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Helen Keller: The Girl With the Vision

by Liana Mahoney

Over the course of her lifetime, Helen Keller achieved many things. She earned the Theodore Roosevelt Distinguished Service Medal, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. She was elected to the Women's Hall of Fame, graduated with honors from Radcliffe College, and received honorary degrees from several universities. She wrote an autobiography, and traveled to more than thirty nations around the world to inspire people. These achievements are quite impressive. What's even more amazing is that she achieved all of this and more without being able to see or hear! From the time she was a young child, Helen Keller was completely blind and deaf.



Helen Keller was born in 1880 in Alabama. She was a healthy baby who began speaking her first words around six months old, and began walking around one year old. Before her second birthday, though, Helen got very sick and developed a high fever. A few days after her fever finally broke, her parents noticed changes in their daughter. She didn't seem to notice when they rang the dinner bell, or waved at her. It soon became clear that Helen had lost her ability to see and hear.

Helen became wild and uncontrollable. She kicked, hit, screamed, threw tantrums, and put her hands in other people's food at the dinner table. She wouldn't stay in her bed at night. Her parents decided it was time to get Helen some help.

The Kellers met with Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone. He was working with deaf children at the time, and also had a wife who was deaf. Bell

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suggested they contact the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts to see if the teachers there might be able to help Helen. Mr. and Mrs. Keller took his advice and hoped for good news. On March 3, 1887, good news came indeed! One of the institute's most recent graduates, Annie Sullivan, arrived to the Keller home to begin teaching Helen. This was the beginning of a 49-year relationship between Helen and her teacher, and it changed Helen's life forever.

Annie was a strict teacher who worked very hard teaching six-year-old Helen how to behave and how to communicate with others. She brought Helen a doll as a gift, and on her very first day at the Kellers, Annie tried to teach Helen the word "doll." She used finger spelling to spell out the letters "d-o-l-l" in Helen's hand. She tried teaching Helen many words in this manner. Eventually, Helen learned to spell them back to Annie. But Annie could tell that Helen wasn't connecting the letters and their meaning. Many times, Helen threw tantrums and appeared angry. Still, Annie didn't give up.

One day, Annie had a big breakthrough. She taught Helen the meaning of the word "water" by holding her hand under a water pump and spelling "w-a-t-e-r" over and over again. Helen understood! She spelled it back to Annie, then pounded the ground to tell Annie she wanted to know its name. By the time evening came, Helen had learned over thirty words and understood their meaning! Now that she had discovered a whole new world, Helen's love for learning ignited. She wanted to know more. The little girl who never smiled and often went into fits of rage was now a happy child who was thirsty to learn.

Now Helen wanted the rest of the world to understand her just as well. She learned how to read Braille, a special alphabet for blind people. Then she used a Braille typewriter to type out stories of her own! She also spent the next twenty-five years of her life learning to speak so that others could understand her. She went to a school for the deaf in Boston. Here, she learned that she could use her hands to teach herself how

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to speak. She put one hand on a person's throat to feel the vibrations, while her other hand touched the person's mouth so she could feel how they formed the sounds in their words. This was very difficult, but Helen was determined. When she finally learned how to speak, everyone listened. She was very intelligent and inspirational.

With the help of Annie Sullivan and a vision to live her life to the fullest, Helen Keller grew up to become a truly amazing woman. She helped improve others' lives, too, by speaking up for their rights, and by helping to change the way the world viewed people who were blind and deaf. Although her own life was one of silence and darkness, Helen Keller was courageous and determined enough to bring light to others by encouraging them to never give up.

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- 1) What of the following best summarizes the central idea of the text?
 - a) How, despite some serious challenges, Helen Keller grew up to become one of the most inspirational women.
 - b) In a world blessed with scientific inventions, physical infirmities won't stop you from achieving your dreams.
 - c) The amazing parents of Helen Keller
 - d) Helen Keller and her great teacher.

- 2) Annie, the teacher, was instrumental in shaping up Helen Keller into the most inspirational woman that she later became. Analyze the introduction and development of Annie's character in the passage.

- 3) What does the phrase "a big breakthrough" mean?

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4) Write a brief appreciatory note on the overall structure of the passage.

5) Do you know of a person who, in spite of physical challenges, became very successful in life? Explain what they have achieved.
