

Name:	Helen Adams Keller
Birth Date:	June 27, 1880
Death Date:	June 1, 1968
Place of Birth:	Tuscumbia, Alabama, United States
Place of Death:	Westport, Connecticut
Nationality:	American
Gender:	Female
Occupations:	lecturer, author

World of Health on Helen Adams Keller

Helen Adams Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on June 27, 1880. She developed normally until the age of nineteen months, when she was stricken by a severe fever. In Keller's writings, she describes her parents' relief that she recovered from the fever, touching on the irony that, in their early rejoicing, they were unaware that she could no longer see or hear.

Keller spent the next five or so years locked into her isolated, dark world. Unable to see or hear, she also became mute. Her frustrations frequently boiled to the surface, and her behavior was described as angry, wild, and animal-like. She struck out at others, scratched, and hurled herself to the ground in fury at being unable to communicate with the people around her. Finally, when Keller was six, her parents reached the end of their rope. They consulted Alexander Graham Bell (inventor of the telephone and an expert on the deaf). He was able to make referrals which ended up in a young teacher, Annie Sullivan, (Anne Sullivan Macy), being sent to the Keller family from the Perkins Institute for the Blind in Boston. Sullivan had herself been blind for a time, only to regain partial sight through surgery. Annie Sullivan proved to be the key to unlock Keller's world.

Using an alphabet of hand shapes which can be spelled into another person's hand, Sullivan followed Keller everywhere. As Keller experienced the world, Sullivan would spell pertinent words into Keller's hand. Finally, as Keller felt water from a pump gushing out over one of her hands, Sullivan formed the letters for the word "water" into Keller's other hand. At that moment, Keller suddenly underwent an epiphany, and she understood that Sullivan's fingers were communicating with her to identify the cold, liquid substance her other hand was experiencing.

From this point on, Keller was ravenous for knowledge. Sullivan taught her finger spelling, and Keller went on to learn a technique for "hearing" what people were saying by placing her hands on their nose, mouth and larynx. Keller quickly learned to read Braille, and a specialized typewriter allowed Keller to communicate in writing.

At age 10, Keller became determined to learn to speak, and attended the Horace Mann School for the Deaf, where she began the process. She also attended the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf, and the Cambridge School for Young Ladies.

She was an excellent student, and was admitted to Radcliffe College at age 20. Annie Sullivan attended classes with Keller, patiently spelling the lectures into Keller's hand. Keller read material for her courses in Braille textbooks. By 1904, she had graduated with honors.

Keller, with Sullivan, traveled and lectured widely in the United States and overseas, speaking out on a variety of political and

humanitarian issues; she was a committed socialist and progressive for her entire adult life, and she was one of the most prominent political commentators and activists of her time.

Raising money for the blind and deaf, Keller and Sullivan helped put a stop to the practice of placing all disabled children permanently in

institutions. As a living example, Keller was able to convince the government and the public of the importance and value of appropriate education for disabled children. During World War II, Keller championed the cause of veterans who had been blinded in battle.

In 1930, Annie Sullivan's eyes failed again, and she became blind. Polly Thompson, Sullivan and Keller's housekeeper/secretary since 1914, stepped into the role that Sullivan could no longer fill, caring for both Sullivan and Keller, and helping Keller travel and lecture. In 1936, Sullivan died. Thompson stayed with Keller until Thompson's death in 1960.

Keller wrote a number of very well-received books, including *The Story of My life* (1902); *Optimism* (1903); *The World I Live In* (1908); *The Song of the Stone Wall* (1910); *Out of the Dark* (1913); *My Religion* (1929); *Midstream: My Later Life* (1930); and *Teacher* (1930). Numerous biographies have been written about Helen Keller. William Gibson wrote the Pulitzer prize-winning play *The Miracle Worker* about Annie Sullivan's teaching of Helen Keller. *The Miracle Worker* was made into a 1962 film which garnered Academy Awards for Anne Bancroft (as Sullivan) and Patty Duke (as the young Helen Keller).

On June 1, 1968, Helen Keller died at the age of 87. Her own words make a fitting eulogy for the turning point in her life: "Once I knew only darkness and stillness. . . . My life was without past or future. . . . But a little word from the fingers of another fell into my hand that clutched at emptiness, and my heart leaped to the rapture of living."

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