and portfolio, and it wasn't long before larger and more lucrative projects arrived.

"I have a wide range of clients from private property owners through to schools, hospices and charitable foundations. On-going projects are varied, a basement garden in London W2, to a 10-acre garden in Leicestershire. So far, I have never had to turn a job down because of access problems because of my wheelchair –

where there's a will, there's a way! I recently took delivery of a special 'off-road' Segway wheelchair, that's going to make rough terrain a lot easier. I live in Kent, just outside Canterbury, I love the local countryside and am very happy here. My work takes me all over the country, including a major project in Ireland at the moment. I'm very lucky to be so busy."

## Surprise call from the BBC

Talking of lucky, Mark's career took another unexpected turn a couple of years ago.

"I had been championing the cause of disabled gardening, trying to highlight the difficulties of accessibility for people with physical disabilities. An article I had written on this was published in BBC Gardeners' World magazine. I was surprised to get a phone call from the BBC asking if they could record me doing a piece to camera on the accessibility issue. I happily agreed – and what followed were more invitations to cover RHS Chelsea and Hampton Court flower shows for them, and then the offer of a more permanent slot on BBC Gardeners' World TV show.

"I really enjoy the presenting work, it's another way of keeping disabled gardening in the spotlight and I've met so many wonderful people along the way. The last 17 years have been amazing, with many ups and downs, but it just goes to show with a positive attitude and the right kind of help and support, you can get to where you want to be and have a fulfilling life and career."

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