

## Helen Keller

(1880–1968). “Once I knew only darkness and stillness. . . . My life was without past or future. . . . But a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped to the rapture of living.” This is how Helen Keller described the beginning of her “new life,” when despite blindness and deafness she learned to communicate with others.

Helen Adams Keller was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Nineteen months later she had a severe illness that left her blind and deaf. Her parents had hope for her. They had read Charles Dickens’ report of the aid given to another blind and deaf girl, Laura Bridgman. When Keller was six years old, her parents took her to see Alexander Graham Bell, famed teacher of the deaf and inventor of the telephone. As a result of his advice, Anne Mansfield Sullivan began to teach Keller on March 3, 1887. Until Sullivan’s death in 1936 she remained Keller’s teacher and constant companion. Sullivan had been almost blind in early life, but her sight had been partially restored.

Keller soon learned the finger-tip, or manual, alphabet as well as braille. By placing her sensitive fingers on the lips and throat of her teachers, she felt their motions and learned to “hear” them speak. Three years after mastering the manual alphabet, she learned to speak herself.

At the age of 20 Keller was able to enter Radcliffe College. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904 with honors. She used textbooks in braille, and Sullivan attended classes with her, spelling the lectures into her hand.

Keller helped to found the Massachusetts Commission for the Blind and served on the commission. She raised more money for the American Foundation for the Blind than any other person. She lectured widely and received honors and awards from foreign governments and international bodies.



*Figure 1: Helen Keller at age 66.*



*Figure 2: Helen Keller had many pet dogs during her lifetime.*



*Figure 3: Helen Keller touches the face of Anne Sullivan, her remarkable teacher. Keller learned to speak partly by feeling how people’s lips move when they talk.*

At her home near Easton, Connecticut, she wrote and worked for the blind and deaf. She died at her home on June 1, 1968.

Keller's writing reveals her interest in the beauty of things taken for granted by those who can see and hear. Her books include *The Story of My Life* published in 1903; *Optimism* (1903); *The World I Live In* (1908); *Out of the Dark* (1913); *Midstream: My Later Life* (1929); *Journal* (1938); and *Let Us Have Faith* (1940).

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