

## Helen Keller

Helen Keller was quite possibly the most remarkable person to ever grace our planet. She was born in a small town called Tuscumbia, Alabama, on an estate called Ivy Green on June 27, 1880. Left deaf and blind as a result of a childhood illness at the age of 19 months, Helen Keller nevertheless became an articulate spokesperson for the dignity of all individuals.

Learning was tough for Helen. Because of her deafness and blindness, no one could get through to her, and she could not communicate with others. Basic rules and lessons made no sense to her, and she was called a "wild child." Helen's mother wrote to the head of the Perkins School to ask for a teacher for Helen and they sent their star student, Anne Sullivan. The day she arrived—March 3, 1887—Helen's life changed.

Anne taught Helen how to understand words and their meaning. She began to teach Helen letters, by signing them into her palm. After just one month, everything clicked. Anne held Helen's hand under a pump while signing W-A-T-E-R into her palm. Helen's whole face lit up. The word came to life, in one moment. That day, she learned almost 50 words. Quickly, she learned words and then sentences. Soon she was able to communicate by signing the manual alphabet. But Helen wasn't satisfied with signing alone. She wanted to learn to write. In addition to learning to write in braille, Helen placed a ruler on the page as a guide and drew very square block letters.

Anne taught Helen many things outside of the classroom. She taught her to touch, smell, and experience nature. She wanted Helen to be curious, ask questions, and to discover the world around her. And, for the rest of her life, Helen loved to smell and touch flowers, to feel the wind on her face...she was curious about everything! She had no fear. Helen once said, "Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing."

In 1902, a year before her graduation, Helen successfully published her first book, *The Story of My Life*. The book received great reviews and has since been translated into 50 languages. Helen also led the way for so many women, as well as people with disabilities. In 1904, she was the first deaf-blind person to receive a college degree. She graduated from Radcliffe College cum laude. In 1924, Helen joined the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), the country's leading advocate for people who are blind or visually impaired. For the next 44 years, she was an ambassador for AFB. She toured the United States, developing support for programs that help blind people.

During World War II, Helen went all over the United States giving support to blind and wounded veterans. Everywhere Helen went, barriers and obstacles that faced the blind came tumbling down. Her boundless determination and her example of what a person with disabilities could accomplish helped change laws and create programs for people who were visually impaired. Another quote from Helen stated: "We can do anything we want if we stick to it long enough."

Helen's life has been the subject of movies, books, and plays for many decades. In 1955, Helen received an Academy Award for the documentary about her life, *Helen Keller in Her Story*. In 1959, Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke starred in the Broadway play *The Miracle Worker*. The play, written by William Gibson, was based on Anne's earliest efforts to teach Helen how to communicate. Three years later, Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke starred in a movie version of the play. Both women won Academy Awards for their performances.

Helen loved all aspects of life, not just the political and social causes she fought for. Helen had very keen senses, including an extraordinary sense of touch. Even though she had a disability, she didn't let that stand in her way of becoming a successful woman. She used her disability to her advantage and created many opportunities for people who are blind. She once said: "I am only one; but I am still one. I cannot do everything, but I still can do something. I will not refuse to do the something I can do."

Helen Keller may not have been able to see color, but she certainly could understand it. Through her innovation...her determination...her desire to make life better for others...in her own way, she painted a beautiful picture through the life she lived and the impact she made. Her painting was one of inspiration, motivation and love for others.

Most of us don't have any disabilities as severe as Helen Keller...so what's stopping us creating our own beautiful painting that can impact our world? As you go through Ambassador and Recreation Team Training this weekend, think about what you can do to apply what you learn. What kind of picture will you paint of the 4-H program when you return home? Will it be blurry and unclear...or will it be bright, sharp and very descriptive of the program?

Tonight we leave you with one more quote by Helen Keller. We challenge you to think of what you can do to paint a bright future for Texas 4-H.

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