

Name _____ Date _____

Helen Keller

By Mary L. Bushong

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be deaf or blind or even both?

Close your eyes tight and put your fingers in your ears. Everything is dark, and you can't hear.

Can you imagine spending your whole life like that? Helen Keller did, but she learned how to overcome it.

Helen Keller was born on June 27, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama. When she was less than two years old, she got sick with something the doctors back then called brain fever.

No one expected her to live, but she did. The only problem was that the disease had taken both her sight and her hearing. Her family did not know what to do with her. They did not know how to teach someone who could neither hear nor see. Other people said to send her away, but her mother and father wanted to try and help her. They took her all the way to Baltimore, Maryland, to be examined by a specialist, but he could not help her either.

He sent the Kellers to see a man who was doing good work with the deaf. His name was Alexander Graham Bell. He told the Kellers how to find a teacher for Helen.

In March 1887 when Helen was almost seven years old, Anne Sullivan arrived at her home. Anne started working with Helen right away, but Helen did not understand what her new teacher wanted. Anne started teaching Helen to use her hands to speak in sign language. One day when Helen was holding her hands under the gushing water pump, Anne spelled the word "water" into her hand. Helen finally made the connection between the finger movements in her hand and the things around her. Within just a few hours, Helen could spell thirty words.

Once Helen understood how to "talk" to the world, she started learning very quickly. Anne taught her to read and write in Braille first and then taught her to type on a regular typewriter. (Braille is a special kind of writing which is made up of raised dot patterns. Each pattern is a letter of the alphabet.)

Soon people began to write articles about her, and she met many famous people of the day. She even traveled to meet Alexander Graham Bell, and she visited President Grover Cleveland in the White House.



In 1897, Helen went to college. She was the first deaf and blind person to ever graduate from Radcliffe College. Helen wrote a book called "The Story of My Life," and it has since become a classic. All this time, she stayed with her teacher, Anne Sullivan. They were to remain good friends for their whole lives. Even when Anne married, Helen continued to live with them. Anne helped Helen travel as she spoke to people all over the world. Anne Sullivan died in 1936. Helen's secretary, Polly Thomson, continued to travel and live with Helen.

In 1957, a story of Helen's life, "The Miracle Worker," was performed for the first time on TV. Two years later it was made into a Broadway play. Helen's health soon took a turn for the worse. She suffered the first of many strokes in 1961 and died in her sleep on June 1, 1968. Helen Keller helped change people's attitudes about the deaf and blind through her courage and determination. In her own words she said, "The public must learn that the blind man is neither genius nor freak, nor an idiot. He has a mind that can be educated, a hand which can be trained, ambitions which it is right for him to strive to realize, and it is the duty of the public to help him make the best of himself so he can win light through work."

Questions

1. How old was Helen when she lost her sight and hearing?
2. What great inventor helped the Keller's find a teacher for Helen?
3. What do you call the special kind of raised dot patterns, which form letters of the alphabet?
4. What was the title of Helen's first book?
5. Why do you think that Anne Sullivan was interested in helping Helen?