

Mosaic Legacy Materials

Case Study 3: Karl Epps, Young Champion with the New Forest National Park

'I'm happy and proud to say I won the young volunteer of the year award. If you asked me when I got nominated if I would win the award I'd say don't be so daft but winning this award has made me realise anything is possible. You can get anything you fight for and truly want. Volunteering gives you a sense of wellbeing and it brings so many different opportunities in life.'



Sarah, the Mosaic project officer, writes about Karl: Karl Epps, 22, lives in Totton, a small town between Southampton and the New Forest National Park. He lives with his mum, dad, sisters and nieces.

Karl was referred to Mosaic when he was 20 by a youth worker at his local youth centre. Karl had been struggling at college and subsequently left. He started getting in trouble at home and with other people in Totton. He was drinking heavily and becoming increasingly isolated, falling into the NEET¹ category. Karl has spina bifida and has lost one leg below the knee due to an incurable infection. He is a permanent wheelchair user.

I first met Karl at his local youth centre. He felt didn't fit in anywhere, but as we talked he expressed his love for animals and how he liked being outside and away from Totton – something he didn't get much opportunity to do.

Slowly and surely Karl started coming out on Mosaic events in the New Forest National Park – walks, conservation activities, bushcraft sessions etc. We came across many obstacles for wheelchair users on these activities, such as excessive mud, cattle grids and narrow gates. At first, Karl found this difficult and would sometimes stay away but it never lasted long. He stuck to it and together with him and National Park Authority staff and other activity providers, we have worked on ways to get around these obstacles and improve access for him and for other wheelchair users.

In his first year with the project Karl attended our national Annual Event for all Young Champions in Exmoor. This was a huge experience him having never stayed away from home without family. He took part in everything and made new friends. Everyone helped him on a challenging final walk up Dunkery Beacon, the highest point on Exmoor, via a barely accessible track. On our way Karl said, 'I feel like I started this residential as a boy and have come home a man'.

Karl then started volunteering at the Countryside Education Trust in Beaulieu two or three days a week, often helping out with the animals. He became a committed member of their team and volunteered regularly for two years. Karl says that volunteering has helped him grow as an individual and overcome personal reservations he held as a result of his physical challenges.

Karl's confidence has grown so much that he spoke at the New Forest National Park Health and Wellbeing conference in 2015 to rave reviews! He has spoken out about better wheelchair access to National Parks, tested places for accessibility and provided feedback to the YHA about access to their hostels in National Parks.

Karl's journey has been one of determination. He is now studying Animal Management at Sparsholt College and playing wheelchair basketball in a competitive team. In 2015 he was also awarded Young National Parks Volunteer of the year award for his dedication to volunteering and his focus on access to National Parks.

The Campaign for National Parks ran the Mosaic youth project from 2013-2016 in partnership with the YHA and five National Park Authorities (Exmoor, Lake District, New Forest, Northumberland and Yorkshire Dales). The project aimed to make positive changes in young people's lives through engaging with National Parks. www.cnp.org.uk

¹ Not in Employment, Education or Training