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Helen Keller

Reading and Discussion

Helen Keller was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama. Helen's story is an amazing one that shows how a person's determination can help him or her to overcome life's obstacles. Her story shows how a person can turn a difficulty into an incredible story of hope.

When Helen was only 19 months old, she had a fever that left her both blind and deaf. Before she lost her vision and her hearing, Helen had just begun learning how to speak. After she lost her vision, she still had a memory of what it was like to see light. It was very difficult for her to lose her capabilities, and she became frustrated. She did not know how to communicate effectively with others.

By the time Helen was seven, her parents knew that they needed additional guidance to effectively help Helen. As a result, they hired a tutor named Anne Sullivan. By this time, Helen had invented about sixty gestures that she used to identify things or ask for things. Helen's language was very limited, and her frustration caused her to misbehave by throwing temper tantrums.

Upon her arrival, Anne began teaching Helen sign language. Anne would finger spell in Helen's hand. Helen learned the patterns but was unable to relate the signs to the objects that they stood for. She did not understand how the signs stood for other things. All of this changed after a trip to the well. Anne had been teaching Helen the finger spelling pattern for water and mug. Helen learned the signs, but she did not relate the actual words to anything. She could not relate the spelling of water to the liquid. While at the well, Anne put Helen's hand under water and then spelled the word water. Finally, Helen understood that the liquid from the pump had a name, and that it was called water.

After only a few months, Helen had a vocabulary of hundreds of words and was able to form simple sentences. While most of her communication was done by finger spelling, she also learned the shaped of letters. This helped her to learn how to print block letters. She would use a grooved writing board and guide her pencil with the index finger of her left hand. She began sending letters to relatives and also learned the Braille alphabet.

When Helen was almost eight, she went on a trip with Anne to the Perkins School for the Blind in Boston. This was the first trip of many. Helen was exposed to a variety of resources and her abilities increased. She was also exposed to foreign languages and learned some Latin, French, and German words.

When she was nine, Helen began learning how to speak. Helen's first speech teacher was named Sarah Fuller. Sarah taught Helen how to feel the shape of her mouth and tongue while speaking in order to make her mouth form the right sounds. Helen learned

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to say letter sounds. She then moved on to learn syllables and words. Her speech was difficult to understand at first. She continually tried to improve and perfect her speech. As she was learning to speak, she also learned to read lips with her fingers.

Helen spent years trying to perfect her speech. She also used her writing capabilities to write a great number of letters. Eventually, Helen began to think about college. While there were some colleges that welcomed Helen and wanted her to attend, there were others that said she could not do it. Helen chose Radcliffe College. Unfortunately, Radcliffe was one of the schools that thought Helen could not compete with sighted students. Helen was determined she could, and she passed her entrance exams. She then attended regular classes, with Anne Sullivan serving as a translator. While in college, Helen wrote *The Story of My Life* for the "Ladies home Journal." Helen graduated from Radcliffe in 1904.

Anne fell in love with John Albert Macy, the English instructor who was hired to edit Helen's story. Eventually, with Helen's encouragement, Anne married John Macy on May 2, 1905. In 1914, Anne's health began to worsen, and it was clear that Helen would need a new companion. Her new companion was Polly Thompson, a woman hired to keep house, and with no previous experience working with the blind or deaf.

In 1916, Helen fell in love with Peter Fagan, a man who was hired to care for her while Anne was ill and Polly was away. They tried to keep their love a secret, but Helen's mother found out. She fired Peter Fagan immediately and sent him away. Although Helen and Peter wrote a few letters to each other after this, the romance was over.

Helen went on to star in a silent movie and to be the spokesperson for the American Foundation for the Blind. She traveled with Anne and Polly and raised money for the blind. She gave many speeches. Her support for the foundation became her life's work. Helen traveled all over. She went to France, Yugoslavia, and Japan. She was awarded an honorary degree from the University of Glasgow. She even met and visited with the Queen at Buckingham Palace.

During World War II, Helen visited disabled soldiers. She continued to write and even wrote a book about Anne Sullivan Macy. She wrote a great deal. Helen sought to help others overcome their difficulties the same way that she did. On June 1, 1968, at the age of 88, Helen died in her sleep.

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Activities

Activity A: Multiple Choice:

1. Helen Keller was born in:

- a. Arkansas
- b. Afghanistan
- c. Alabama
- d. Germany

2. Helen's tutor was:

- a. Annie Oakley
- b. Anne Smith
- c. Anne Scott
- d. Anne Sullivan

3. Helen's autobiography was called:

- a. The Story of My Life
- b. My Story
- c. My Journal
- d. Journal About My Life

Activity B: Fill in the blanks:

1. Helen fell in love with _____.

2. Helen graduated from _____ College.

3. Helen's first speech teacher was _____.

4. Polly Thompson was originally hired to _____.

Activity C: True or False:

____ 1. Helen Keller was born blind and deaf.

____ 2. Helen Keller met the Queen of England in Buckingham Palace.

____ 3. Helen Keller became a spokesperson for the American Foundation for Braille.

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Answer Key

Activity A

1. Helen Keller was born in:

- a. Arkansas
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- b. Anne Smith
- c. Anne Scott
- d. **Anne Sullivan**

3. Helen's autobiography was called:

- a. **The Story of My Life**
- b. My Story
- c. My Journal
- d. Journal About My Life

Activity B

1. Helen fell in love with Peter Fagan.

2. Helen graduated from Radcliffe College.

3. Helen's first speech teacher was Sarah Fuller.

4. Polly Thompson was originally hired to keep house.

Activity C

F 1. Helen Keller was born blind and deaf.

I 2. Helen Keller met the Queen of England in Buckingham Palace.

F 3. Helen Keller became a spokesperson for the American Foundation for the Braille.