

# Helen Keller:

## A Life of Triumph over Adversity

### Early Life

**Name:** Helen Adams Keller

**Born:** 27th June, 1880 in Tuscumbia, Alabama, USA.

**Father's job:** Cotton Farmer and Army Officer.

**Significant event:** Helen could speak at 6 months old.

**Early childhood illness:** At 19 months old, she had a very bad fever, which left her deaf and blind.



### Did you know?

When she was young, Helen and her friend Martha talked to each other using sign language. Helen was a bright, but very naughty child. She had lots of temper tantrums. An inventor called Alexander Graham Bell had used a system called 'Visible Speech' for deaf people to communicate and he recommended a place for Helen to go to learn it. Helen went to the Perkins School for the Blind for help. She met Anne Sullivan who taught her how to behave, then how to spell words on the palm of the hand and to learn to speak by feeling the throats and mouths of people as they spoke to her. She also learned to read braille with her fingers (an alphabet of raised dots punched onto paper).



<b>Languages learnt in braille:</b>	English, French, German, Greek and Latin
<b>As a student at Radcliffe College:</b>	First deaf-blind person to be awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904.
<b>As an author:</b>	Helen wrote twelve books, including her autobiography.
<b>As a traveller:</b>	Helen visited over 40 countries, speaking to audiences about the problems for blind people.
<b>Lifetime awards:</b>	Helen was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 and elected to the Women's Hall of Fame in 1965.

Helen spent her life helping others in need and was hugely brave herself.  
She died on 1st June, 1968.

# Helen Keller:

## A Life of Triumph over Adversity

### Early Life

**Name:** Helen Adams Keller.

**Born:** Tuscumbia, Alabama, 27th June 1880.

**Significant events:** Helen first spoke at 6 months old. At 19 months old, she had a very bad fever which left her deaf and blind. Her eyes were replaced with glass eyes for medical reasons.

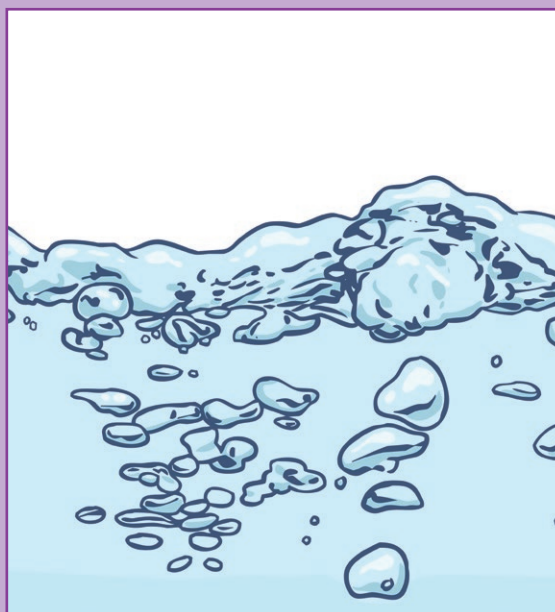
### Did you know?

When she was young, Helen and her friend Martha talked to each other using sign language. Helen was a bright but unruly<sup>1</sup> child who had lots of temper tantrums and disrupted family life. An inventor called Alexander Graham Bell had used a system called 'Visible Speech' (originally invented by his father) for deaf people to communicate and he recommended a place for Helen to go to learn this method. Helen went to the Perkins School for the Blind for help. She met Anne Sullivan who taught her how to behave, then how to spell words on the palm of the hand and to learn to speak by feeling the throats and mouths of people as they spoke to her. She helped Helen to connect words with objects and sensations. After Anne got Helen to run her hands under a water pump, Helen described it in her autobiography like this:



*"I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness<sup>2</sup> 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!"*

Helen also learned to read braille with her fingers (an alphabet of raised dots on paper).



## Later Life

Helen spent her life helping others triumph over adversity and was hugely courageous herself. She died on 1st June, 1968, just a few weeks before her 88th birthday.

<b>Languages learned in braille:</b>	English, French, German, Greek and Latin
<b>As a student at Radcliffe College:</b>	First deaf-blind person to be awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904.
<b>As a celebrity:</b>	Helen became famous because of her accomplishments <sup>3</sup> and Mark Twain, the author of Huckleberry Finn, became friends. An oil executive <sup>4</sup> , Henry H. Rogers, paid for her to go to Radcliffe College.
<b>As an author:</b>	Helen wrote 12 books, including her autobiography, 'The Story of My Life'.
<b>As a traveller:</b>	Helen visited over 40 countries. She was an advocate for women and people with disabilities.
<b>Lifetime achievements:</b>	Helen was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 and elected to the Women's Hall of Fame in 1965.



## Glossary of Vocabulary

**unruly<sup>1</sup>** - difficult to control

**consciousness<sup>2</sup>** - an awareness of your surroundings

**accomplishment<sup>3</sup>** - a remarkable or successful achievement

**executive<sup>4</sup>** - a senior manager in a company

# Helen Keller:

## A Life of Triumph over Adversity

### Early Life

Helen Adams Keller was born in Tuscumbia, Alabama, on the 27th June, 1880. Her father owned a cotton plantation but he was also a Confederate Army Officer during the Civil War. Helen could speak at 6 months old but at 19 months old she had a very bad fever which left her deaf and blind. Her eyes were replaced with glass eyes for medical reasons.

When she was young, Helen and her friend Martha talked to each other using sign language. Helen was a bright but unruly child who had lots of temper tantrums and disrupted family life.

Helen's mother read her a story by Charles Dickens, describing how a deaf-blind child, Laura Bridgman, was taught to communicate. Inspired by the story, the family contacted the inventor, Alexander Graham Bell. He had used a system called 'Visible Speech' (originally invented by his father) for deaf people to communicate and he recommended a place for Helen to go to learn. In 1888, Helen went to the Perkins Institute for the Blind for help. She met Anne Sullivan who firstly taught her how to behave, then how to spell words on the palm of the hand and to learn to speak by feeling the throats and mouths of people as they spoke to her. She helped Helen to connect words with objects and sensations. After she got Helen to run her hands under a water pump, Helen described it like this:



*"I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness<sup>2</sup> 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!"*

Very quickly, Helen learned new words and she could also read braille with her fingers (an alphabet of raised dots on paper). In time, she used a braille typewriter to record her thoughts.



## Adult Life

Helen was a quick and determined student. She learned to communicate in English, French, German, Greek and Latin. Aged 24, as a student at Radcliffe College, she was the first deaf-blind person to be awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1904.



Her achievements brought her to the attention of many, including the author Mark Twain (who wrote Huckleberry Finn). The oil executive, Henry H. Rogers paid for her expenses at Radcliffe College.



Helen wrote 12 books, including her autobiography, *The Story of My Life* (1903). She travelled to over 40 countries and was a strong advocate for women and those with disabilities. When she visited Akita, in Japan, she remarked that she would like an Akita dog – a popular breed there – and was presented with one from the Japanese Government.

Helen was recognised by the US Government

for her

achievements and was given the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964 and elected to the Women's Hall of Fame in 1965. In 1980, the US Postal Service issued a stamp depicting her and in 2003, Alabama State honoured her by minting a coin featuring her image. It is the only state coin to feature braille.

Helen spent her life helping others triumph over adversity and was hugely courageous herself. She died on 1st June, 1968.

