



## Foresight Backstory

Helen Keller lived in a world of "white darkness." Born in Alabama in 1880, she was a year and a half old when a case of scarlet fever or meningitis left her deaf and blind. She made signs and gestures, but her inability to truly communicate often left her a frustrated and angry child. Once she locked her mother in the pantry for three hours, and another time threw her baby sister out of a cradle.

When Helen was seven, her parents hired Anne Sullivan to be Helen's tutor. Helen learned the manual alphabet and some words, and for a month Helen signed words without knowing what they meant. One day Anne held Helen's hand under a water pump while signing "water." Helen suddenly realized that the motions of her fingers had meanings. "That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!" she later said. "There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away."

During the next decade, Helen worked on sweeping away those barriers. She learned to read Braille, to read lips, and to write in normal script. Eventually she learned how to speak. She attended schools for the deaf and blind, and, later, mainstream schools. It took Helen longer than her classmates to study, but she excelled. She wrote her memoirs, *The Story of My Life*, at age 21, the first of almost a dozen books during her lifetime. She graduated from Radcliffe College, the women's counterpart to Harvard University, in 1904: the first deaf and blind person to graduate from a college.

Helen also learned to paddle a canoe, ride a horse and a tandem bicycle, and play chess and checkers. She traveled the country as a lecturer, and until 1922 she even performed in vaudeville shows.

By the age of 24, Helen Keller was already more accomplished and famous than any other deaf and blind person in modern history. But she also had a keen sense of the needs and suffering of others. Having "swept away" her own barriers as much as she could, she began to focus on doing the same for others.

Helen Keller believed in equal rights and economic opportunities for all people. She became involved with the Women's Suffrage movement, the Socialist movement, and labor unions. In 1917 she founded an organization that would later become Helen Keller International to prevent and treat blindness in impoverished nations. This organization still operates in 23 countries. Helen Keller joined the American Foundation for the Blind in 1924 and advocated for policy and technology to allow the blind to live fuller lives. During her lifetime she traveled to 35 countries on five continents. Her visits inspired blind citizens, but also prompted legal and social changes that improved conditions for them.

Helen Keller died in Easton, Connecticut in 1968, a few weeks short of her 88th birthday. In her life she had reached far beyond her own darkness to shape a more compassionate future for the world. As Senator Lister Hill of Alabama said in her eulogy, "Her spirit will endure as long as man can read and stories can be told of the woman who showed the world there are no boundaries to courage and faith."

*Pass It On.*

**VALUES.COM** THE FOUNDATION  
FOR A BETTER LIFE

[www.values.com](http://www.values.com)