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Helen Keller at the age of 24, when she graduated cum laude from Radcliffe College.

Miracle Girl

Out of her darkness and silence, Helen Keller grew to become one of the most admired people in the world

BY JOAN CATHERINE KRAMER

It was the winter of 1882 and Helen Adams Keller was 19 months old, already walking and talking, a beloved and strikingly determined toddler, when her world went silent and dark.

A mysterious illness—the Keller family doctor in rural Tuscumbia, Alabama, called it brain fever, and speculation today is that Helen had some form of meningitis, or perhaps scarlet fever—rendered her deaf and blind and mute.

"Gradually I got used to the silence and darkness that surrounded me and forgot that it had ever been different," she wrote in her now classic 1903 memoir *The Story of My Life*, "until she came—my teacher—who was to set my spirit free."

"My teacher" was Anne Sullivan, the remarkable young woman, blind herself and newly graduated from the Perkins School for the Blind, who traveled from Boston to the modest Keller cotton plantation and never looked back. She would be Helen's teacher, governess, and then constant companion until she died in 1936 with Helen holding her hand.

When Sullivan first came into her life, Keller was nearly 7 years old. She had only a few rudimentary signs she'd improvised—pushing and pulling, for instance—to make herself crudely understood, and her family was desperate. Frustrated in her desire to express herself, she threw violent tantrums, nearly killing her baby sister in one fit of fury, and relatives were urging her parents to commit her to an institution.

"I do not remember when I first realized that I was different from other people," Keller wrote, "but I had noticed that my mother and my friends did not use signs as I did when they wanted anything done, but talked with their mouths. Sometimes I stood between two persons who were conversing and touched their lips. I could not understand, and was vexed. I moved my lips and gesticulated frantically without result. This made me so angry at times that I kicked and screamed until I was exhausted."

Helen's mother, Kate, came across a piece by Charles Dickens about a blind and deaf girl who had been successfully educated. Kate Keller felt encouraged enough to dispatch Helen and her father to a specialist in Baltimore who referred them to Alexander Graham Bell, whose invention of the telephone had been inspired by his lifelong work with the deaf. Bell, who became a friend, advised

Keller, left, with her devoted teacher, Anne Sullivan.

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Keller graduated from Radcliffe in 1904, with honors in German and English.

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the Kellers to write to the Perkins School, and the director recommended Anne Sullivan.

Sullivan started teaching Keller using a technique called "finger spelling," a gentle, intimate method of communicating hand to hand. For the first few weeks, Keller understood it as little more than a game. And then came the moment—immortalized in *The Miracle Worker*, an Academy Award-winning 1962 film based on Keller's autobiography—when the two took a break from their lessons to walk in the garden. They came to the well house and someone pumping water. Sullivan inserted Keller's hand into the flow, then quickly and repeatedly spelled "w-a-t-e-r" into her other hand.

"I stood still," Keller wrote, "my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!"

She wanted to know the words for everything—learned dozens of words that very day, including "mother," "father," "sister," "teacher." And if the "miracle worker" of the film is Anne Sullivan, the miracle itself is the child, her spirit so determined to be heard.

Helen Keller's experience of the world is so intense in her telling—she "sees" the delicacy of jasmine and other spring flowers with her eager fingers and highly developed sense of smell. She experiences the coolness of grass with her whole body, delights in the touch of frogs and insects and her dog. Later in life she realizes she can "hear" orchestras by feeling their vibration through the tips of her fingers on a table, that she can "see" and "hear" Niagara Falls by feeling the earth and the very atmosphere tremble around her.

Sullivan accompanied her to Boston, where she became a star pupil at the Perkins School, learning to read raised

letters, then Braille, decoding the mysteries of the world's great books and attracting the attention of journalists and philanthropists to the cause. The two moved to New York, where Keller studied with another extraordinary teacher, Sarah Fuller of the Horace Mann School for the Deaf, who helped her realize one of her great ambitions—to be able to speak. The process was laborious and involved Keller feeling the lips and throat of her speaker/teacher and working to imitate the vibrations she felt with her own lips and throat. Over the years, Keller became adept at reading lips with her fingers.

She wanted to go to Harvard, and when that was ruled out—they did not accept women—she settled on Radcliffe. Everyone told her it could not be done, but the determination that once made her kick and scream and destroy things propelled her through prep school,

Keller and her companions traveled [the] world, raising money for the blind, advocating for equal rights for women and the disabled, giving inspirational speeches.

Sullivan always at her side, literally holding her hand and speaking into it lectures, exam questions, conversations.

Keller passed the same test everyone had to take and got into Radcliffe. While she was there she wrote *The Story of My Life* (there would be a half-dozen more books). It was first serialized in *Ladies Home Journal* and would become an award-winning play, then the film, then a TV movie.

Everywhere she found helpers, wealthy donors inspired to pay her tuition, to support her. Samuel Clemens (better known as Mark Twain), who became a good friend, introduced her to an oil magnate who put her through Radcliffe. She graduated cum laude, with honors in German and English. At one point, even industrialist Andrew Carnegie insisted on contributing to her support.

Below, left: Helen Keller with writer Mark Twain, who became her good friend. Right: Keller teaching a child sign language in 1907.


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Helen Keller, c. 1950's

Sullivan married, but after a year or two her husband drifted away. Keller in her 30s had a love affair with a newspaper reporter who came to fill in as her secretary. These things didn't last. But Polly Thomson, who came to live with the women as a housekeeper, learned their special language and stayed with them until she died in 1960. Winnie Corbally, a nurse hired to care for Thomson, stayed with Keller as her companion until Keller herself died in her sleep just shy of her 88th birthday.

From the dark silence of her early childhood, Helen Keller grew to become one of the most admired people in the world. She and her companions traveled that world, raising money for the blind, advocating for equal rights for women and the disabled, giving inspirational speeches. Her message was love, the joy of service. She was a suffragette, an enthusiastic Socialist, an advocate for birth control. She helped found the American Civil Liberties Union. She met every U.S. president from Grover Cleveland to Lyndon Johnson, who in 1964 awarded her the Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Her only regret, she said in a taped 1954 interview, was that despite years of dogged practice, she never was able to make herself understood when she spoke. "Longingly I feel how much more good I may have done, if I had only acquired normal speech," she said aloud, as Polly Thomson repeated her words to make them more clearly understood. "But out of this sorrowful experience, I understand more fully all human strivings, thwarted ambitions, and the infinite capacity of hope."