

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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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.

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