

HERO of the MONTH

THE SERIES THAT CELEBRATES ORDINARY PEOPLE DOING EXTRAORDINARY THINGS

KAREN DARKE THE PARAPLEGIC WHO HELPS DISABLED PEOPLE TAKE PART IN ACTIVE SPORTS

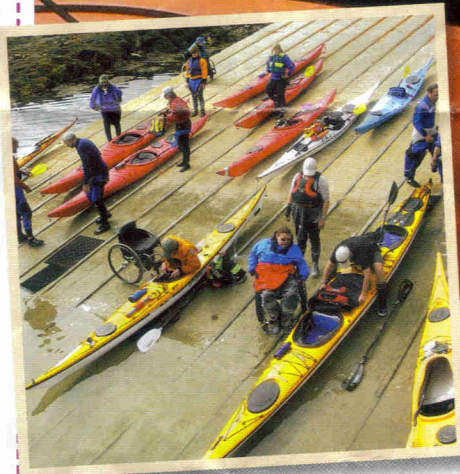
I fell 30ft from an overhang onto a rocky ledge,' says Karen Darke, 34, from Scotland. 'I'd been climbing with friends on the sea cliffs near Aberdeen. I ran out of strength and fell off. I broke my back, neck, arm, wrist, ribs and punctured my lungs. When I woke up three days later, a doctor told me I was paralysed. I was in complete shock.'

Karen spent two months in hospital after the accident in 1993, which left her unable to move from the chest down. 'I had to learn how to do everything: go to the toilet, use a wheelchair and sit up in bed. For the first couple of weeks, the hardest part was when the painkillers wore off. I'd have nice dreams, then wake up to a nightmare.'

A geology student at Aberdeen University at the time, Karen was determined not to let being wheelchair-bound restrict her. 'I've lost count of the times I've been refused entry to clubs and cinemas because I was deemed a fire hazard. But if I got angry every time there was an obstacle, I'd lead a miserable life,



'Since her accident, Karen, above, still takes part in active sports - including skiing in the Arctic. Her charity arranges trips for the disabled, such as a week's sea kayaking in Scotland, left



so I just face each one as they crop up.'

Karen has repeatedly challenged the confines of her disability. She has hand-cycled across the Himalayan mountains, kayaked from Canada to Alaska and skied in the Arctic. 'I've discovered I can do things I thought were impossible.'

Karen started her charity, Interventure, in 2001. Her aim is to help people with disabilities enjoy the outdoors and participate in adventure sports.

Every summer, she runs a trip to Scotland for 15 disabled guests. 'Last year, a woman came along who had spinal muscular atrophy. She did a 12-mile canoe trip. It changed her life and gave her so

much confidence in her abilities. Pushing yourself like that makes you aware of what you can do, rather than what you can't.'

Karen began climbing at the age of 15. 'I loved the challenge of finding my way up a piece of rock. I used to dance and it felt like I was dancing on the rocks.'

While she'll never dance or rock climb again, Karen is determined to stay positive. 'I thought I was invincible,' she says. 'Falling never crossed my mind, but I'm never angry or regretful. I'm determined to make the most of what I have.'

How can you help?

To donate to Karen's charity, which helps disabled people take part in active sports, visit www.interventure.org.uk. Karen's autobiography, *If You Fall* (£9.99, 0 Books), is published in September.

Do you know any real-life heroes? Visit www.marieclaire.co.uk