

Feature

# The Francesco Clark Interview:

## Entrepreneurship and Overcoming Adversity

*Francesco Clark is founder and CEO of Clark's Botanicals, based in Bronxville, New York. At age 24, he became paralyzed from the neck down after a swimming pool accident. Some physicians thought he would never move or breathe without assistance again. But with great effort over several years, Mr. Clark made strong progress and, given his physical-therapy experiences, developed an award-winning line of skin-care products that became Clark's Botanicals, now sold in Europe, Asia, and the United States. We met with Mr. Clark in New York to discuss coming back from tragedy, what it takes to fight against overwhelming odds, and entrepreneurship as an option for people with disabilities and special challenges.*

Continuous  
Improvement

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### INSIDE:

Letter from the  
Executive Director  
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**Kaizen:** Where did you grow up?

**Clark:** I grew up in Italy — in Bologna — for seven years and then we moved to New York. Since sixth grade, I grew up just outside of New York City in Westchester.

**Kaizen:** When you were a teenager, what were you thinking your likely

career would be?

**Clark:** My original career path was to become a diplomat. So I went to Baltimore and studied at Johns Hopkins. I double majored in International Relations and Romance Languages. I liked that because it gave me kind of a wide funnel, a wide array of options to go into. I took the Foreign Service Exam and I passed, and it gave me the option in going into that aspect, or business, or law. But in reality, I didn't really know what I wanted; I was just curious. I love learning and I'm still just as curious as I was before about that. And then I just kind of started working after I graduated.

**Kaizen:** You are now an entrepreneur — during your teen years, did you ever think you would start your own business?

**Clark:** Yes. My father is a doctor. He was actually one

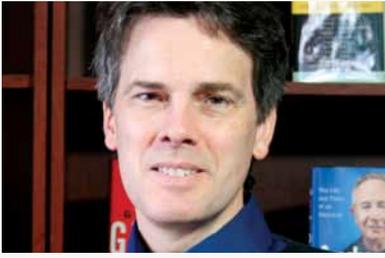
of the first homeopathic and natural doctors, as well as being a regular M.D. So he opened his own practice, but the way that medicine works now is that it's almost as if you are your own business. You have to have that kind of entrepreneurial spirit, so I grew up around that. I always knew that I wanted to be my own boss in one way or other. I have always been very creative in that sense, that I knew I wouldn't take the typical route of being a consultant at Andersen Consulting or go to law school, or anything like that. But I knew that I had the drive to do something more than a typical 9-to-5 job.

**Kaizen:** After high school, what did you do next?

**Clark:** I made a pact with myself when I was a senior in college. I wanted to live in a city I'd never lived in and do something that I'd never done. So I moved to Chicago for six months and I was a project manager at a company that makes websites for law firms. I learned there how to manage teams and became very time-efficient. I was working with small groups of people — a different group of people that I would probably never work with — law firms. Then I was recruited to work at Condé Nast at *Mademoiselle* magazine, and from there I was recruited to work at *Harper's Bazaar*.

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## From the Executive Director



John H. Johnson — the grandson of slaves who went from poverty to founder of a media empire and a place on the Forbes 400 list — famously said this about adversity: “When I see a barrier, I cry and I curse, and then I get a ladder and climb over it.”

That determination to overcome adversity is the theme of our feature interview with entrepreneur **Francesco Clark**. We spoke Mr. Clark in New York City about his

terrible accident and the great efforts he made to re-start his life and build a successful skin-care products business.

In this issue, we also report on guest lectures on leadership and humor by business ethics professor **Al Gini**, the CEE co-sponsored **High School Entrepreneurship Day**, and the excellent work of three students in the **Business and Economic Ethics** course — **Nicole Schnack**, **William Newkirk**, and **Jake Maliszewski**.

All of our previous issues of *Kaizen* featuring our news and extended interviews with entrepreneurs in a wide variety of exciting fields — from architecture to technology to marketing to venture capital to sports and more — are available online at [www.EthicsandEntrepreneurship.org](http://www.EthicsandEntrepreneurship.org). So please feel welcome to visit us there or on the second floor of the Burpee Center.

Stephen Hicks, Ph.D.

## Guest Speaker



Al Gini

Dr. Al Gini is a Professor of Business Ethics and Chair of the Department of Management in the School of Business Administration at Loyola University Chicago. He is also the cofounder and Associate Editor of *Business Ethics Quarterly*, the journal of the Society for Business Ethics. His books include: *My Job My Self: Work and the Creation of the Modern Individual* (Routledge, 2000) and *The Importance of Being Lazy: In Praise of Play, Leisure*

and Vacations. Dr. Gini gave talks on “10 Critical Tasks for Leadership” and “The Importance of Humor in Business.” A follow-up interview with Dr. Gini is available at our website.

## More information about CEE and Rockford College



*Kaizen* is published by the Center for Ethics and Entrepreneurship at Rockford College. Founded in 1847, Rockford College is a four-year, independent, coeducational institution offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in traditional liberal arts and professional fields. One of 81 colleges nationwide designated as a “College with a Conscience” by the

Princeton Review, Rockford College is also among 76 U.S. colleges and universities selected by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching for inclusion in a “Community Engagement” college classification. Rockford College is one of 11 colleges in Illinois and 280 in the country with a Phi Beta Kappa chapter, the oldest and most prestigious academic honors society, and in 2007 was named a “College of Distinction.” Please visit us online at [www.Rockford.edu](http://www.Rockford.edu).

## CLARK, CONTINUED

**Kaizen:** How old were you when you went to work for *Harper’s Bazaar*?

**Clark:** I was 23.

**Kaizen:** That’s a lot packed into a year or two.

**Clark:** I was only in Chicago for six months. I went there in August and then I left there and then I was at *Mademoiselle* for a year and then *Harper’s Bazaar* for a year.

**Kaizen:** What was your job at *Harper’s*?

**Clark:** I was an assistant in the editorial department. *Bazaar* is not under Condé Nast; it’s Hearst Publications. They run a little bit of a tighter ship. For me, it was very advantageous and wonderful because you went from a substantially larger to a smaller, tighter ship. That means you have much, much more responsibility; your hours are a lot longer, but you’re working with the best in the field. I had a lot more of responsibilities at 24 years old, but I also learned a lot more there.

**Kaizen:** Where were you physically located?

**Clark:** New York City.

**Kaizen:** What happened that weekend in Long Island?

**Clark:** It was Memorial Day weekend and I had a summer share in Long Island, which is very typical in New York. To escape the city life, people often go to Long Island on the weekends or in the summer. It was with friends of friends of friends, so complete strangers. The house had an above-ground pool, but it was built like an in-ground pool. They had put the metal ladder — that typically is in the deep end — into the shallow end. When I saw it, I thought it was the deep end so I dove in. The second that I dove in, my chin hit the bottom and my head snapped back. I was completely paralyzed in the blink of an eye.

**Kaizen:** How old were you?

**Clark:** I was 24 years old.

**Kaizen:** What was the doctors’ early prognosis after your accident?

**Clark:** I was told six times that night that I was going to die, that there was more than an 80 percent chance that I was going to die. My left lung had totally collapsed. I had inhaled so much pool water that I could smell and taste the chlorine coming back into my mouth. He said, “If you do survive the surgery” — the next stabilization surgery, where they take titanium and stabilize your spine and then they take a

piece of the bone from your hip to also stabilize your spine — “If you survive that, you will never speak on your own, you will never breathe on your own, you will never move your arms on your own.” What he could have said was, “I don’t know,” instead of being so bleak. I understand that there was a part of him that was trying to protect himself from malpractice, but it is also somebody’s life. So it’s not so much a business decision. That’s what it felt like at that time, that I was signing my life away to this surgery. I felt like my life had ended, the way that it was being presented to me.

**Kaizen:** At time of accident you also felt, “I knew I’d be okay. I just knew it.” Where did that come from?

**Clark:** I have no idea. I think that parlays into every aspect of my life, even with the business. The second that I dove into the pool, there were two things that were happening concurrently. I was face down and I could see the bubbles floating up from my nostrils, and part of me was very angry at myself because I knew I was going to be okay but it would take a lot of work to get better.

Another part of me was realizing, “Wait a minute, I have been under water now for 45 seconds and I can’t move — how am I going to get out of the pool?” I was alone. Luckily, somebody noticed I was in the pool and grabbed me and lifted me out of the water.

**Kaizen:** Do you know who that person is?

**Clark:** No. I don’t, actually. I haven’t kept in contact with anybody from there. I didn’t know them that well, and it was just that emotional connection to that traumatic event ... it’s almost like you shy away from it...

**Kaizen:** But you had great challenges ahead. Tell us please about the biggest physical challenges.

**Clark:** Everything. I mean, breathing was the hardest thing to do at first. To physically breathe through the night, I would be woken up four or five times by this blood oxygen machine that would beep every hour and a half, every 45 minutes. I felt robotic. Technically I was on life support at that point, and to be sitting there with 14 or 15 different tubes and monitors all over your body you start to wonder, “Is this even worth it?” But then you start to do exercises, breathing exercises. My best friend and my sister brought over a Discman with speakers. I just started to sing horribly and loudly; it was like a sav-

**I was told six times that night that I was going to die.**



Mr. Clark (front), Alexandra Richards, Matthew Reeve, Alexandra Reeve-Givens, & Kristen Dalton

ing grace. Then my lung capacity started to come back.

**Kaizen:** One unusual therapy you tried was loud singing — what was its purpose?

**Clark:** I didn’t really care if I got embarrassed; it was in the ICU. It was typical of who I am. It lightened the mood. It didn’t feel like death anymore in the hospital. The guy in the next room had stage four cancer and his likelihood of living was much higher than mine when I first got there. But then after forty days — to start to see that I was getting better, he was still getting worse, it made me very thankful to be alive.

**Kaizen:** You spent about five hours a day doing physical therapy, including treadmills?

**Clark:** Christopher Reeve was very involved in this treadmill study at Kessler Institute in New Jersey. I immediately contacted them when I left the ICU and Mt. Sinai. I enrolled in that for about two years. What they found was that I started to get back voluntary movement in my legs. They now are using my data from that study for all the treadmill studies. But it’s not enough; you always have to do more. Because they were like, “Oh this is incredible; it’s just incredible work.” And I’m like, “Yeah, it’s really incredible but I’m still in a wheel chair. So, what do you want me to say?”

**Kaizen:** As difficult as the physical challenges were, the psychological were equally or more so?

**Clark:** I think it was particularly difficult when you’re 24 years old, you’ve just graduated from college, and suddenly to need help to have a glass of water, to have to be fed like a baby at first. Now I can eat on my own; now I can use a regular fork. But to go back to that infantile state, that you are now trying

to prove that you’re an adult and to be thrust back to that level of humanity that you felt like you had grown beyond is the most difficult part.

**Kaizen:** For how long were you depressed, initially?

**Clark:** Two years. It was hard. I had become very one-dimensional. I just wanted to focus on my rehabilitation. I wanted to get better and that’s all I could focus on. There was a level of shock in what had just happened — with not just me but also my family and friends — that I completely became this robotic existence of physical therapy.

**Kaizen:** It was also a philosophical journey: What is the point of my life? What will lead to a fulfilled, happy life?

**Clark:** It’s interesting that you should ask that, because the point in which my life started to get better was also the lowest point of my life. It was the day that Christopher Reeve passed away — Superman had just died. He was the biggest advocate for people with disabilities and spinal cord injuries ever. He testified in Congress. He had enacted his own law, the Christopher Reeve Act, and he pushed for stem cell research and other kinds of research that pushed the envelope.

When he passed away, I felt like there was nobody left to really push for that cause. It made me really reflect inward and say “Wait a minute. What have I been doing to become part of the cure, instead of just doing physical therapy and being home all day and wallowing in what had happened? What am I doing?” And I realized I hadn’t been doing anything. I could have. It was a point in my life where I couldn’t really focus on how I could help, but the trauma of his passing away made me take that risk and take that next step in becoming an advocate and deciding that I wanted to do more than just therapy.

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## Student Essay Contest Winners

Students in the Business and Economic Ethics class wrote on the topic of success. Having read a large number of case studies of successful business professionals, they addressed this question: *What essential character traits and business skills lead individuals and organizations to succeed?*

The essays were judged on their accuracy and depth of interpretation as well as their independence of thought. Cash prizes were awarded for first place and two honorable mentions. Congratulations to our winners!

### First Prize



Nicole Schnack

### Honorable Mention



Jake Maliszewski

### Honorable Mention



William Newkirk

## Course Development Grant



Professor Jules Gleicher of the Department of Political Science was awarded a grant to develop a new course entitled “The Constitutional Convention and the Federalist-Anti-federalist Debates,” which will be offered for the first time in the 2011-2012 academic year. Dr. Gleicher’s is the eleventh new course at Rockford College for which CEE has given a development grant, such grants being part of our ongoing effort to enhance the College’s offerings in entrepreneurship, political economy, ethics, and related fields.

## CLARK, CONTINUED

I was doing therapy, lying on a mat, and I realized I wanted to become an advocate for people with disabilities. As soon as I thought that, this very subtle shift in my thinking happened and I no longer wanted to be a wallflower. I no longer wanted to be invisible. Up to that point I didn’t want anyone to worry about me and didn’t want anyone to stress out about me or to look at me or talk to me. But I also hadn’t looked in the mirror for two and a half years.

So suddenly, in becoming an advocate, the way that I looked became somewhat important to me. I wanted the way that I looked be the way that I felt, because I didn’t look like myself and I didn’t feel like myself. I wanted to be seen by strangers as me and not by this wheel chair. And so suddenly my skin became important. I didn’t want to wear the same paper pants that I wore every day. I didn’t want to wear the same hospital t-shirt that I wore every day. I didn’t want to shave my head bald. I wanted to go out with my friends. I wanted to become part of this advocacy group for people with disabilities. I wanted to become part of the Christopher Reeve Foundation, then ... who knows? Part of my mission was to become part of the cure for spinal cord injuries.

**Kaizen:** We sometimes talk about success traits in the abstract: Courage despite fears. Persistence despite setbacks. Effort despite resistance and a sense of futility. Overcoming anger at felt unfairness. Can you say which was most important for you in your transition?

**Clark:** I’m a bit of an idiot sometimes, in that I’ll want to do something and then I’ll just do it, and then think of the obstacles to overcome my goal later. But I’ll know what my goal is immediately and then, despite knowing how difficult it might be, I’ll pursue that. Having a spinal cord injury, I don’t have anything wrong with my body; I don’t have a disease. I just know that I have to figure out a way to make my nerves grow in my spine.

Thinking about it that way, starting your own business then seems very easy. Starting Clark’s Botanicals felt like, “Well of course, I want to do Clark Botanicals.” Because you are talking about an industry, the beauty industry, that can seem so fickle, it can seem so shallow and unimportant and without meaning. To start a company in that field and to make it more meaningful — to make sure that all the products get back to spinal cord injury research, and make it more than just a skin cream — is more of a testament to your

mission. I wanted to make sure my mission was strong.

**Kaizen:** With your father, who is a physician, you experimented with oils and extracts. What did you try and for how long?

**Clark:** Three years. So many dead ends. We went through 78 different botanical extracts and oils before we found Jasmine Absolute.

**Kaizen:** What properties did Jasmine Absolute have?

**Clark:** It's a very precise mixture of essential oils from jasmine, botanical extracts from jasmine, and it has to be done in the right way because it can be very basic. And if it's too basic, it can burn your skin. So it has to be just the right combination of oils and extracts from the jasmine flower.

**Kaizen:** In your case, having lost the ability to sweat, you had lots of skin blotches?

**Clark:** Sweating is important, as gross as it sounds. Your skin has to rebalance itself, and I lost that ability for my skin to rebalance itself from released toxins.

**Kaizen:** Why did you decide to start a business, rather than simply use the products personally?

**Clark:** No, I didn't start it as a business. I started it for myself, for the selfish reason that I wanted to look good again. My sister started using it and then my mom started using it and then my dad's patients started using it. Then I started to see my friends again, just becoming more social. And they noticed that I looked better — "What are you using?" I had these little glass vials with me — "I'm making this stuff with my dad here."

My ex-boss from *Bazaar*, Glenda Bailey, the editor-in-chief, really liked it. She started using it and about six weeks later the beauty director, Alexandra Parnass, called. She said, "We want to shoot it because it actually works. We're all using it." I was like, "What?!" I said, "I don't even have it in jars; we're making it in the kitchen. What am I going to do?" And she was like, "We'll figure it out because we are going to shoot it and we really like it."

**Kaizen:** How did you launch your first product — it sounds like word-of-mouth was key?

**Clark:** It started to float on its own. But the thing is that I had this product, and before even this marketing opportunity came up with the magazine, it was making money

**I'll know what my goal is immediately and then, despite knowing how difficult it might be, I'll pursue that.**



Mr. Clark at Night of the Stars in 2010

because people were already buying it — my dad's patients. It was such a strong testament to the product that we have a 98 percent customer retention rate. We don't make 15 new products a year; we'll make two a year. Everything is about the formulation. Everything has to be immunostimulating. Everything has a very strong core. Everything is unisex, except for the lip tints. It's about something that works. It's such a basic idea that was missing and lacking in beauty.

**Kaizen:** Saks Fifth Avenue only has the pink one in stock right now.

**Clark:** I know, we sold out! That's a good problem.

**Kaizen:** How did you finance the start-up?

**Clark:** The business has always floated on its own. You hear so many horror stories of new businesses that open in beauty (and other fields) too many stores too quickly and don't have the capital to support it. So, I wanted to make sure that we were slow and steady and deliberate with every product launch. Every store that we open has to be successful. My biggest fear would be opening a store and then closing it because it wasn't doing well enough. So we were very deliberate, and it's a very hands-on approach with whatever we do.

**Kaizen:** As your business grew you have more training and managing of staff. As CEO, did you have to work at those skills or did it come naturally to you?

**Clark:** I think that there are always challenges, especially in the current economy. But everyone is a human being and so you don't look at yourself as having a certain title or saying, "This is my company." It doesn't matter whom you're meeting with or who works with you. It could be salespeople; it could be your V.P. If you treat everybody with the same

kind of respect as anybody else, then they are willing to put as much commitment and effort and passion as you. You want them to have that passion that you have for products. You can't fake that. So you really have to translate that well into the people that you work with.

**Kaizen:** How many Clark's Botanicals products are there now?

**Clark:** Fourteen.

**Kaizen:** What differentiates your line from other skin care products?

**Clark:** Clark's Botanicals is different because they are all immunostimulating: they all boost collagen production in your skin. They're completely paraben free. We don't use any unnecessary chemicals in our formulations. At the same time, it's a unique synergy of botanicals and naturals with lab science. It's about making your skin act younger and it's not a quick fix. Typical beauty is a moisturizer that will work for four hours but the next day your skin looks the same. Our Smoothing Marine Cream, for example, our moisturizer, isn't good for every skin type because it has sugar glycolic acid in it. So it's going to burn if you have sensitive skin. But you can't make a product that is so bland that anyone can use it, because then it doesn't do anything. We maintain a very results-oriented product.

**Kaizen:** What are your major sales outlets?

**Clark:** We just launched Anthropologie nationwide. We just launched Space NK in Europe, and Saks Fifth Avenue, C.O. Bigelow, Fred Segal. We launched in Russia and Japan and China in early 2011.

**Kaizen:** You chose high-end stores — what went into that decision?

**Clark:** That wasn't a marketing ploy at all, because our formulations are expensive because we don't use the parabens.

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A display of Clark's Botanicals products and *Walking Papers*, Mr. Clark's autobiography

## CLARK, CONTINUED

Parabens are preservatives that you can use in any skin care product. If you add a couple of drops, they'll stay fresh on the shelf for years. Parabens, however, have been proven to lead directly to breast cancer — elevated estrogen levels in women that lead directly to breast cancer. So we did away with that. You can use natural preservatives that cost more than a hundred times more than these parabens. That is one factor that drove the price up. Our active ingredients — we use enough that the clinical testing shows that they actually will make a difference in your skin. We don't just add a couple of drops of apple stem cells to the cellular lifting serum just to say that we use it. We add as much as you can use so that you are going to see a significant difference in your skin.

**Kaizen:** What has been the biggest business difficulty you have encountered?

**Clark:** You know, I've never been asked that. Fear. I think fear can be good, but it can also be crippling. A lot of business owners have a fear of success, I think. You can stifle your business because of this fear of growing, or you can nurture it and make sure that your business grows in a steady way.

**Kaizen:** What's scary about growing?

**Clark:** A lot of my competitors failed in the first three years of my being in business. It's scary to be part of these trade shows where they have these elaborate booths that say they were on Oprah Winfrey's TV show, so they seem indomitable. They seem like nothing can knock them down, and two years later they're shut down. That was my biggest fear — being a flash in the pan.

**Kaizen:** The skin-care industry is fast-

moving and innovative. What are your plans for staying competitive?

**Clark:** We are very focused on scientific development. For example, the Cellular Lifting Serum we launched last year was the first product to use fruit-derived stem cell. We launched the product the day after President Obama repealed the stem cell law. It's the first and only beauty product to be endorsed by Michelle Obama. It's one of those products that delivers clinical results in your skin after just 30 days of use that looks like you had an eyelift. It's about the results, and the scientific formulation, and products that you use, and the ingredients that you use, and making sure that they're all relevant to each other. It goes back to what the customer wants. As much as the company is a feel-good company that started because of my injury and gives back to research, if you're going to Saks to buy a skin care product you want your skin to look good after using the product. The product has to be result-oriented.

**Kaizen:** Your company has won several awards and seems well poised for continued growth. What has been your biggest personal reward from developing your own business?

**Clark:** I get a lot of letters and emails from other people who have had injuries, or their parents had cancer, or a loved one had cancer. They'll say other lip balms — for example, because they're petroleum based — don't work. "My mom's undergoing" — and this is a quote from somebody — "My mom's undergoing chemo and nothing is making her feel good. Just using something as simple as your

lip balm makes her feel great." So something that seems as frivolous as a lip balm is making somebody in the ICU feel good. I know what that feels like from first-hand experience. Singing ABBA horribly in the ICU lightened my day; it made me live.

**Kaizen:** Your story is inspiring to many and has led to positive coverage in the *New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *Bazaar*. Are you surprised at the response to your saga?

**Clark:** I'm always surprised. You could be featured eight times in any one magazine and be surprised every time because it's an honor, it's a privilege. It's humbling to know that other people appreciate the work and passion you put into something. I would wake up at three in the morning — and I still do — when we're launching a new product and look at the packaging and think about the formulation and memorize the percentages of active ingredients. To have other people acknowledge that — the hard work, and that it isn't a marketing ploy, and that it isn't just something that I want to do for a couple years; it's my life. So it's truly an honor.

**Kaizen:** Your book, *Walking Papers*, came out in 2010. How did the idea of writing the book come about?

**Clark:** Just like the business. I started emailing my former colleagues — updates from physical therapy and my life since my injury. Then my ex-boss started to write me, "You know, you should flesh these out, because these emails are funny and interesting to read. We need to work on your writing a little bit ... But it's fun. You learn so much about a different part of life that, at 24, you would never expect to learn." At first, I was like, "Nah, I'm not a writer; you're a writer." She wrote nine books. And then, on a lark, I started to write more, and it became cathartic and therapeutic for me to put all these words on paper about my injury, and it made me feel good.

The fear of writing had overcome itself. I found a good agent in New York on Fifth Avenue, Carol Mann, and I literally emailed her the first six chapters. She read them, liked them, we set up a meeting, and I kept writing. If you want to write, you have to write. If you want to work, you have to work. Writing a book wasn't as complicated as it felt like it should have been. If I didn't want to write, then there were obstacles I could have set up in my head. But writing a book, you physically you have to sit down and type and write. You have to put in the work. And that's it.

**Something that seems as frivolous as a lip balm is making somebody in the ICU feel good.**

**Kaizen:** You are a role model for people with disabilities. Do you also see your story as championing entrepreneurship as an option for people with disabilities or limited options?

**Clark:** Yes. Having a disability — to think about being in an office setting from 9 to 5 can seem overwhelming. But to have your own business and to be able to work from home ... that doesn't necessarily mean that you have to have your own business. There are many job options where you can work from home or at a different schedule. But when you think of a job, you typically think of being in an office setting at specific hours. From my experience, being an entrepreneur works out to be the best option because I can be doing physical therapy while I work. The bad thing about it is that you have no hours so it's a double-edge sword. I love what I do so I can work seven days a week, but then you're working seven days a week.

**Kaizen:** One inspiring thing about your story is that entrepreneurship is hard enough in normal cases, but it seems like you must have superman-like will-power to have made it happen. Does it feel normal to you, or do you have a sense that you really have accomplished something outstanding?

**Clark:** No. I think that people treat me the same as anybody else who is starting a skin-care line. It's interesting you should say that, because at first when I would tell my friends I would get that glazed look in their eyes like, "Oh, that's great!" But you know that they are like, "That's not going to happen." So I would keep it more to myself, and then as the idea actually gained some traction, they started to say, "Well, wait a minute he's now sold in Los Angeles and C.O. Bigelow in the city, and — oh my God — Saks Fifth Avenue is selling the products. And look, *Vogue* wrote about him, and *Vanity Fair*. He's writing a book; he wrote the book."

I guess I proved myself, but that's true for anybody. You can talk the talk, but eventually you have to walk the walk. If you talk about starting a business, make sure you do your homework and have a viable business model.

**Kaizen:** Speaking of Superman, you have a connection to the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation. How did that come about?

**Clark:** I'm noticing now that it's very repetitive. I just called them. I spoke to Peter Wilderotter, the president. He set up a meeting later that day and came to my house. I met with him, like I was auditioning for working with the foundation. Because it

was literally me talking for two and a half hours and him listening. I'm lucky to say now that Alexandra Reeve-Givens and Matthew Reeve are two of my very good friends. I work with them almost on a daily basis on keeping the foundation stronger than it was before and keeping the meaning and the mission of the Reeve Foundation strong.

**Kaizen:** What is the scope of the Foundation's activities?

**Clark:** They are looking to fund the cure and care for people with spinal cord injuries. They give grants throughout the world. Also funding for people who need care right now. So it's about having the best quality of life, getting people physically out of the wheel chairs, and finding the cure for spinal cord injuries.

**Kaizen:** In your judgment, what are the most promising approaches: stem cells, exoskeletons, spinal cord injury research, developments in physical therapy?

**Clark:** Personally, I am most interested in the combination of stem cell treatments with non-traditional physical therapies. For me, the exoskeleton seems like something that

can help you with limited mobility, but it doesn't seem like it's to the point where it can help you with rehabilitation. It can certainly help with getting more independence, but when you say "cure," I want to move my leg organically and not having a robot help me do it. Ironically, I'm also using robots to facilitate my rehabilitation right now, in a research study that I'm involved in. So it's not one over the other; it's everything all together. It's collaborative.

**Kaizen:** What is your role as ambassador?

**Clark:** It can be anything. They keep it very open-ended with me. It's about raising awareness. It's about having that contact with anybody who wants to be involved with the foundation. When we have events in the city, they can meet me, they can volunteer with the foundation. If they just want to donate money, they can just donate money. Or if they want to physically give time. If they want to run the Team Reeve New York City Marathon, they can do that. I meet with other people with spinal cord injuries. I meet

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## High School Entrepreneur Day



On April 21, Rockford College held its fifth annual High School Entrepreneur Day, co-sponsored by the EBA department and CEE. About 100 students from local high schools attended. Professor Fahrenwald explored the personality traits successful entrepreneurs share, Professor Rezazadeh discussed the economics of entrepreneurship, Professors Lewis and Kadamian led a session on business planning, and Professor Hicks talked about ethics and entrepreneurship. Students also had a Q&A session with a panel of local entrepreneurs and received gift bags courtesy of CEE.

## CLARK, CONTINUED

with research scientists. I meet with other parents and siblings of other people who have disabilities. It's anything and everything.

**Kaizen:** You're 32 now?

**Clark:** Yes.

**Kaizen:** Where would you like Clark's Botanicals to be ten years from now?

**Clark:** In ten years, I would like to partner with a bigger company like a Procter & Gamble, so that I can focus more on developing new products, where they would help me take on the back end of the business. Ten years from now, we expect to be in more than 250 doors. At that point, you need a much bigger structure and a bigger sales team. I want to focus on creating the products and kind of keeping the core of the business model alive and strong. You have to evolve the business to the growth that your business model focuses on.

**Kaizen:** Looking back, is there a piece of life advice you have received from a mentor that has stuck strongly with you over the years?

**Clark:** You can always apologize for something after doing it. What that means is take a risk and don't play everything too safe. I think that when starting a business a lot of people play it too safe. It's not just about taking one risk and starting the business; it's about taking a lot of little, calculated risks. Even with my therapy, even with me now being able to move my wrists, I underwent two experimental stem cell procedures. One was in China and one was in Germany last year. All the therapy I do is against the traditional physical therapy — I'm doing nontraditional physical therapy. But if I hadn't taken these little calculated risks in my personal life and my professional life, I wouldn't be where I am.



Mr. Clark in New York City in 2010

**Kaizen:** For young people just starting out in their careers, knowing they will encounter challenges and, sometimes, apparently overwhelming odds against them — what advice would you give to them?

**Clark:** If it was easy, it wouldn't be worthwhile. If it was easy to get a college degree and to graduate college, it wouldn't really be that meaningful. Taking your class, you have to do reading, you have to write papers. There's an element of sacrifice that you put in to every aspect of your life. The challenge and the obstacle make it fun. So you have to make sure that the challenges and the obstacles are fun. Even if it's overwhelming, you have to really love what you're doing at the end of the day.

*This interview was conducted for Kaizen by Stephen Hicks. The full-length version will soon be posted on [www.EthicsandEntrepreneurship.org](http://www.EthicsandEntrepreneurship.org). For more information about Francesco Clark, visit <http://clarksbotanicals.com>.*

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**Chan Luu on  
Entrepreneurship and  
Fashion Design**

