

Helen Keller 1880-1968

Helen Keller was born on June 27, 1880 in a small town in Alabama. Her father Captain Arthur Henley Keller, was a cotton plantation owner and newspaper editor. Her mother Kate worked hard to make the plantation successful and even made her own butter, ham and bacon.

Helen became ill just a few months before her second birthday. She had a fever for many days, and when she finally recovered, her mother realized that something was wrong. Her baby was both blind and deaf.

As Helen grew she became more and more frustrated with her surroundings. She was unable to communicate. She would often scream and throw temper tantrums. Even relatives referred to her as a "monster" and recommended that she be placed in an institution.

By the time Helen was six her mother was overwhelmed by the struggle to help her daughter and sought for help. She soon met Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, who dedicated great efforts to teaching deaf children. He recommended that Kate try to find a teacher for Helen. She eventually found a remarkable woman by the name of Anne Sullivan.

Anne herself had had a difficult childhood and also had poor eyesight. But Anne was determined. When she graduated from school she accepted the challenge to teach Helen, even though she had no experience working with such children.

Immediately Anne went to work teaching Helen sign language. She would finger spell simple words into Helen's hand, but Helen just couldn't seem to make the connection between the word and what it represented. Helen was still frustrated and her tantrums continued. Soon however, a bond grew between the student and the teacher.

On a spring day in 1887 something miraculous occurred. Helen later told what happened: "We walked down the path to the well-house,

attracted by the fragrance of the honey-suckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten, a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me."



Helen had made the connection between the words spelled in her hand. Now she knew what they meant. It was as if the world had opened to her and she had been set free! On the way back to the house she wanted to know the name of everything she touched. Within a few hours she had learned 30 new words.

Soon everyone realized what an extraordinary, intelligent girl Helen was. She quickly learned how to read and write in braille. Soon Helen was famous. She attended Cambridge College with the help of her devoted teacher, Anne.

Helen graduated with high honors and spent much of the rest of her life writing and raising money for the blind. Helen said: "The public must learn that the blind man is neither genius nor a freak nor an idiot. He has a mind that can be educated, a hand which can be trained, ambitions which it is right for him to strive to realize, and it is the duty of the public to help him make the best of himself so that he can win light through work."