

“Breaking Through” by Gina DeAngelis and Audrey DeAngelis

Helen was born on June 27, 1880, in Tuscumbia, Alabama. She was a healthy baby and a quick learner. She began to walk on her first birthday, and she could say “tea!” and ask for water. When she was 19 months old, however, she caught a bad fever. When she recovered, she could no longer see or hear. Most young children need to be taught how to understand and express what they think and feel. For Helen, the loss of her hearing and her sight made that almost impossible. ...

The Kellers already had brought Helen to be examined by doctors, who told them that no operation could reverse Helen’s deafness and blindness. But in 1886, they were referred to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell (see page 16), who suggested that they contact the Perkins Institution, known today as the Perkins School for the Blind, in Boston, Massachusetts. Mr. Keller wrote to Michael Anagnos, the school’s director, and asked him to recommend a teacher. Anagnos suggested Anne Sullivan. Sullivan had just graduated from Perkins at the top of her class. She knew the manual alphabet—a way of using fingers to spell words into a person’s hand. ...

About a month after arriving in Tuscumbia, Sullivan brought Helen to the water pump, a device that pulled water from a well in the ground. Helen had shown great confusion in distinguishing among the words “mug,” “milk,” and “drink.” Sullivan gave Helen a mug to hold under the spout. When the water flowed over Helen’s hand, Sullivan spelled “W-A-T-E-R” into Helen’s other palm. Helen had once known the word “water.” At that moment, Sullivan later wrote, “A new light came into [Helen’s] face.” She suddenly understood what Sullivan had been trying to do. Helen excitedly asked the name of everything around her, including the name for Sullivan. Sullivan spelled “T-E-A-C-H-E-R” into Helen’s hand. By bedtime, Helen had learned more than 30 words. ...

Sullivan also taught Helen to read special books with raised letters. When they ran out of books, Sullivan wrote to Anagnos to send more. During that first summer with Sullivan, Helen also learned to write and to read braille.¹ ... Helen read everything she could and wrote letters to friends. ...

In 1890, Helen took some lessons with Sarah Fuller at the Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Massachusetts. In 1894, Helen and Sullivan went to the Wright-Humason School for the Deaf in New York City. Learning to speak was slow, and Helen never felt good at it, but she kept practicing. Helen wanted to live independently one day. She set a goal of going to college. When people tried to caution Helen about her aspirations, she responded with a prediction that someday women “will all go to college, and some day they will vote. I am going to work for women’s rights, and I am going to earn my own living, too.” ...

In 1899, Helen passed Radcliffe College’s entrance exam. The following year, she became the first student who was deaf and blind to enroll at a U.S. college. Once again, Sullivan was by Helen’s side every step of the way. She translated to Helen what the professors said in class. Afterward, Helen would rush back to her room to write down everything she could remember. Most textbooks were not available in braille, so Sullivan read them to her—spelling by hand four or five hours a day. Sullivan’s vision, which was never very strong, started to fail. But Sullivan knew Helen was counting on her, and she would not quit.

While Helen was in college, the editor of Ladies’ Home Journal, a popular women’s magazine, asked her to write about herself. The magazine offered \$3,000 for six articles. It was a lot of work, but it was also a lot of money (equal to about \$80,000 today!). Helen accepted, and she and Sullivan hired a secretary, John Albert Macy, to help write the articles. The arrangement gave Sullivan time to rest. In 1903, the articles were republished as a book, *The Story of My Life*. It was a bestseller that remains in print in more than 50 languages. Everyone wanted to know more about the determined, inspiring young lady. After Helen graduated in 1904, Ladies’ Home Journal asked her to write about her plans. “I shall devote my life to those who suffer from loss of sight,” she wrote. She had already shown that people who were blind could do anything anyone else could do.

¹ Braille is a system of writing for people who are visually disabled that uses patterns of raised dots that are felt with the fingertips.

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