



“Alone we can do so little. Together we can do so much”.

This is just one of the many quotes attributed to Helen Keller. Amongst Lions Helen is best known for her presentation to the 7500 Lions who attended the Lions International Convention held in Cedar Point, Ohio in 1925 when as part of her address to the conventioners she challenged members to become “Knights of the Blind.”

The final paragraph of her presentation was as follows “This is the opportunity I offer you, Lions—to foster and sponsor the work of the American Foundation for the Blind. Will you not help me hasten the day when there shall be no preventable blindness, no little deaf blind child untaught, no blind man or woman unaided? I appeal to you, Lions—you who have your sight, your hearing, you who are strong and brave and kind—will you not constitute yourselves Knights of the Blind in my crusade against darkness?”

Helen was born on 27th June 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama and lost her sight at the age of 19 months following a bout of illness. This was described at the time as an “acute congestion of the stomach and the brain.” Contemporary doctors now believe it may have been meningitis.

She recovered from the illness but was left permanently blind and deaf which she describes in her autobiography as being “at sea in a dense fog.”

Helen established a series of home signs through which she was able to communicate with Martha Washington, the young daughter of the family cook and who was about 2 years older than Helen. By the age of 7 she had extended the number of signs to about 60 and was now able to communicate with her family and could distinguish between people from the vibrations of their footsteps.

Following several consultations, she was eventually recommended to make contact with the Perkins Institute located in South Boston. The school’s director, Michael Anagnos, asked Anne Sullivan, a 20-year-old former student of the school, to become Helen’s instructor.

Sullivan first met Helen at her home on 5th March 1887 and so began a friendship that lasted for nearly 50 years. Helen later described this meeting as “my soul’s birthday.”

With constant companionship from Anne, Helen navigated a series of educational institutes until at the age of 24 she graduated from the Radcliffe College of Harvard University. During this time, she had gained the admiration of Mark Twain who introduced her to oil magnate Henry Hutton Rogers who, along with his wife Abbie, paid for her education.

At the time of graduating, she became the first deaf/blind American to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree. She maintained correspondence with the Austrian pedagogue and philosopher Wilhelm Jerusalem, who recognised and encouraged her literary talent.

She showed a determination to learn to communicate with others and in doing so learnt to speak and subsequently delivered numerous speeches and lectures on various aspects of her life.

She learnt to “hear” people speaking by using the Tadoma method which involved using her fingers to feel the lips and throat of the speaker. She became proficient at using braille and soon discovered that by placing her fingers on a table top she could enjoy music being played nearby.

Anne Sullivan remained as her companion until her health began to fail in 1914. At this time Helen met Polly Thompson who was hired to keep house for her. She was a young woman from Scotland with no experience of working with deaf or blind people. She progressed to working as Helen’s secretary and eventually became her constant companion.

During her 30’s Helen had a love affair with Peter Fagan with whom she planned to elope. He was known as the “fingerspelling socialist” and they had met when she was working on behalf of the American Foundation for the Blind in Forest Hills, Queens, New York.

Anne Sullivan died in 1936 with Helen holding her hand. Following this Helen and Polly moved to Connecticut from where they then toured the world raising funds for the blind. Polly had a stroke in 1957 from which she never fully recovered and died in 1960. Winnie Corbally, a nurse originally hired to care for Polly, stayed on and became Helen’s companion until her death in June 1968.

In 1919 a silent movie entitled “Deliverance” was made and which depicted Helen’s life story. It was described as emphasising the physical and emotional struggles that existed between Helen and Anne. It was claimed at the time some minor differences existed but in the main was regarded as accurate. Her life story was also the subject of a film produced much later and entitled “The Miracle Worker”

Helen wrote a total of 14 published books and numerous articles. Her books included her autobiography entitled “The Story of My Life” which was published in 1903. This recounted her life experiences up to the age of 21 and was written whilst she was studying at college. It was later adapted as a play by William Gibson.

In an article written in 1907 she noted that many cases of childhood blindness could be prevented by washing the eyes of every newborn baby with a disinfectant solution. Apparently at that time only very few doctors and midwives undertook this procedure but because of this article this commonsense public health measure became widely used and adopted.

In 1999 Helen Keller was listed 5th (at 30%) in Gallup’s Most Widely Admired People of the 20th century. That same year she was also named one of Time Magazine’s 100 Most Important People of the 20th Century. In 2003 the State of Alabama honoured Helen on its State quarter coin which became the only circulating coin to feature braille.

Many hospitals and clinics catering for the blind and/or deaf around the world are named after Helen as well as many streets. 1973 she was inducted into the American National Women’s Hall of Fame and in 1980 a stamp marking the centennial of Helen’s birthday was issued by the United States Postal Service depicting Helen and Anne. The same year President Jimmy Carter recognized her birth with a Presidential proclamation.

Helen Adams Keller was a noted author, disability rights activist, political activist and lecturer.

An inspiration to all who knew her and who have followed in her footsteps.