

# INSIGHT

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*Transportation  
and Vision Loss:*  
**Where are  
We Now?**

**Thyroid Eye Disease**

**Strength, Courage, and Mission of  
Helen Keller, Part I**



American Society of  
Ophthalmic Registered Nurses  
*Specialists in Eye Care*



Laura C. Beckwith

DID YOU KNOW?

## The Strength, Courage, and Mission of Helen Keller: Part I



It is my pleasure to offer a story of tragedy, courage, faith, hope, and triumph. My hope is that you will not only come to know the real Helen Keller, but also to see, through her life lessons, that life is truly a journey, and it is for us to decide how we handle the struggles that our individual journey brings to us. Helen Keller's life demonstrates that despite the difficulties we face, we can change the world, one person at a time.

Helen Keller's story is known to millions worldwide. She was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on June 27, 1880. When she was 19 months old, she developed what the family doctor called "brain fever." The disease might have been scarlet fever or meningitis, an inflammation of the brain and spinal cord. Whatever her illness was, no medicines were available at

that time to treat it. After a few days, the terrible fever left Helen, and she fell into a deep sleep. Once she awakened, it did not take long for her mother, Kate, to realize that her daughter could no longer see or hear. Helen would live in silence and darkness for the rest of her life.

Because of social perceptions at that time, people hindered through disability were often viewed as social outcasts. This prejudice was reinforced by Helen's temper tantrums and violent outbursts, the result of her inability to fully grasp the world around her. For Kate, however, Helen was still the soft-faced, curly-haired angel of yesteryear, and she desperately needed help for her child. So she turned to the famous inventor, Dr. Alexander Graham Bell.



It was Dr. Bell who put the Kellers in touch with Perkins School for the Blind, and it was through this school that the family hired a young girl, practically blind herself, to assist and educate their six-year-old daughter. This young teacher's name was Anne Sullivan. In April 1887, 19-year-old Annie stepped off the train in Tuscumbia, ready to open the gates of the world to young Helen.

Teaching Helen proved more difficult. Annie attempted to show Helen that every object had a corresponding word, made up of letters. Annie would place Helen's favorite doll in her arms, spelling out the word "D-O-L-L" using Helen's fingers. Helen could not understand this and sank deeper into frustration. Annie, however, was unrelenting in her attempts.

One day in early day in April, after a major battle of the wills in the Keller family dining room, Annie took Helen out to the family's water pump. "We walked down the path to the well-house," Helen later wrote, "attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered." Annie held Helen's hands under the cool, flowing water of the pump. "As the stream gushed over one hand, Annie spelled into the other hand the word 'W-A-T-E-R,' first slowly, then

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rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly, I felt a misty consciousness as something forgotten, a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that W-A-T-E-R meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free." Years later, she would call this day her "soul's birthday."

Building on her experience at the water pump, Helen learned to read Braille, and she also learned to write by forming letters on paper with a pencil, using a ruler as her guide. She continued her education at Boston's Perkins School for the Blind and the Horace Mann School for the Deaf, learning arithmetic, French, and Latin. Every day, Annie would attend every lecture and every class by Helen's side, translating lessons in the palm of Helen's hand. When not in the classroom, Annie worked tirelessly to translate books into Braille so Helen could continue her studies.

When Helen was still a young girl, she proclaimed, "Someday I shall go to college—but I shall go to Harvard." Although Harvard was an all-male college at the time, Helen never let her dream die. In 1900, at 20 years of age, she entered Radcliffe College, the female coordinate



college of Harvard. Because Helen passed all her preliminary examinations, even receiving honors in German and English, Annie was not allowed to help translate her tests and examinations. Instead, a new translator replaced Annie. However, Helen continued to excel, illustrating her genius and proving that her intellect relied on no one. She recalled, "The administrative board at Radcliffe did not realize how difficult they were making my examinations, nor did they understand the peculiar difficulties I had to surmount. But if they unintentionally placed obstacles in my way, I have the consolation of knowing that I overcame them all." In 1904, Helen graduated cum laude with a bachelor of arts degree from Radcliffe, becoming the first blind-deaf individual to earn such a degree.

In her junior year at Radcliffe, Helen published her autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, the first of her 13 books. Throughout her life, she greatly valued her education, for it allowed her to better express her unique situation and philosophy to the world.

Shortly after college, Helen discovered what would become her life's work – campaigning on behalf of the blind. She learned that most blindness was a result

of poverty – poor living conditions, lack of nutrition, lack of access to proper medical care –and that there were few schools for blind children and little job training for blind adults. This disturbed her greatly, so she vowed to do all that she could to bring attention to the welfare, capabilities, and education of the blind.

Helen also believed in women's suffrage, and she enthusiastically joined the fight to ensure that women were given their right to vote. She was a special correspondent at the 1916 Republican Convention in Chicago, and although she was not able to get the suffrage amendment into the Republican platform, the Republican nominee, Charles Evans Hughes, personally endorsed it, as did former President Theodore Roosevelt. She also stood strong on child labor laws and capital punishment during these years. She never missed an opportunity to express her opinions on the matters at hand.

As a disabled individual, Helen was no stranger to societal ill treatment, and she ardently felt that all her fellow Americans should be valued equally, regardless of gender, race, or creed. While she fought diligently for those rights, she also made a stand for peace when possible. She believed that war took its toll on the innocent and that all means should be exhausted before taking that final step.

By February 1913, with Annie by her side, Helen was ready to take her story to the rest of America on the lecture circuit. She was terrified! She later described the experience: "My mind froze, my heart stopped beating. Until my dying day, I shall think of that stage as a pillory where I stood cold, riveted, trembling and voiceless." Though her voice was at times hard to understand, it served her well – that day and on many others.







She and Annie developed a routine. Annie would speak for about one hour, telling the audience about the early days with Helen and how she had taught the young girl. Helen would then be brought out to join Annie on the stage, and she would place her fingers on Annie's mouth to illustrate lip reading. She would then talk, offering her own brand of inspiration and advice. The audience was invited to ask questions. Helen had heard most of the questions countless times before, and she endured them with good humor: "How do you tell day from night?" "Can you tell colors apart?" and always, "Do you close your eyes when you sleep?" "I don't know," she would always reply to this last question. "I never stayed awake to find out!"

After touring for a few months, Annie became so ill she could no longer continue. Hence, they returned home, only to begin preparing for the lecture circuit again.

Helen embarked on another lecture tour in 1915. She and Annie were now accompanied by Polly Thomson, a new secretary who had been hired to take some of the workload and stress off Annie. They would cover the continent, speaking everywhere from large halls in cities to tents in the country. The lectures were a huge success. Helen had become one of the most famous women in the world. Audiences, including celebrities like

Thomas Edison and Henry Ford, crowded into auditoriums to hear her speak.

As a deaf-blind individual who overcame the prisons of darkness and silence, Helen held optimism close to her soul. For her, optimism was a way of life, a means to survive, and a force that moves worlds. In her book on optimism and throughout her lectures, her message was, "Sometimes it is true, a sense of isolation enfolds me like a cold mist as I sit alone and wait at life's shut gate. Beyond there is light, and music and sweet companionship; but I may not enter. Fate – silent, pitiless – bars the way. Fain would I question her imperious degree, for my heart is still undisciplined and passionate, but my tongue will not utter the bitter futile words that rise to my lips, and they fall back into my heart like unshed tears. Silence sits immense upon my soul. Then comes hope with a smile and whispers, 'There is joy in self-forgetfulness.' So, I try to make the light in others' eyes my sun, the music in others' ears my symphony, the smile on others' lips my happiness."

Much of Helen's knowledge of the world was based on her keen sense of touch. She "heard" music through vibrations. She enjoyed the organ and the violin. She also enjoyed things that many sighted people enjoy – swimming, boating, the beach, and animals, especially



her many dogs. She loved a good martini, and she preferred her hot dogs with mustard and relish only. She was humorous, fun-loving, and kind.

Moving pictures, or "movies," were becoming very popular, and early in 1918, Hollywood came knocking on Helen's door. Deliverance was to be a silent film (the technology to combine sound with movies had not yet been invented). Helen wanted it to show her life in an accurate and honest way. The film's producer and writers wanted suspense and drama. In the end, the film wasn't what she wanted, though it received good reviews.

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## The Strength, Courage, and Mission of Helen Keller: Part I

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By 1925, Helen realized that she and the AFB could not carry on this work for the blind alone, so she turned to Lions International, the world’s largest fraternal organization. While attending their international convention in Cedar Points, Ohio, she challenged the Lions to become “knights of the blind.” Today, the Lions support many sight-saving programs, largely because of Helen Keller and her trust in their willingness to help her.

In the spring of 1931, Helen played a key role for the AFB as it hosted the first international conference of workers for the blind. The event was held in New York, and workers from 32 countries attended. She raised funds, delivered speeches, held a reception, and even presented the delegates to President and Mrs. Hoover. She thrived on the excitement and the feeling that she was helping the millions of blind people around the world!

Helen was an avid writer. Not only did she write 13 books of her own, but she also wrote beautiful and compelling magazine



and newspaper articles, expressing her ideas and fighting for things she deeply believed in, such as equal rights, women’s suffrage, and peace.

In April 1931, Helen and Annie traveled to Paris. While there, Helen visited French soldiers who had been blinded during World War I. They also visited Yugoslavia, having been invited by the Yugoslav government to stimulate public interest in the work for the blind there. In addition, Scotland, Ireland, and England were added to the pair’s agenda. It was a hectic life, but Helen enjoyed every moment of it.

On October 20, 1936, Anne Sullivan Macy passed away at the age of 70, with Helen’s hand tightly in hers. Helen had lost a true friend, companion, guide, and a part of herself. They had been together since that fateful day in March 1887, and the death of Annie brought great pain to Helen. Helen once said, “Death cannot separate those who truly love. Each lives in the other’s mind and speech.” For Helen and Anne, this was undoubtedly true. Annie taught Helen the spoken word, and how to think for herself. For Helen, living life to the fullest meant that Annie would never be far away.

**Laura C. Beckwith** is executive director of the Helen Keller Foundation. She can be reached at lbeckwith@helenkellerfoundation.org



Keller Johnson-Thompson and Laura C. Beckwith

DID YOU KNOW?

## The Strength, Courage, and Mission of Helen Keller: Part II

Part I of this series, featured in the previous issue of *Insight*, focused on Helen Keller's early days, including her friendship with her teacher, Anne Sullivan; her schooling, travel, and speaking engagements; the movie about her life; her vaudeville act; and her fundraising and advocacy efforts. Part II continues to highlight her strength, courage, and mission.

After Anne's death, the world continued to beckon Helen, inviting her to visit and provide advice, support, and publicity for work regarding the blind and deaf-blind. For the next 11 years, she visited 35 countries on five continents, eager to change the world for the better.

Helen loved the people of Japan and visited them three times during her world tours. In 1948, huge crowds turned out to see her. In Tokyo, Helen spoke outside the Imperial Palace. She attracted a crowd numbering in the tens of thousands. Her primary goal was to aid the blind and to promote Japanese-American goodwill. Shortly before her departure to Japan, President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent her this message: "I feel confident that your presence will prove a lasting inspiration to those Japanese laboring under physical handicap, and that your association with Japanese individuals and groups interested in humanitarian endeavors will contribute to promoting

that spirit of friendship and goodwill between our people and the people of Japan upon which good international relations must rest. You are so well qualified to convey to the Japanese people the cordial greets of the American people. I take this opportunity to express my hope for the success of your mission."



Helen and Polly Thomson toured Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel. Helen was entranced and wrote about her visit to her friend and colleague Georges Raverat, director of the American Foundation for Overseas Blind (now Helen Keller International), in Paris. During her visit, she met leading cultural and political figures of the region, including the Egyptian writer and intellectual Taha Hussein, Queen Noor of Jordan, and Golda Meir, Israel's foreign minister. She wrote, "I could not help wondering how it would

fare with us in our work in Egypt. To my surprise the people we met showed us warm friendliness and were most hospitable. We visited the few schools that exist for children without sight. I was grieved to find what meager openings the adult blind of Egypt have for re-education or employment. As one of the charming, progressive Egyptian women said to whom I was introduced, 'Our people have a strong willpower, but you must make them believe in a movement before they support it.' How true that is of the work for the blind and the deaf!"

Helen was an enormous success, and in Egypt her timing could not have been better; the visit took place just two months before Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew King Farouk. Kim Nielsen, in her book *The Radical Lives of Helen Keller*, notes that the U.S. State Department, unlike the CIA, was unaware of the monarch's imminent overthrow. Helen's presence was an affirmation of U.S. values at a time when America was becoming increasingly concerned about Egyptian sympathies for the Soviet Union.

Helen's chief concern had become the blind and deaf of the world. Consequently, when the Rev. Arthur Blaxall of the South African National Council

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for the Blind, whom she had met at the 1931 World Conference, bade her to come to South Africa to spur support for the blind and the deaf, she immediately began to make arrangements. In February 1951, Helen and Polly boarded a ship for Cape Town. Her itinerary included 28 schools and institutions; she addressed 48 meetings and receptions, and she visited every important urban center in the Union, pleading with the various races of Africa to take an equal share in promoting the welfare and happiness of their handicapped friends and neighbors. The Zulus gave her the name "Homvueselelo," meaning, "You have aroused the consciences of many."

Helen was truly an American ambassador. She was to some a saint, to others a blessing, and to all, a national treasure.

As a result of her work throughout the United States and the world, U.S. presidents were eager to make her acquaintance. She personally met every president from Calvin Coolidge to John F. Kennedy. She told President Kennedy that he had to be the best-looking



president America had ever had, and while she was feeling Dwight Eisenhower's face, he accidentally opened his mouth as she went to feel his lips, causing her to comment, "Oh, Mr. President! What a big mouth you have."

Helen was especially close to First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she met in 1938, Eleanor's husband, Franklin D. Roosevelt, proclaimed his admiration: "Whatever Helen Keller is for – I am for."

World War II created thousands of war veterans who needed Helen's particular brand of optimism and courage. Helen wanted to help, so she asked Polly to make arrangements so that she might visit the wounded men. She clearly knew in her heart how the wounded men felt. "Life [is] not over," she told them. "It [is] different, but not over, and [you can] still find meaning and satisfaction in it." It was a message she lived herself, and she gained enormously from her visits. She wrote, "Often it was not verbal encouragement that was asked of me, but a kiss or the laying of my hand on a wearied head. This always made me feel as if I was partaking of a sacrament. Visiting the war wounded was the crowning achievement of my life."

In 1952, Helen was awarded the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Social Sciences, given annually to a distinguished individual who has been of outstanding service to humanity.

Also in 1952, the World's Ambassadors to the United States honored Helen at the Waldorf Astoria in New York as she was ready to embark on another world tour. While many called her "an ambassador to the world," she called herself "an international beggar." This was to be the last of her world tours.

During her lifetime, Helen Keller witnessed great advances in civilization. Inventions, such as the radio, airplane, and automobile, demonstrated the immeasurable will of the human spirit to progress. However, she also lived during the creation and use of the atomic bomb, the bomber, and the tank. Colonization, two world wars, and increasing labor conflicts continued to draw out her will to change the world for the better. She believed that humanity's destiny is our responsibility, and she was never timid in expressing her opinion of society as a whole or in her attempts to better it. She wrote, "Until the spirit of love for our fellowmen, regardless of race, color or creed, shall fill the world, making real in our lives and our deeds, that actuality of human brotherhood – until the great mass of the people shall be filled with the sense of responsibility for each other's welfare, social justice will never be attained."





At the Harvard commencement exercises in 1955, Helen became the first woman to receive an honorary degree. The entire audience gave her a standing ovation!

Indeed, Helen received awards and honors of distinction throughout the world, from every country that she visited. She won an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 1956 for *Helen Keller in Her Story*. On September 14, 1964, President Lyndon Baines Johnson presented Helen with the highest civilian award presented in the United States, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, one of only 30 that had been presented up to that time. A year later, she was elected to the Women's Hall of Fame at the New York World's Fair.

Helen had a heart attack in late May 1968. A few days later, on June 1, she died quietly, according to the nurse who was with her. Helen never feared death; she was sure that in eternity, she would be able to both see and hear.

In the end, Helen died as she had lived, dignified and courageous, with her sightless eyes focused firmly on the future. Her ashes were interred in the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. At her memorial service, Senator Lister Hill of Alabama remarked, "She will live on, one of the few, the immortal names not born to die. Her spirit will endure as long as man can read and stories can be told of the woman who showed the world that there are no boundaries to courage and faith."

Throughout her long life, Helen worked tirelessly to change the world, not only for the blind and the deaf-blind but for all people. And she succeeded. Today, work in her name is being carried on in every part of the world.

Twenty years after her death, members of my family helped establish the Helen Keller Foundation to align her legacy with research and education solutions to sight



and hearing loss. Aunt Helen is our guiding light, and the work that we do in her name is changing the world for the better.

As the twentieth century concluded, with Time magazine naming Helen Keller as one of the century's 100 most important figures, the Helen Keller Foundation completed its first decade of work in her name. Helen Keller Foundation researchers were the first to report a revolutionary surgery to repair the diseased macula, the human center of vision.

The Foundation proved that recently injured eyes with no remaining light perception (NLP) need no longer be removed or abandoned to reconstruction – that these eyes could often be surgically restored to useful vision.

Foundation researchers also developed a laser treatment that could prevent retinal detachment with 95% certainty. This ameliorated a scourge that has plagued humankind since ancient times, producing blindness that became partially treatable only in modern times. For those who have already suffered the blinding condition of retinal detachment, the Foundation has also developed a surgical eye treatment that reduces scar tissue complications in retinal detachment repair by 88%!

During the first decade of the new millennium, the Helen Keller Foundation

developed a cure that saves central vision in diabetic retinopathy – the leading cause of sight loss in the working-age populations of developed countries worldwide. The same laser-based technique offers better hope for those over age 65 who develop strokes of the retina.

The Foundation is confident that when these research breakthroughs are fully implemented into patient care, millions of years of lost eyesight will be saved, and cost savings to public health and productivity will have been made for pennies on the dollar! That is the power of the modern biomedical research era that dawned in the 1960s, even as Helen was leaving us.

As Helen's great-grandniece, I have taught her famous story to school children and adults throughout the United States and abroad for more than a decade. I now plan to begin webcasting to schools worldwide from Aunt Helen's birthplace in Tuscumbia, Alabama.

The Helen Keller Foundation is ensuring that her life lessons, still beloved by literate people worldwide, will be known to generations yet to come, and that public support for sight research will forever be mobilized in her name.

If you or someone you know has an interest in our work and/or are interested in helping our cause, "to help hasten the day when there shall be no preventable blindness," please contact us at (205) 933-9389, or visit our website, [www.helenkellerfoundation.org](http://www.helenkellerfoundation.org).

*"Alone we can do so little;  
together we can do so much."*

– Helen Keller

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