

Helen Keller

Helen Adams Keller was born on **June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama**. In 1882, she fell ill and was struck blind, deaf and mute. Beginning in 1887, Keller's teacher, **Anne Sullivan**, helped her make tremendous progress with her ability to communicate, and Keller went on to college, graduating in 1904. In 1920, Keller helped found the **ACLU**.

Helen Keller was the first of two daughters born to **Arthur H. Keller and Katherine Adams Keller**. Keller's father had proudly served as an officer in the Confederate Army during the Civil War. The family was not particularly wealthy and earned income from their cotton plantation. Keller was born with her senses of sight and hearing, and started speaking when she was just 6 months old. She started walking at the age of 1.

Loss of Sight and Hearing

In **1882**, however, Keller contracted an illness—called "brain fever" by the family doctor—that produced a high body temperature. As Keller grew into childhood, she developed a limited method of communication with her companion, **Martha Washington**, the young daughter of the family cook.

Looking for answers and inspiration, in 1886, Keller's mother came across a travelogue by **Charles Dickens, American Notes**. She read of the successful education of another deaf and blind child, **Laura Bridgman**, and soon dispatched Keller and her father to Baltimore, Maryland to see specialist **Dr. J. Julian Chisolm**. After examining Keller, Chisolm recommended that she see **Alexander Graham Bell**, the inventor of the telephone, who was working with deaf children at the time. Bell met with Keller and her parents, and suggested that they travel to the **Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts**. There, the family met with the school's director, **Michael Anagnos**. He suggested Helen work with one of the institute's most recent graduates, **Anne Sullivan**. And so began a 49-year relationship between teacher and pupil.

She began by teaching Helen finger spelling, starting with the word "doll," to help Keller understand the gift of a doll she had brought along. Other words would follow.

In a dramatic struggle, Sullivan taught Keller the word "water";

In 1890, Keller began speech classes at the **Horace Mann School for the Deaf in Boston**. She would toil for 25 years to learn to speak so that others could understand her. From 1894 to 1896, she attended the **Wright-Humason School for the Deaf in New York City**. There, she worked on improving her communication skills and studied regular academic subjects. Her famous quote "*Keep your face to the sunshine and you cannot see the shadow.*"

Around this time, Keller became determined to attend college. In 1896, she attended the **Cambridge School for Young Ladies**, a preparatory school for women. As her story became known to the general public, Keller began to meet famous and influential people. One of them was the writer **Mark Twain**, who was very impressed with her. They became friends. Twain

introduced her to his friend Henry H. Rogers, a Standard Oil executive. **Rogers** was so impressed with Keller's talent, drive and determination that he agreed to pay for her to attend **Radcliff College**. Keller wrote her first book, *The Story of My Life*. It covered her transformation from childhood to 21-year-old college student. Keller graduated, cum laude, from Radcliffe in 1904, at the age of 24.

When the **American Federation for the Blind** was established in 1921, Keller had an effective national outlet for her efforts. She became a member in 1924, and participated in many campaigns to raise awareness, money and support for the blind. She also joined other organizations dedicated to helping those less fortunate, including the Permanent Blind War Relief Fund (later called the American Braille Press).

Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, was used as the basis for 1957 television drama *The Miracle Worker*. In 1959, the story was developed into a Broadway play of the same title, starring Patty Duke as Keller and Anne Bancroft as Sullivan.

During her lifetime, she received many honours in recognition of her accomplishments, including the **Theodore Roosevelt Distinguished Service Medal in 1936**, the **Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964**, and election to the **Women's Hall of Fame** in 1965. She also received **honorary doctoral degrees** from Temple University and Harvard University and from the universities of Glasgow, Scotland; Berlin, Germany; Delhi, India; and Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Additionally, she was named an Honorary Fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland.

Keller died in her sleep on **June 1, 1968**, Easton, Connecticut, just a few weeks before her 88th birthday.

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