

SOPHIE MORGAN

BREAKING BOUNDARIES

Interview: **Debbie Jeffery**

Sophie Morgan was paralysed from the chest down in a car crash at the age of 18. Since then she has gone on to establish a diverse and successful career portfolio as a television presenter, artist and entrepreneur. Sophie is the director of a property development and investment company, a patron of disability charity Scope, and an avid campaigner for improving disability representation.



Tell us about your childhood home

I grew up in East Sussex, in a little village called Nutley on the edge of the Ashdown Forest, which inspired A.A. Milne's Hundred Acre Woods in the Winnie the Pooh books. We lived in a tiny three-bedroom cottage, nestled on its own in the middle of the woods with amazing views. I lived there until I was 15 with my mum, dad, brother and loads of dogs. It was very secluded and peaceful, and I spent a lot of time outdoors in the woods with my brother.

How did the car crash shape your life?

In 2003 I was driving some school friends between A-Level results parties in Scotland when I lost control of the car and crashed

off the road into a field. I wasn't drunk, I was just driving like a typical inexperienced teenager, lost control of the car and crashed into a field. In the crash I damaged my spine and was paralysed from the chest down.

Before the car crash I'd planned to study law, but afterwards I had a complete change of heart. At school I'd been encouraged to go down the law route, and didn't really consider art as a career, but after the injury I realised that life is too short not to pursue what you love, so I went on to complete a Fine Arts degree which led to working as a portrait artist.

Just a few months after the car accident I was auditioned by researchers to take part in the BBC2 series *Beyond Boundaries*, which



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involved travelling with other disabled people on an expedition across Nicaragua. I clung to the focus of what I could do rather than what I couldn't, and adapted quickly, but I also came face to face with the reality of my disability in the jungle and really learnt the hard way. It was a very challenging environment.

A year later I unfortunately got an infection in a cut which turned into an abscess. I ended up having about three years of bed rest at my mum's house, and couldn't do anything, but after that time I was invited to appear on the series Britain's Missing Top Model. This led on to more TV appearances, including documentaries about issues for the disabled, and also to sports broadcasting covering the Paralympics.

In 2013 I presented Licence to Kill,

a documentary about road accidents caused by young drivers, and helped to launch a schools' tour which promoted young driver safety. I hadn't previously thought about television as a career, and I didn't have a plan, but I've just taken every opportunity that's come my way.

I now present Tricks of the Restaurant Trade, a current affairs consumer programme, Unreported World documentaries and live sports. Co-presenting the Channel 4 10-part property series Best Laid Plans was hugely enjoyable as I was able to help homeowners undertake extensive renovation projects in a personal and innovative way.

When did you become interested in property?

It started about five years ago when I went with my friend Magnus to a motivational networking event. Someone started talking about property investment, which I'd never really had any interest in, but because of the unpredictable nature of my disability we realised that this could be an opportunity to make some money in a way that would offer a bit more stability and security.

Magnus and I enrolled in a number of different courses to learn as much as we could about property development, and then bought our first little buy to let. We decided to focus on property in the North East, because London prices were beyond our means, and did the typical thing: buy, renovate, refinance and then recycle that deposit to buy another one.

Our portfolio grew and we started to help other people find investment opportunities as well. Magnus is great at finding properties deals and I love developing them, so we decided to set up a company together and started Empire Investors.

What tips do you have for those interested in property investment?

Do your homework and use on-line resources before you start, or find a mentor. You need to decide if you want to invest in bricks and mortar, to hopefully watch the capital grow, or if you want to achieve rental income from a property.

Try to buy in a way that your investment is sound, whatever happens to the market – perhaps buying at below market value or developing a property to increase the value.

Buying for investment is very different



from buying a home to live in. Research various locations and focus on areas where prices are rising, or with local amenities which will appeal to renters.

Consider whether the property will make more from a long-term tenancy agreement, divided into flats or as a holiday let perhaps – which will take more time to manage and upkeep but could add more income.

Find a good mortgage broker with experience in buy-to-let properties, and take their advice. Consider taking out an interest-only mortgage, which will mean only having to find 25 to 30 per cent of the property's value, and if you plan to buy more than one investment property then you may decide to set up a limited company. Talk to an accountant about whether this could be beneficial for you.

Describe your own home

I live in a wheelchair-friendly, two-bedroom flat in south-east London on the river, which I bought four years ago. It was a new build flat that I chose because it's really accessible and convenient, and obviously there's always the hope that it will go up in value.

Any future plans?

I'm quite inspired to try to change the way that disabled people are represented, especially in fashion and retail, and designed Mannequin – a wheelchair for a mannequin to sit in, which was installed in Adidas and Debenhams. I will continue to

campaign and my company, Sophie Morgan Creative, provides services to retailers to improve disability representation because our needs aren't really met.

My main focus recently has been TV presenting, which took up most of last year, and then this March we're going out to Korea to present the 2018 Winter Paralympics, which should be really exciting. I'm also hoping to grow Empire Investors, and am launching a new voting app with a couple of business partners later this year.

Art is still my passion, so I enjoy creating portraits when I have the time, and I've always got several projects bubbling



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away. I never really plan too far ahead, and I don't really know how to do just one thing, but new projects keep coming up.

My disability reminds me every day that life is short, so best to fill it with as much as possible, so long as you're happy!

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